

QUALITY FACTORS FOR INTERNAL COMMUNICATION IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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Purpose: Internal communication in municipal offices is an important factor that affects the quality of the services provided by this organisation. The article uses factor analysis to identify the quality factors of internal communication between front-office and back-office staff and, on this basis, identifies problems in this communication and also proposes improvement measures.

Design/methodology/approach: The paper identifies latent factors of the quality of internal communication between front-office and back-office employees of a selected municipal office. The identified factors were used to assess the level of internal communication quality between front-office and back-office employees.

Findings: Based on factor analysis, latent factors of the quality of internal communication between front-office and back-office employees were identified and, on this basis, the level of quality of internal communication between the surveyed municipal office employees was assessed and problems in this communication were identified.

Research limitations/implications: The main limitation of the article is that it is based on one case of an organisation. Future research will need to be conducted in more organisations to find out whether the same result can be achieved.

Practical implications: The research conducted identified three latent factors of the quality of internal communication between front-office and back-office staff in one municipal office. These factors include: cooperation between front-office and back-office staff, assurance and responsiveness. The identified factors were used to assess the level of quality of internal communication between front-office and back-office staff. The worst-rated factor is collaboration between the employees surveyed (2.26), better assurance (3.67), while responsiveness is the best (3.97).

Originality/value: To date, the level of quality of internal communication between front-office and back-office employees has not been assessed in municipal offices. It is difficult to find research results in the system that are effective and effectively ensure the effectiveness of communication between front-office and back-office employees.

Keywords: internal communication, service quality, front-office employees, back-office employees, municipal office.

Category of the paper: case study.

1. Introduction

In all organisations, the internal communication process is important for smooth functioning. The process of internal communication between employees in public administration must be smooth and uninterrupted. This is because the efficiency and quality of this process has a direct impact on citizens' perception of the entire entity (Wicak, Trzcińska, 2021). The specificity of public administration units lies in the fact that all citizens use the services of these organisations (Smolağ, Ślusarczyk, 2018). Public administration units need to ensure the effective quality of both external and internal communication (Andersson, 2019). The quality of internal communication is an important factor influencing the communication process in an organisation (Rogala, Białowąs, 2014). Communicating effectively and at the right quality level between individual employees has an impact on the functioning of the organisation (Olsztyńska, 2002).

In the literature (Teixeria et al., 2018; Araújo, Miranda, 2021) of the subject, the quality of communication is considered in three aspects: the first, the organisation's policies; the second, the professionals responsible for its formation; and the third, the degree to which internal communication influences the quality of relationships between different groups of employees. The level of quality of communication between individual organisational structures and employees contributes to effective and efficient organisational policy and the smooth functioning of the organisation as a whole.

This article delineates the problems (i.e. research gaps) affecting the quality level of internal communication between front-office and back-office employees in the municipal office. Problems in this communication were identified using factor analysis.

2. Literature review

The term 'internal communication' refers to the internal environment of an organisation. It includes employees from all organisational structures, management, employee families and owners (Samoder, 2016; Adler et al., 2016).

There are many definitions of internal communication in the scientific literature. According to A. Olsztyńska (2002), internal communication should be identified with the process of communicating information, and the main purpose of this process is to arouse employees' understanding of any action taken in the management of the organisation. A completely different definition is proposed by B. Quirke (2011) who believes that internal communication is a fundamental process that enables the organisation to create value for the customer. By contrast, according to E. Scholes (1997), internal communication is the management of

interactions between all people with a stake in an organisation. Yet another understanding of internal communication was presented by M. Dunmore (2002). According to him, it is a process that supports the implementation of strategy, the spread of values and the creation of an organisation's personality. An even more detailed definition was developed by U. Gross (1994), who considers it to be the main organisational process involving the exchange of information between different participants, binding organisational units together. In another approach - instrumental - J. Cornelissen (2004) defines internal communication as a process in which all instruments are used by the organisation to communicate with employees. In summary, it should be stated that internal communication is, in its essence, a process used to transfer information between employees at all levels of the organisation using the available tools and information channels.

Internal communication in an organisation takes place on three levels (Olsztyńska, 2010):

- the organisational structure, which influences communication in the context of the system of relationships between positions;
- the human factor, where two aspects can be distinguished; the first is defined as the individual characteristics of employees, their predispositions and subjective interpretation of information; the second is the creation of informal networks by employees, which may bypass formal structures and networks (such informal networks among employees may function in accordance with or against formal dependencies);
- symbolism comprising systems of symbols and meanings that facilitate employees' understanding of their role, allow them to better identify with the organisation, perform tasks and make decisions (Griffin, 2002).

From the point of view of the subject matter of this article, the first plane namely the organisational structure was considered and the quality of internal communication between front-office and back-office employees was analysed.

The quality of the internal communication process is a complex problem consisting of many elements. A. Olsztyńska (2002) distinguished the following elements of internal communication quality:

- awareness of the communication process resulting from the importance for the recipient and the simplicity of the message construction;
- understanding based on the clarity of the message and dialogue;
- credibility related to the unification of the company's mission, vision and strategy with the actual behaviour of employees;
- commitment resulting from a sense of belonging to the company, as well as awareness of one's own contribution to its functioning and development.

Based on our own observations and analysis of the literature, to the elements of internal communication outlined above, we should add the level of competence of front-office staff, since their work directly affects the level of quality of internal communication and, therefore,

the perception of the level of quality of service provided by the public administration (Mitu, 2021; Santos et al.).

Internal communication in public administration bodies is performed in all directions, i.e.: downward, upward and horizontally - bi-directional. In a well-functioning public organisation, a communication model of flowing information in all legitimate directions while receiving feedback is established. In this way, an effective and efficient circulation of information will be maintained (Serafin, 2013). The benefits of a properly functioning communication model for government employees are as follows (Anderson, 2019; Serafin, 2013):

- employees will have access to information;
- the channels of communication in force will be transparent, known and, above all, respected in practice;
- communication channels will have continuity and be as short as possible;
- employees will know the sources of information;
- employees will have access to information that introduces change.

In a public administration, the flow of information between the different positions located in vertical communication downwards and upwards and horizontally must be smooth and uninterrupted, and verified in accordance with the procedures in place (Karanges et al., 2015).

3. Research methodology

The research, the results of which are presented in this publication, was conducted in one of the municipal offices in the Silesian Voivodeship. The research resulted in 165 correctly completed survey questionnaires from both front-office and back-office employees. Factor analysis was used to determine the problems that have the greatest impact on the quality level of internal communication between front-office and back-office employees.

A survey questionnaire, which included 16 variables, was used to determine the quality factors of internal communication between front-office staff (staff providing services to external customers) and back-office staff (IT staff supporting front-office staff):

- Z1 - In the municipal office, any front-office employee can report failures and problems to back-office employees.
- Z2 - Front-office employees can always count on the support of back-office employees when needed.
- Z3 - Back-office employees should provide their IT knowledge to front-office employees.
- Z4 - The front-office employees inform the back-office employees immediately of equipment failure.

Z5 - All software failures and problems are solved by back-office employees efficiently and in a short time.

Z6 - Front-office employees are always met with understanding and willingness to help by back-office employees.

Z7 - Back-office employees clearly and comprehensively inform front-office employees about new software.

Z8 - Back-office employees are always willing to help front-office employees.

Z9 - Front-office employees relate to back-office employees in a polite and friendly manner.

Z10 - Back-office employees are always understanding and patient with front-office employees.

Z11 - Front-office employees clearly and understandably inform back-office employees of a problem.

Z12 - Back-office employees are competent.

Z13 - Back-office employees inspire trust.

Z14 - Back-office employees react to the occurring equipment malfunctions promptly.

Z15 - Back-office employees should treat each front-office employee individually.

Z16 - Back-office employees should assist and answer questions of front-office employees.

The individual variables regarding the level of quality of internal communication between front-office and back-office employees were rated according to a five-point Likert scale where:

1 - very bad,

2 - bad,

3 - average,

4 - good,

5 - very good.

In order to examine the structure of the selected variables, an exploratory factor analysis method was used. In order to break down the variables of the evaluation of the quality level of internal communication between front-office and back-office employees into individual factors, extrapolative factor analysis was applied to the perceived quality of both front-office and back-office employees. For this analysis, a classic principal component factor analysis was used. The factors to be identified are latent factors that have a significant impact in the problem under study. They were assumed to represent the largest subset of the original variables (Wolniak, Skotnicka -Zasadzień, 2010).

The following interpretation of the Kaiser-Mayer-Olkin coefficient is adopted in the literature (Aczel, 2000).

KMO > 0.9 - very high,

KMO > 0.8 - high,

KMO > 0.7 - moderate,

KMO > 0.6 - moderate,

KMO < 0.6 - very low.

Most textbooks assume that the coefficient must exceed 0.7 in order for a factor analysis to be carried out. For the problem under analysis, the KMO coefficient was 0.84 according to the Kaiser-Mayer-Olkin criterion is high and allows a factor analysis to be performed.

To determine the number of factors, Cattell's Osip method was used. According to this method, three latent factors were identified. To obtain a simple factor structure, the factor loadings matrices representing the correlations between the variables and the extracted principal components were subjected to orthogonal rotation using the Varimax method. In this way, the factor with the variables with the highest factor loadings could be identified (Wolniak, Skotnicka-Zasadzień, 2010).

4. Determination of internal communication quality factors

In the results of the factor analysis carried out, three latent factors of the quality of internal communication between front-office and back-office employees were identified. Table 1 shows the factor loadings for each factor. In the analysis carried out, the identified factors together explain 64% of the variability.

Tabela 1.

Identification of latent charges of perceived quality level of internal communication between front-office and back-office staff

Variables	Latent factors		
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Z1	0.77	0.12	0.01
Z2	0.74	0.20	0.10
Z3	0.76	0.14	0.70
Z4	0.22	0.09	0.71
Z5	0.73	0.20	0.20
Z6	0.10	0.22	0.15
Z7	0.43	0.33	0.71
Z8	0.09	0.72	0.54
Z9	0.32	0.71	0.43
Z10	0.34	0.70	0.22
Z11	0.70	0.12	0.21
Z12	0.23	0.14	0.33
Z13	0.19	0.77	0.21
Z14	0.12	0.23	0.33
Z15	0.71	0.34	0.22
Z16	0.43	0.21	0.34

The first factor identified - **cooperation between front-office and back-office staff** - explains 34% of the variables. It includes problems related to communication between front-office and back-office staff, clear communication of hardware problems by front-office staff. The problem also relates to the speed of resolution of hardware problems by back-office staff

and the lack of personalised approach to front-office staff and translation of hardware problems at a level appropriate to their IT competence. These factors consist of five variables: Z1 - In the municipal office, any front-office employee can report failures and problems to back-office employees, Z2 - Front-office employees can always count on the support of back-office employees when needed, Z5 - All failures and software problems are solved by back-office employees efficiently and in a short time, Z11 - Front-office employees clearly and comprehensibly inform back-office employees about the problem, Z15 - Back-office employees should treat each front-office employee individually.

Factor two **certainty** - explains 18% of the variability. Four variables fall under this factor. These variables are related to trust and courtesy. It is important whether back-office employees are able to talk to front-office employees in a polite, friendly and understanding manner about a hardware problem that has occurred. The following variables were included in the factor in question: Z8 - Back-office employees are always willing to help front-office employees, Z9 - Front-office employees are polite and kind to back-office employees, Z10 - Back-office employees are always understanding and patient with front-office employees, Z13 - Back-office employees inspire trust.

The third factor, **responsiveness**, explains 12% of the variability. This factor includes two variables that relate to how responsive both back-office employees are to reported hardware problems and how quickly front-office employees report hardware failures that occur. For the factor in question, we include the following variables: Z3 - Back-office employees should provide their IT knowledge to front-office employees, Z4 - Front-office employees promptly inform back-office employees about hardware failures, Z7 - Back-office employees clearly and comprehensively inform front-office employees about new computer hardware,

For each identified factor, a reliable dimension determination and variable assignment was made. This was done with the help of one of the most commonly used methods - the Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which is the lower limit of the scale reliability estimator in the case of a unidimensional scale. This coefficient takes values from 0 to 1. It is recommended in the literature to be at a level greater than 0.70 (Aczel, 2000). In the case of the identified factors, the value of the Cronbach's alpha coefficient always exceeds 0.7, which means that they are reliable.

The latent factors identified from the analysis were used in a further stage of the research to assess the level of quality of internal communication between front-office and back-office staff in the selected municipal office. The individual factors assessed by the surveyed employees are as follows:

- cooperation between front-office and back-office staff - 2.26,
- assurance - 3.67,
- responsiveness - 3.97.

The analysis shows that the area rated best by front-office and back-office employees is reacting (3.97), understood as reacting to the occurrence of an emergency in the case of back-office employees and reporting a breakdown of computer equipment without delay by front-office employees. The area with the lowest rating was cooperation between front-office and back-office employees (2.26), where the biggest problem is that front-office employees are unable to clearly and comprehensibly inform back-office employees of a problem that has arisen, and front-office employees believe that back-office employees should approach them individually and clearly explain how to use IT equipment, while back-office employees consider the poor IT competence of front-office employees to be a problem. The area of certainty was rated at 3.67 in this area the following problems should be noted: back-office staff do not always patiently provide information on IT equipment and new software, there are situations where there is a lack of understanding and forbearance for the poor knowledge of front-office staff about the external customer service software used.

5. Summary

The research results presented in the publication identified three latent factors of the quality of internal communication between front-office and back-office staff in one municipal office. These factors include: collaboration between front-office and back-office staff, assurance and responsiveness.

The identified factors were used to assess the level of quality of internal communication between front-office and back-office staff. The worst-rated factor is collaboration between the employees surveyed (2.26), better is assurance (3.67), while the best is responsiveness (3.97).

The most important problems (i.e. research gaps) in communication between front-office and back-office employees include: the biggest problem is that front-office employees cannot clearly and comprehensibly inform back-office employees of a problem, back-office employees consider the poor IT competence of front-office employees to be a problem, front-office employees believe that back-office employees should approach them individually and clearly explain how to use IT equipment.

The problems identified in the analysis are mainly related to communication between front-office and back-office employees to improve mutual cooperation one should:

- introduce training for front-office employees on the use of the software and hardware they use in providing services to the external customer,
- train back-office staff to explain to front-office staff in an understandable way how to solve problems related to the use of hardware,
- encourage self-learning by front-office employees,

- introduce training to reduce the so-called 'mental barriers' among front-office staff resulting from their reluctance to use ICT in the delivery of public services,
- draw the attention of front-office employees to reliably inform back-office staff of any hardware failures that occur,
- introduce training on how communication between front-office staff should take place to generate as little conflict as possible.

The presented analysis and conclusions of an issue important for quality management sciences, namely the effective and final communication connection, which affects the entire process of providing public services.

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