
Miscellaneous

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Internal Communication in Pharmaceutical Companies: A Case Study of Portuguese Companies during the Pandemic of COVID-19

Abstract

While companies across different sectors in the Western world have increasingly begun to value their employees' roles, this practice is not yet universal in our globalized economy. This research examines how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced employee communication practices within pharmaceutical companies operating in Portugal. Through a survey of communication managers, our findings reveal that these companies not only shifted to online communication channels during the pandemic but continue to maintain these digital platforms as primary communication tools.

Keywords

Employee communication, health communication, COVID-19, pharmaceutical industry.

1. Introduction

The late 20th century witnessed the emergence of numerous communicable diseases, including the severe acute respiratory syndrome in 2003, the H1N1 influenza pandemic in 2009, the Ebola outbreak in West Africa (2014-2015), the Zika virus syndrome (2015-2016), and yellow fever outbreaks across several African countries in 2016 (World Health Organization, 2018). Although COVID-19 was not the first outbreak to spread rapidly in the social media era, it exposed unprecedented vulnerabilities in our modern way of life.

On March 11, 2020, when the World Health Organization officially declared the novel coronavirus crisis a pandemic, it became crucial to ensure the availability and accessibility of credible, clear, and practical information (*The Lancet*, 2020). This was particularly important in combating what became known as the “infodemic” –defined as “the overabundance of information, both accurate and inaccurate, that occurs during an epidemic” (Tangcharoensathien *et al.*, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced numerous global health communication challenges, including:

- The need to disseminate accurate information about the novel coronavirus (King, 2021)
- Content overload from multiple sources (Finset *et al.*, 2020)
- Uncertainty surrounding virus transmission patterns (White *et al.*, 2021)
- Proliferation of misinformation on social media (Ratzan *et al.*, 2020)
- Inconsistent messaging about behavioural changes (Noar & Austin, 2020)

This public health crisis affected organizations across all sectors, compelling them to rapidly adapt their work processes to new ways of managing, organizing, and communicating with employees (Ruck & Men, 2021; Li, Sun, Tao & Lee, 2021). In Portugal, government mandates to prevent SARS-CoV-2 transmission forced many organizations to implement remote work policies.

Despite the pandemic’s challenges, the State of the Sector study –which surveyed 1,300 organizations worldwide– revealed positive developments in internal communications. Organizations began capitalizing on emerging opportunities, including:

- Enhanced focus on employee wellbeing (70% of respondents)
- Greater emphasis on diversity and inclusion (55%)
- Implementation of new working methods (52%)
- Increased leadership visibility (47%)
- Higher investment in digital channels (46%)
- Greater empowerment of people managers (38%) in team engagement (Gallagher, 2022)

Pharmaceutical companies have played a crucial role since the pandemic’s onset, leading the search for SARS-CoV-2 treatments. These companies’ mission is to “promote innovation and develop therapies that meet treatment and prevention needs for new diseases, while providing medicines that improve population health and quality of life” (APIFARMA, 2023). According to the Portuguese Pharmaceutical Industry Association (APIFARMA), medicines produced by the pharmaceutical industry have prevented 110,000 deaths and increased average life expectancy by ten years since 1990 (APIFARMA, 2018).

Despite the pharmaceutical industry’s vital role in developing healthcare solutions, scientific studies examining their communication practices remain scarce, both in Portugal and globally. While extensive literature exists on internal communication during the COVID-19 pandemic, to our knowledge, no studies specifically analyze pharmaceutical industry practices. Therefore, we propose the following research questions:

RQ1. How has the COVID-19 pandemic influenced internal communication practices within pharmaceutical companies operating in Portugal?

RQ2. What are the primary challenges currently facing pharmaceutical companies in internal communication?

This study aims to enhance understanding of internal communication development in pharmaceutical companies operating in Portugal. Additionally, it examines whether these companies have returned to pre-pandemic communication practices and identifies current challenges in this field. To achieve these objectives, we developed and conducted a questionnaire targeting communication managers in Portuguese pharmaceutical companies.

For this study, we adopt Men and Bowen's (2017) definition of internal communication as "managing interdependence and building mutually beneficial relationships between the organization and its employees" (p. 12). Internal communication is also known as employee communication, internal relations, internal public relations (Men, 2021), or organizational communication (Yeomans & Fitzpatrick, 2017). Over the past decade, internal communication has gained increasing attention from public relations scholars (Lee & Yue, 2020), reflecting its recognition as a crucial component of public relations practice (Zerfass, Tench, Verhoeven, Verčič & Moreno, 2010; Yeomans & Fitzpatrick, 2017).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Employees engagement

In recent decades, public relations research has increasingly focused on building and maintaining relationships with the strategic public (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Men (2014) emphasizes employees' dual role as a crucial strategic public within organizations: "On the one hand, employees are the productive force of the organization, directly contributing to organizational performance. On the other hand, employees are corporate ambassadors and brand advocates who represent the organization to external stakeholders (i.e., customers and shareholders) both online and offline" (p. 265).

A growing body of evidence identifies employee engagement as a central objective in internal communication practices (Verčič, Verčič & Sriramesh, 2012; Mishra, Boynton & Mishra, 2014; Verčič & Vokić, 2017). The term 'engagement' serves as an umbrella concept encompassing various organizational initiatives to involve stakeholders in activities and decision-making processes (Verčič & Vokić, 2017, p. 1). More specifically, employee engagement, fostered through internal communication, represents "the degree to which individuals are attentive and absorbed in the performance of their roles" (Saks, 2006, p. 602).

Recent research conducted by Gallagher, surveying 1,300 global organizations through their State of the Industry study, reveals that engaging employees with organizational purpose, strategy, and values remains the primary priority for more than half (53%) of respondents (Gallagher, 2022). For organizations with 10,000+ employees, additional key priorities include:

- Adapting channel strategy to hybrid working (39%)
- Improving communication with line managers (31%)
- Building internal communications function (29%)
- Enhancing impact measurement and evaluation (26%)
- Increasing leadership visibility (26%)
- Developing communications strategy and tone of voice (26%)

In "Exploring Internal Communication," scholars have mapped the evolution of internal communication from the 1990s to 2010, as outlined in Table 1 (Welch, 2020). This historical analysis demonstrates that during the 2000s, engagement emerged as the primary objective of internal communication practices.

Table 1. Eras of internal communication practices.

| Eras | Principal internal communication objectives | Focus of internal communication |
|----------|---|--|
| Pre-1939 | Entertainment | Recreation, soft news and employee human interest stories. |
| 1940s | Information | Promotion opportunities, the activities of the organization, and productivity. |
| 1950s | Persuasion | Explaining strategic management decisions to gain employee support. |
| 1980s | Mutual understanding | Facilitating dialogue and mutual understanding. |
| 1990s | Cultural change | Supporting business process reengineering and organization cultural changes initiatives. |
| 2000s | Engagement | Contributing to increase employee engagement. |
| 2010s | Transparency and trust | Achieving greater transparency and rebuilding trust. |

Source: Welch 2020, p. 49.

The emphasis on employee engagement stems from its demonstrated business value. As Yeomans and Fitzpatrick (2017) note, “Organizations are interested in achieving high levels of employee engagement because there appears to be a clear link to business profitability, customer service levels, productivity, and innovation in the workplace” (p. 290). This connection is fundamental, as organizational goal achievement may be compromised without effective internal communication (Dahlman & Heide, 2021).

Empirical evidence supports these assertions. A comprehensive Gallup Management study revealed that engaged employees demonstrate deep organizational commitment, leading to significant operational improvements, including reductions in:

- Absenteeism
- Employee turnover
- Inventory shrinkage
- Safety incidents
- Product defects (Robison, 2012)

This relationship between internal communication and engagement has been well-established in the literature, with Welch and Jackson (2007) identifying internal communication as a crucial driver of employee engagement. This understanding is reflected in the contemporary definition of internal communication proposed by Verčič, Verčič and Špoljarić (2023): “Internal communication is the management of communication between an organization and its members to inform, motivate, engage, and co-create meaning in order to make organizations more effective” (p. 10).

2.2. Internal Communications During Crisis

Crisis events are characterized as threats or hazards that can yield negative consequences if not managed appropriately (Coombs, 2007). Unlike traditional organizational crises where companies may bear direct responsibility, the COVID-19 pandemic represents a unique case where organizations, while not responsible for the crisis, must nevertheless manage its consequences. Coombs (2015) defines a crisis as “an unpredictable event that threatens important stakeholder expectations related to health, safety, environmental, and economic issues and can seriously affect an organization’s performance and produce negative outcomes” (p. 3).

The distinctive nature of the COVID-19 crisis is emphasized by Heide and Simonsson (2021), who describe it as “a rare and unusual crisis that is more protracted and complex compared to many other organizational crises, such as a product recall or a workplace accident” (p. 271). They argue that within the pandemic’s ambiguous context, organizations should prioritize:

- Improvisation
- Flexibility
- Active listening

- Approaches that help make sense of uncertainty

This perspective aligns with observations that internal communication serves as a crucial support mechanism helping employees cope with unexpected and uncontrollable situations during turbulent times (Li, Sun, Tao & Lee, 2021).

Men and Bowen (2017) underscore this vital role in their book “Excellence in Internal Communication Management,” noting that “internal communication connects employees, builds relationships, and strengthens a sense of community and belongingness. Similar to a machine, internal communication ensures that the organization continues to run smoothly” (p. 1).

For maintaining employee engagement during challenging times, Jones and Kober (2019) identified five key strategies:

1. Maintain focus on core values to encourage employee engagement
2. Build trust, appreciation, and loyalty through explicit employee support
3. Establish constructive internal feedback channels rather than external, destructive ones
4. Maintain trust and credibility through open, honest, and timely communication
5. Demonstrate commitment to employees’ value and employment within the organization

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the evolution of communication practices. Early pandemic research recommended implementing online approaches, emphasizing the crucial role of virtual relationships in maintaining employee engagement (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2021). Dewhurst and FitzPatrick (2022) note that the unprecedented use of new technologies since 2020 has necessitated innovative approaches to maintain employee involvement.

The pandemic has reinforced internal communication’s strategic importance in organizational cohesion. As Verčič, Verčič & Špoljarić (2023) observe, “During the pandemic, purposeful internal communication has been essential in providing essential health information to employees and serving as the ‘glue’ holding them together” (p. 9).

This perspective is illustrated by real-world examples. Katarina Klemenc, Country Head of Communications at Novartis Slovenia, emphasises the importance of transparent, clear, and regular communication during the SARS-CoV-2 crisis:

We started with crisis communication even before our colleagues started working from home because things in the countries around us had already appeared to be critical and we understood that something similar could happen in our country. We organized ourselves quickly and efficiently and began to communicate key information clearly and transparently (as cited in Verčič, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2021, p. 234).

The dynamic nature of crisis situations demands adaptable communication channels, often requiring rapid changes in approach (Dewhurst & FitzPatrick, 2022). While numerous communication channels exist, their selection is crucial for effective communication: “If you don’t have the right channels infrastructure, communication is likely to be a frustrating, inadequate experience. And if you choose the wrong tactics, it doesn’t matter how perfectly you word the objectives of your comms plans –you won’t achieve them” (Dewhurst & FitzPatrick, 2022, pp. 106–107).

2.3. Internal communication channels

Internal communication channels serve as the conduits through which organizations disseminate information to and engage with their employees. According to Yeomans and Fitzpatrick (2017), organizations typically employ multiple channel types to serve different communication purposes:

1. Push channels for information dissemination
 - Newsletters
 - Corporate magazines
2. Pull channels for on-demand information access
 - Intranet systems

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- Digital repositories
- 3. Understanding-focused channels
 - Team meetings
 - Departmental briefings
- 4. Community-building channels
 - Corporate events
 - Social gatherings
- 5. Interactive dialogue channels
 - Online forums
 - Webinars
 - Discussion platforms

A significant empirical study by Men (2014), surveying 400 employees in medium and large U.S. companies, revealed evolving channel preferences:

Regarding corporate communication channels, the results show that nowadays employees seem to prefer to receive information from the organization regarding new decisions, policies, events, and changes through email and rich face-to-face channels such as employee meetings and interpersonal communication with direct managers. By contrast, print channels such as memoranda, brochures, newsletters, reports, policy manuals, and posters are less preferred by employees (p. 279).

The rapid advancement of technology has prompted organizations to adapt traditional communication methods to digital platforms. Men (2014) observes that “The easy access of organizations to numerous new communication tools (e.g., Facebook business pages, Twitter, instant messenger, and YouTube) has transformed how companies communicate with employees and what channels are most effective to reach employees” (p. 266).

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 accelerated this digital transformation, making online communication channels essential, particularly for organizations with remote workforces. Responding to these changes, scholars have proposed a new matrix of internal communication channels in 2023, categorizing them based on:

- Level of digitization
- Degree of interactivity

Table 2. Matrix of internal communication channels.

| | Traditional | New |
|----------------------|---|--|
| Not interactive | Newsletters Magazines Information boards Posters Memos Mail sent to home | Digital newsletters Information on LCD or other screens Podcasts Blogs Video posts Group e-mails |
| Somewhat interactive | Meetings in larger groups Live events | Intranet One-on-one e-mails |
| Interactive | Meetings in smaller groups Team building One-on-one interactions Rumor mills | Live webcasting Video conferencing in larger groups Social networks Internal communication applications (apps) Video conferencing in smaller groups One-on-one video conferencing |

Source: Verčič, Verčič and Špoljarić 2023, p. 41.

Contemporary research demonstrates that high-quality internal communications positively influence employee-organization relationships (Ecklebe & Löffler, 2021). This finding is supported by a comprehensive study involving 27 senior-level internal communication professionals

from global companies, which revealed the strategic use of diverse communication channels, including social media platforms, to foster employee engagement (Ewing, Men, & O'Neil, 2019).

While no universal solution exists for internal communication channels, scholars emphasize the importance of three key factors in channel selection:

1. Organizational goals
2. Available resources
3. Employee preferences and needs

As Verčič, Verčič, and Špoljarić (2023) note, “The appropriate mix of channels depends on whether the primary goals are, for example, to foster employee satisfaction, engagement, organizational identification and understanding; or to communicate change” (p. 42).

This strategic approach to channel selection has become particularly relevant in crisis situations. A longitudinal study conducted across 14 Croatian organizations before and during the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced that “Effective internal communication is crucial for successful organizations as it affects the ability of strategic managers to engage employees and achieve objectives” (Welch, 2020, p. 45).

The evidence suggests that successful internal communication requires:

- Strategic alignment with organizational objectives
- Careful consideration of available communication channels
- Understanding of employee communication preferences
- Flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances
- Regular assessment of communication effectiveness

3. Materials and methods

This study aims to answer two questions: Has the COVID-19 pandemic modified internal communication practices developed by pharmaceutical companies operating in Portugal? And what are the current major challenges facing pharmaceutical companies in internal communication?

The participants were required to be responsible for communication in their companies for at least the previous three years.

Although there are established instruments to measure internal communication, such as the International Communication Association Audit, the Organizational Communication Scale, and the Communication Satisfaction Questionnaire (Verčič, Verčič, & Špoljarić, 2023), we decided to create a concise questionnaire for data collection. The questionnaire consists of three parts: internal communication (questions related to communication before, during, and after COVID-19), socio-demographic data (gender, age, and full academic qualifications), and professional data, specifically the company name, job title, and total number of employees in the company.

In the first part of the questionnaire, our goal was to analyze how the pandemic changed the mix of internal communication channels. According to Tkalac Verčič (2021), “There is not nearly enough research on internal communication channels. Especially in the current climate where new technologies are completely reshaping our world” (p. 247).

We also aimed to identify the internal communication objectives of pharmaceutical companies operating in Portugal, determine whether they have a strategic internal communication plan, and assess whether the internal communication budget is currently (2023) decreasing, remaining stable, or increasing.

As in the internal communication study developed by Verčič, Verčič and Špoljarić (2023), we also asked the communication managers of pharmaceutical companies about the future of internal communication (What do you see as the main focus of internal communication in the future?).

Table 3. Data collection instrument (Questionnaire).

| Question | Type of possible answer |
|---|--|
| In your opinion, how important is internal communication (with employees) in your company? | Multiple choice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Very Important ● Important ● Not very important |
| In your opinion, is internal communication valued by your company's employees? | Scale from 1 to 5: 1 - Lowly valued 5 - Highly valued |
| What means, channels and/or media did you use to communicate with employees before the COVID-19 pandemic? (2019 and previous years) | Checkboxes: several pre-formatted options to choose from |
| How would you describe your company's actions with regard to communication with employees during the COVID-19 pandemic? | Open answer |
| What means, channels and/or media did you use to communicate with employees during the COVID-19 pandemic? (2020, 2021, 2022) | Checkboxes: several pre-formatted options to choose from |
| What reasons were taken into account when choosing these means, channels and/or media for communicating with employees? | Open answer |
| What means, channels and/or media do you currently use to communicate with employees? | Checkboxes: several pre-formatted options to choose from |
| What are your company's current internal communication objectives (with employees)? | Checkboxes: several pre-formatted options to choose from |
| How often do you currently hold online meetings/initiatives with your company's employees? | Multiple choice: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Daily ● At least once a week ● At least once every 15 days ● At least once a month ● Very rarely |
| What are your company's current biggest challenges in internal communication (with employees)? | Checkboxes: several pre-formatted options to choose from |
| This year, your company's internal communication (with employees) budget: | Multiple choice: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Increased significantly ● Increased marginally ● Remained the same ● Decreased marginally ● Decreased significantly |
| Does your company have a strategic internal communication plan (with employees)? | Multiple Choice: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Yes ● No |
| What are your company's current biggest challenges in internal communication (with employees)? | Open answer |

Source: Own elaboration.

The data for this study was collected online, chosen for its advantages as noted by Bryman (2012), such as cost-effectiveness, time efficiency, and ease of access regardless of location, requiring

only internet access. However, using online data collection also has limitations, including reduced personal interaction, potential barriers to access, and concerns about confidentiality and anonymity (Bryman, 2012).

The questionnaire was created and pre-tested using Google Forms, leading to adjustments that included additional examples of internal communication channels. It was then distributed via email to a curated database of communication managers within pharmaceutical companies in Portugal.

The study employed non-probability convenience sampling, commonly used in exploratory research (Oliveira, 2001). Additionally, purposive sampling was applied, as inclusion depended on participants' roles as communication managers within their companies. Non-probability sampling has limitations, as it relies on subjective selection criteria, but it is a practical choice when resources, time, and workforce are constrained (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016).

The study received 29 responses from July 20 to October 10, 2023. Only 16 responses met the criteria for validation, as some were submitted by individuals not in communications roles or without the required minimum of three years of experience. Responses from non-pharmaceutical companies or those operating outside Portugal were also excluded.

Participants included communication managers from companies such as Alfasigma Portugal, A. Menarini Portugal, Bayer Portugal, and others. Most participating companies are based in Lisbon, with one company located in Oporto. Collectively, these companies represent 3,274 employees, as reported by the communication managers involved.

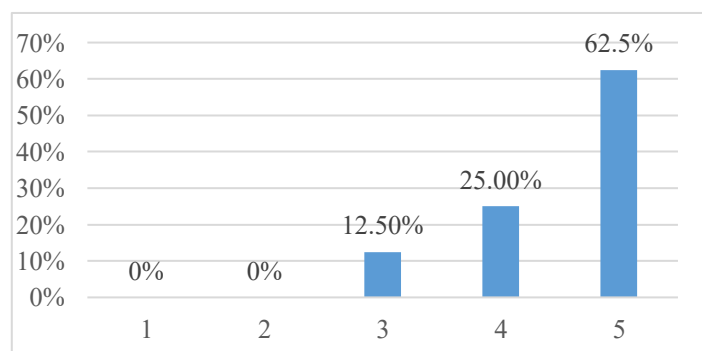
Regarding demographics, the majority of participants were aged 40-50 (56.3%), followed by those aged 51-60 (25%), and 18.8% aged 29-39. Educational backgrounds varied, with 50% holding a postgraduate degree, 37.5% a master's degree, and 12.5% a bachelor's degree.

Both qualitative (content analysis) and quantitative (descriptive statistics) methods were employed to analyze the data collected.

4. Results

Participants in this study uniformly agree that internal communication is highly important within their organizations. However, they noted that employees do not always share this view. When asked to rate how employees value internal communication on a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 being the lowest and 5 the highest), only 62.5% of participants selected the highest rating. This suggests that, according to communication managers, just 62.5% of the 3,274 employees represented in this study view internal communication as very important.

Figure 1. In your opinion, is internal communication valued by employees?



Source: Own elaboration.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic (2019 and earlier), communication within pharmaceutical companies in Portugal primarily relied on face-to-face meetings (87.5%) and email (100%).

Additional commonly used methods included face-to-face initiatives (81.3%) and the intranet (62.5%). Social networking sites (12.5%) and online initiatives (18.8%) played a minimal role in employee communication at that time.

A notable percentage (56.3%) of companies were already utilizing instant messaging applications pre-pandemic, and over half maintained an internal newsletter (62.5%). Podcasts, however, were rarely used, with only 12.5% of companies adopting them. Both companies using podcasts at the time had more than 150 employees. Interestingly, one company used unique methods such as displaying information on bathroom walls and mirrors, and videos in an “infotainment” style.

The COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022) significantly reshaped communication practices, pushing pharmaceutical companies in Portugal to rely more on digital channels. Online initiatives (87.5%), instant messaging applications (87.5%), videoconferencing (81.3%), email (75%), intranet (62.5%), and internal newsletters (62.5%) became the primary channels. According to one participant, videoconferencing saw increased employee engagement during the pandemic, growing from a modest 10–15% pre-pandemic to becoming a dominant channel.

There was a marked increase in the use of instant messaging applications, such as Microsoft Teams, which rose by 31.2% compared to pre-pandemic usage. Similarly, social networking sites experienced a growth in use, from 12.5% to 43.8%.

Email usage decreased by 25% compared to the pre-pandemic period, while one company even resorted to using the postal service to reach remote employees. Institutional websites showed a modest increase in usage (6.3%), while SMS use rose by 12.5%.

Restrictions and telework requirements due to COVID-19 led to a steep decline in in-person interactions: face-to-face meetings dropped by 75%, and face-to-face initiatives by 68.8%. Bulletin board usage, typically intended for on-site employees, also decreased by 25%.

Some channels remained unchanged. Podcasts, for example, saw no increase in usage, while the two companies that had previously used corporate TV discontinued it entirely during the pandemic. Both of these companies have around 150 employees.

Table 4. In Means, channels and/or communication media used to communicate with employees before pandemic COVID-19 and during 2020-2022.

| | 2019 | 2020-2022 | Difference |
|--------------------------------|-------|-----------|------------|
| Email | 100% | 75% | -25% |
| Face-to-face meetings | 87,5% | 12,5% | -75% |
| Face-to-face initiatives | 81,3% | 12,5% | -68,8% |
| Intranet | 62,5% | 62,5% | 0% |
| Internal newsletter | 62,5% | 62,5% | 0% |
| Instant messaging applications | 56,3% | 87,5% | +31,2% |
| Bulletin boards | 31,3% | 6,3% | -25% |
| Institutional website | 25% | 31,3% | +6,3% |
| Video conferences | 25% | 81,3% | +56,3% |
| Online initiatives | 18,8% | 87,5% | +68,7% |
| Corporate TV | 12,5% | 0% | -12,5% |
| Podcast | 12,5% | 12,5% | 0% |
| Social networking sites | 12,5% | 43,8% | +31,3% |
| SMS | 6,3% | 18,8% | +12,5% |
| Others | 18,8% | 18,8% | 0% |

Source: Own elaboration.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, communication managers in Portuguese pharmaceutical companies chose virtual channels to maintain regular contact with employees who were working remotely. The shift was driven by convenience and the need for consistent communication despite employees' absence from the office. One participant explained: "The forced distance meant that new virtual channels had to be created. The choice of channels was made with the ease and convenience of employees in mind." Another noted that remote work necessitated digital channels: "Employees have started to work remotely, which has meant that most interactions take place via digital means: email, video conferencing, chat..." However, for some companies, particularly those with over 150 employees, pre-existing channels were largely maintained, except for face-to-face events, which were paused. As one manager stated: "Our actions have not changed, except that we have not held any face-to-face events."

As of this study, with the pandemic officially over, communication practices in Portuguese pharmaceutical companies remain similar to the last three years. Face-to-face meetings and events have resumed in most companies, while bulletin boards have also seen a resurgence, albeit at lower usage levels than before the pandemic.

Email (93.8%) and videoconferencing (87.5%) continue to be the primary channels for employee communication. Additionally, 31.3% of companies conduct online meetings or initiatives at least once a month, while 12.5% still hold daily online meetings. The two companies that hold daily online meetings employ more than 300 people and are based in Lisbon.

By 2023, the use of podcasts as a communication tool has notably increased, with 37.5% of companies now using this medium. Corporate television has also been adopted by 18.8% of the companies as an additional communication channel.

Table 5. Means, channels and/or communication media used to communicate with employees in pharmaceutical companies.

| | 2019 | 2020-2022 | 2023 |
|--------------------------------|-------|-----------|-------|
| Email | 100% | 75% | 93,8% |
| Face-to-face meetings | 87,5% | 12,5% | 81,3% |
| Face-to-face initiatives | 81,3% | 12,5% | 87,5% |
| Intranet | 62,5% | 62,5% | 81,3% |
| Internal newsletter | 62,5% | 62,5% | 68,8% |
| Instant messaging applications | 56,3% | 87,5% | 81,3% |
| Bulletin boards | 31,3% | 6,3% | 25% |
| Institutional website | 25% | 31,3% | 43,8% |
| Video conferences | 25% | 81,3% | 87,5% |
| Online initiatives | 18,8% | 87,5% | 75% |
| Corporate TV | 12,5% | 0% | 18,8% |
| Podcast | 12,5% | 12,5% | 37,5% |
| Social networking sites | 12,5% | 43,8% | 43,8% |
| SMS | 6,3% | 18,8% | 25% |
| Others | 18,8% | 18,8% | 25% |

Source: Own elaboration.

Communication managers of Portuguese pharmaceutical companies describe their organizations' approach to employee communication during the COVID-19 pandemic as "active and proactive," "exemplary," "fully transparent," or "dedicated and consistent." Several managers highlighted specific initiatives taken during the pandemic, such as "regular online updates, sending letters and gifts by mail, and maintaining ongoing updates on the intranet," "weekly video conferences," and "virtual town halls with information sharing and small breakout sessions to encourage employee socializing."

One participant emphasized their company's "strong communication, with no interruptions, focusing on both business continuity and employee health and work-life balance." Others noted

frequent updates on the company's contingency plans and the status of COVID-19 cases within the organization. Another manager remarked that maintaining consistent communication was a priority, stating, "Internal communication played a vital role in motivating employees, promoting loyalty, and sustaining corporate culture in a remote environment."

Figure 2. How would you describe your company's approach to communicating with employees during the COVID-19 pandemic?



Source: Own elaboration.

The primary objectives of employee communication, as identified by participants, are to ensure effective information circulation within the company (93.8%) and to maintain trust and credibility with employees (87.5%). Other key goals include fostering a positive outlook toward the future (81.3%), gathering employee feedback (75%), and promoting positive attitudes toward the organization (75%). Additionally, 37.5% of participants highlighted the importance of healthy working conditions, while 18.8% noted continuity in work as an objective.

Participants also emphasized objectives like "maintaining an internal culture (employer branding)," "fostering a sense of belonging," and "promoting a culture of collaboration and camaraderie."

The study reveals that 62.5% of pharmaceutical companies in Portugal have a strategic plan for internal communication. Regarding budget, most companies (81.3%) reported no change from previous years, while 12.5% noted a slight increase, particularly in larger companies with over 1,300 employees.

Current challenges in internal communication primarily stem from managing the high volume of information. Communication managers highlighted the need to "avoid sending excessive and irrelevant information, keeping the focus on results." Remote work has introduced further challenges, including maintaining a "sense of belonging" in hybrid work models and ensuring consistent, aligned messaging.

One participant mentioned the challenge of "unequal access to channels/media, given the geographical diversity (Lisbon, Coimbra, and Morocco) and varied work contexts (factory, laboratory, service, and sales teams)." Another pointed out the difficulty in ensuring all employees read shared information promptly, emphasizing the need for a strong commitment to timely information dissemination across the organization.

5. Discussion

This study focuses on pharmaceutical companies operating in Portugal and provides new insights into how these companies managed internal communication during the COVID-19 pandemic – a previously unexplored area.

The findings underscore the pivotal role of communication managers in adapting swiftly to new methods of employee engagement. This research expands our understanding of the communication channels employed by pharmaceutical companies before, during, and after the pandemic.

As with other sectors, pharmaceutical companies in Portugal were compelled to transition to remote work. Online communication channels became essential for maintaining employee

engagement during the pandemic and remain vital today. The pandemic accelerated the shift from printed materials to digital communication, as noted by Horlait and Lambotte (2021), who observed, “The imposition of teleworking in many companies during the COVID-19 crisis undoubtedly accelerated the digital transformation of communication, especially with the large-scale deployment of collaborative tools and online meetings” (p. 77).

Consistent with prior research, email remains one of the most frequently used communication methods (Welch, 2012). Men (2014) observed that employees prefer emails for receiving organizational updates, policies, events, and changes, followed by employee meetings and direct communication with managers.

In this study, email continues to be a primary communication channel in Portuguese pharmaceutical companies. However, unlike in other countries, internal social networking sites are not widely adopted in Portugal; less than half of the companies utilize this channel. Similarly, podcasts have low usage rates, though they are gradually gaining traction.

While digital communication offers advantages such as quick information transmission, it also presents challenges. Issues like screen fatigue, information overload, and the perception that “everyone is sharing information,” even when they may not be, were cited by communication managers as ongoing challenges. These concerns align with previous studies across different industries.

6. Conclusions

This article aimed to analyze how communication with employees evolved in Portuguese pharmaceutical companies before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic, as seen through the perspective of communication managers. Additionally, it examined the current challenges in internal communication now that the pandemic has ended.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that communication managers successfully maintained consistent communication flows with employees throughout the pandemic. Pharmaceutical companies adapted swiftly to the new circumstances, keeping employees central to their communication strategy to mitigate the pandemic’s impacts.

This study highlights the crucial role of internal communication in the healthcare sector, especially within the pharmaceutical industry—a field with limited research in communication sciences. These findings contribute valuable insights to the scientific community and underscore the need for further research to deepen understanding of employee communication in healthcare organizations.

As anticipated, the pandemic prompted organizations to rely heavily on online communication channels, with fewer large-group in-person meetings—a trend aligned with prior research (Verčič, Verčič & Špoljarić, 2023). However, primary healthcare providers in Portugal have been slower to adopt online media as a standard communication tool (Garcia & Eiró-Gomes, 2020). It’s important to note that this study’s results cannot be widely generalized due to the small, non-probabilistic sample size. As Andrade (2021) states, “there is nothing wrong with convenience and purposive sampling as long as readers are aware of the (sub)population to which the findings are relevant.”

To gain a fuller understanding of internal communication, future studies should combine questionnaires with in-depth interviews or case studies, providing a more comprehensive view. For instance, Cuenca-Fontbona, Compte-Pujol, and Sueldo (2022) conducted structured interviews with communication managers to assess how the health crisis affected internal communication. Similarly, Ace Toledano, Miquel Segarra, and López-de-Ayala (2022) explored the impact of COVID-19 on communication managers’ perceptions of the business environment in Spain.

Research shows that the choice of communication channels significantly affects employee satisfaction (Verčič & Špoljarić, 2020). Future studies could assess employee preferences for communication channels, using qualitative methods to gather more detailed insights.

The study also reveals that communication managers in pharmaceutical companies face diverse challenges, such as managing information overload and finding ways to engage employees, especially as remote work persists.

Emerging trends suggest that it may be worthwhile to explore the role of artificial intelligence in employee communication. This topic, especially relevant to Portugal's pharmaceutical industry, will likely be a focal point in future research. Additionally, as teleworking becomes more common post-COVID, further study on its regulation and impact on employee communication would be beneficial.

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