

A template approach for developing a digital internal communication strategy

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Abstract

The application of information and communication technologies has radically transformed organisations in recent decades. Digital technologies influence internal communication (IC) and how people collaborate in organisational contexts. The line between internal and external communication is blurred, and any internal information can find its way immediately to external stakeholders, particularly using digital affordances. Hence, internal stakeholders must be aware of what is appropriate to be communicated. This conceptual study illustrates the multidimensional perspective of digital IC (DIC) and aims to support organisations in developing a holistic DIC strategy. The findings reveal that the technical (channels, policies) and social (leadership, culture, training, collaboration, skills) digital elements of the organisational system are interrelated and include all organisational communication levels. The interplay between these socio-technical elements is related to competency development and trust-building. This paper contributes to the organisational communication literature by offering a template that provides organisations guidance in elaborating their DIC strategy.

Keywords

Digital transformation, internal communication, digital internal communication, DIC, digital strategy

Track

22. Organisational Studies

1. Introduction

Previous research suggests that new forms of communication currently challenge all areas of strategic communication, including the principles and practices used in areas such as advertising, public relations, sales promotion, and online communication (Moriarty et al., 2019). The application of information and communication technologies has transformed organisations in recent decades. Successful organisations use communication strategies, which are aligned with their vision and mission, and strategic communication plans, describing how they will reach their communication goals and objectives (Mahoney, 2017). Similarly, internal communication (IC) is crucial for organisational success (e.g., Murray, 2013), and in the field of public relations, IC is one of the fastest-growing specialisations (Ruck and Men, 2021; Verčič et al., 2012). Digital technologies influence IC and how people collaborate in organisational contexts (Riemke-Gurzki, 2017). With the digital transformation of organisations, embracing the technological changes from analogue to digital, IC changed into digital internal communication (DIC) (Wuersch et al., 2022), and thus organisations need DIC strategies to satisfy the emerging expectations of digital workplaces (DWP).

However, IC is considered to be a neglected research field despite its strategic management function (Klewes *et al.*, 2017; Yaxley and Ruck, 2017). Furthermore, concerning DIC, there is “a critical need for novel theorising on digital innovation management” (Nambisan et al., 2017, p. 223). Whilst there is a body of literature explaining how to create external communication strategies, which describe what individuals or organisations plan to do to achieve long-term goals (e.g., Mahoney, 2017), such literature is scarce in terms of IC strategies. Similarly, the extant literature shows scant coverage on how organisations can create DIC strategies, methods and frameworks to guide organisations when undergoing digital transformation processes (Peter et al., 2020). Organisations need DIC strategies to satisfy the emerging expectations of DWP, however, it is unknown how organisations can best create a DIC strategy.

This conceptual study aims at filling this gap by offering a template as a practical tool for developing a holistic DIC strategy. Generally, a template supports employees in fulfilling organisational routines and provides details of how tasks are interconnected and completed (Nelson and Winter, 1982). Also, a template increases the effectiveness of knowledge transfer (Chen & Greider, 2003). Hence, this study uses a template to organise strategy development. Our DIC template is built on the framework provided by Wuersch et al. (2022) and contributes to the strategic communication literature. In particular, our research offers application examples to illustrate the possible implementation of the template. Specifically, organisations can use the template to develop a practical holistic DIC strategy to fully engage human potential using digital communication affordances and achieve internal organisational aims. Such a communication-based template may also help managers and employees to effectively create a shared understanding of digital transformation processes and establish common sense-making by building relationships.

Our paper will be presented by starting with an overview of extant research at the nexus between digital transformation and IC. We then develop and discuss the template for

holistic DIC strategies before concluding the paper and identifying limitations that can be addressed in further research avenues. We follow Reese's (2022) suggested structure for writing a conceptual article.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 *DIC and organisational success*

Internal communication contributes to the organisation's overall success (e.g., Murray, 2013; Rajhans, 2012; Ruck and Men, 2021; Vergheze, 2017). As a driver of company management, IC can be characterised as a strategic management function (Ruck, 2016). It ranges from formal communication, such as emails from senior management to all employees, to informal communication, such as casual chats and gossip (Welch and Jackson, 2007). IC includes, on the one hand, communication channels, and, on the other hand, it also comprises interactions and relationships taking place at various organisational levels (Rogala and Bialowas, 2016).

The purpose of IC goes far beyond merely transmitting information essential for employees to perform their tasks. IC also addresses employees' social needs and influences their satisfaction at work, as well as their motivation, engagement, and productivity (Rogala and Bialowas, 2016). Furthermore, IC helps to unify employees towards the organisational mission, strategy, and values; supports employees to adapt to new challenges rapidly; and facilitates building a healthy workplace climate. IC also provides employees with a sense of belonging, a voice to express their opinions and views (Ruck, 2016) and promotes their professional development (Wasiela-Jaroszewicz, 2008). As a vital management function, IC increases employees' loyalty to the organisation and fosters their performance in the workplace (Vergheze, 2017). COVID-19 and the sudden need for remote work accelerated the digital transformation of the workplace (Savić, 2020a) and, at the same time, of IC towards DIC.

Digital transformation, known as the 'fourth revolution', is a multidimensional and technology-driven phenomenon that affects the economy, society, and politics (Riemke-Gurzki, 2017). Digital transformation has been defined as the "process that aims to improve an entity by triggering significant changes to its properties through combinations of information, computing, communication, and connectivity technologies" (Vial, 2019, p. 118). From an economic perspective, digital transformation can be understood as the use of the internet and computer technologies for achieving increased economic value (Reddy and Reinartz, 2017). From a broader perspective, digital transformation comprises the sum of changes that go hand in hand with digital technologies; strategically adopted digital initiatives, which influence business models and processes; and how people interact in everyday work practice and create prosperity. Hence, digital transformation is much more than the digital development of technology in business; it is a strategic initiative that transforms organisations (Schallmo, 2018; Savić, 2020b).

The use of digital products, services and media emerged during the last century. By using intelligent devices and social media platforms, communication between companies and customers has changed drastically. In parallel to external communication and customer

relationships, digital transformation has also found its way into IC (e.g., Ewing et al., 2019; Klewes et al., 2017), and shifted it towards DIC. This shift is visible in the IC history, which distinguishes between four main periods and functions: entertaining, informing, persuading, and engaging (Pilkington, 2017). While the first three functions belong to pre-digital times, the fourth function of ‘engaging’ parallels the last three decades of digital transformation and innovation.

Digital innovation involves novel forms of organising, also called ‘new work’ (Kraft and Peter, 2019), and “digital transformation is, without doubt, institutional change” (Hinings et al., 2018, p. 55). As such, digital transformation affects IC to different extents. Some organisations are already ‘born-digital’ (e.g., Amazon, Uber, Airbnb), while others existed before and are considered ‘pre-digital’ (Chanas et al., 2019). Impacts of the digital transformation process have been conceptualised in previous works as highly interconnected building blocks influencing external communication (e.g., consumer behaviour) and IC (e.g., organisational culture, leadership and employee roles) (Vial, 2019). DWPs enable data access, collaboration between employees, and connection with executives independent of time and place. This development increases transparency, productivity and innovation, and enhances corporate operational efficiency and management ability (Peter et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020).

2.2 *DIC in organisations as socio-technical systems*

There are various ways to conceptualise IC. While some functional traditions emphasise technical organisational elements, such as communication channels, strategies, structures and systems within an organisation, other meaning-centred perspectives highlight social elements in organisational settings, such as people, relationships and interactions between internal stakeholders, as well as organisational culture (Shockley-Zalabak, 2014, Neher et al. 2023). Combining both technical-procedural aspects with socio-cultural elements of IC allows for focusing on the dynamics between the social and technical dimensions. Organisations as socio-technical systems comprise the four interrelated components of ‘structure’ and ‘technology’ (technical), and ‘tasks’ and ‘people’ (social) (Rogala and Bialowas, 2016). For example, introducing digital tools (‘technology’) across the hierarchy (‘structure’) may require staff training (‘people’) to better achieve organisational goals (‘tasks’). Consequently, DIC can be defined as “comprehensive human-focused social constructions founded in a multileveled socio-technical framework to digitally transformed workplace environments” (Wuersch et al., 2022, p. 3).

Furthermore, the dynamics between technical and social elements enhance learning processes and strengthen IC (Wuersch, 2020). For instance, the introduction of social media as a communication platform for DIC purposes was found to be an effective means of staff empowerment and participation (Ewing et al., 2019). Employees become motivated, dedicated, and experience a sense of meaning and purpose which fosters recognition and relationships. As such, online tools are shown to be effective ways of improving IC practice, especially in organisational change processes (Duangekanong and Vate-U-Lan, 2019). Therefore, combining functional and meaning-centred organisational elements supports DIC

while, at the same time, social aspects are paramount as organisational culture and shared values are crucial for organisational performance and success (Gartman et al., 2018; Neher et al., 2018).

2.3 *DIC on various levels allows a multidimensional perspective*

Extant conceptualisations of IC are proposed using communication levels and dimensions (e.g., McQuail, 2010; Welch and Jackson, 2007). Some scholars explain organisational communication using a pyramid (e.g., McQuail, 2010; Rogala and Bialowas, 2016), which integrates an intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, institutional and mass communication level. Others suggest utilising an IC matrix (Welch and Jackson, 2007), which stipulates dimensions according to four internal stakeholder groups: employees and superiors, colleagues in teams, project groups, and strategic management.

Yet, DIC has scantily been discussed in scholarly works (Riemke-Gurzki, 2017), and only recently, a multidimensional perspective has been provided by Wuersch et al. (2022). Such a multidimensional approach is required to integrate technical and social organisational elements with the multiple DIC levels. Embracing a multidimensional perspective allows for a shared understanding of DIC on the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and organisational levels.

DIC on the intrapersonal level explains communication as biological and mental processes, which occur when people formulate messages and create an identity (Ruesch and Bateson, 1987). Such identity-building processes involve a complex system of socially constructed beliefs (Lindgren et al., 2017). IC influences the intrapersonal level of organisational stakeholders in terms of their thinking and feeling, their attitudes, intentions, values, and motivations (Maier et al., 2012) and impacts employees' ability to value themselves. Positive self-evaluation can initiate affirming communication with others (Adler et al., 2013), influencing their collaborations and workplace success (Welch, 2011). Digital tools, in turn, can support individuals in their endeavour to develop a positive self-image, thus, they can contribute to enhanced employee interactions and workplace relationships.

DIC at the interpersonal level involves at least two people (Rogala and Bialowas, 2016). Such relationships are of particular importance when including superiors and subordinates (Gray and Laidlaw, 2004). A strong supervisor-subordinate relationship impacts positively the subordinate's job satisfaction, performance, and potential for promotion (Kramer and Dailey, 2019; Neher and Maley, 2020). Generally, effective leadership communication in organisations is vital to promote trust, openness, and the affective commitment of employees, which are all influencing factors to achieve positive organisational outcomes (Bambacas and Patrickson, 2008). In terms of DIC, leaders must be open to new technologies, and continuously search for innovative work approaches, and systemic learning opportunities (Dery et al., 2017).

Organisational DIC or internal corporate communication (Welch and Jackson, 2007), helps foster organisational culture. The concept of organisational culture is important to an organisation as it is embedded in the system of shared beliefs and values that guide and direct the behaviour of members (Al Saifi, 2015; Neher et al., 2022). In this way, organisational culture can have a strong influence on the behaviour of employees and, ultimately,

organisational performance (Luft and Ingham, 1961; Neher and Maley, 2020). Managing organisational culture is an increasingly critical task for management in contemporary organisations (Singh, 2013), and effective DIC can be a critical protagonist in creating a positive organisational culture.

Our conceptual study accepts the invitation of Wuersch and colleagues (2022) to further discuss the multidimensional perspective with a strategic lens, allowing us to deepen the conversation on DIC. We extend their foundational work by creating a strategic DIC template supported by further literature and adding to the technical elements.

3. A template for holistic DIC strategies

Our study is based on Wuersch et al.'s (2022) multidimensional model, which explains the interplay between DIC's socio-technical elements on communication levels. While the authors conducted an integrative literature review, our study is conceptual. We use recent scholarly literature on the socio-technical elements of the interplay model (Wuersch et al., 2022) to propose a template for developing a holistic DIC strategy (Table 1). Such a holistic strategic approach to DIC includes the interplay of both technical and social elements on various communication levels. The notion of holism means "the effect of an initiative throughout the organisation and beyond" (Ledingham, 2015, p. 48), which reflects our study's strategic DIC approach. Organisations should have an IC strategy that can provide knowledge and affect cognition, touch employees emotionally, stimulate their motivation, and support their learning and growth at work (Maier et al., 2012). Likewise, a DIC strategy, including digital transformation, is needed to be successful in the digital age. Yet Bughin (2017) found that only a minority of companies were successfully undertaking digital transformation consistent with a distinctly articulated strategy. In response, our paper uses current strategic communication literature (e.g., Falkheimer and Heide, 2022) and offers an approach to creating a practical DIC strategy to be used for and adapted to organisations.

3.1 *Socio-technical elements of DIC*

Similar to IC shifting towards DIC, 'strategic communication' is increasingly becoming 'digital strategic communication' (Badham et al., 2022). Digital strategic communication is understood as the targeted use of digital technologies, data and means of an organisation to manage its communication and achieve its mission and communicative purposes. Wuersch et al. (2022), in their integrative literature review, found interlinked themes, including a technical element (digital channels) and social elements (digital leadership, culture, training, collaboration, and skills). This socio-technical interplay was shown to support trust-building learning processes.

Based on further literature (e.g., Mattila and Seppälä, 2016), we emphasise 'digital policy' as an additional technical element to overcome the primary challenge of IC and its "procedural guidelines and values [which] need to be firmly anchored in the interplay of unity and diversity" (Badham et al., 2022, p. 251). The digital policy ensures the trustworthy use of digital platforms in organisational settings and contributes to trust building (Mattila and

Seppälä, 2016). Hence, the following template (Table 1) illustrates the multidimensional perspective of the socio-technical elements, which jointly contribute to competency development and trust-building. This template offers senior management a practical tool, allowing them to create their own holistic DIC strategy by adjusting it to their businesses. Each component of the template is further discussed for clarification and illustrated by examples from theory and practice.

Developing competencies and building trust	Technical elements of DIC	Social elements of DIC
	Channels – Digital internal channels and platforms used on the organisational, interpersonal, and intrapersonal levels, e.g., social media, intranet, electronic newsletters, apps, and video conferencing. Policy – Digital internal policies applied on the organisational, interpersonal and intrapersonal levels, supporting, e.g., open communication, expected behaviour, publishing appropriate content, and building trust.	Leadership – Digital leadership and digital internal corporate communication to unify employees around digital vision, mission, and strategy.
		Culture – Organisational culture to unite employees regarding digital values and build a healthy climate in a DWP.
		Training – Education of employees to enhance their digital skills and ensure appropriate application of policies.
		Collaboration – Online interactions among internal stakeholders and teams to create enhanced value, satisfy social needs, and generate a positive image of the organisation.
		Skills – Digital skills to assist leaders and employees in responding and adapting to challenges in the digital age.

Table 1. Template for developing a holistic DIC strategy

Digital channels. Digital transformation includes the transformation of existing internal processes and structures, allowing to tap the full benefit of new technology (Fenech et al., 2019). Hence, digital transformation is also strongly associated with various DIC channels, such as an intranet and internal social media platforms (Ewing et al., 2019). The increasing use of social media in organisations is changing the approach of IC toward DIC, and engaging in internal social media activities is interlinked with cultivating relationships (Men et al., 2023). At the interpersonal level, tools to enhance collaboration are central. Digital apps and internal social media are frequently used to support collaboration across the organisation. For example, apps provide features such as employee recognition (Berges and Kon, 2019), or in-house Facebook groups share ideas and collaborate across silos (Dery et al., 2017). Organisations using DIC channels can create an environment and mindset of continuous learning, a feedback culture that empowers teams to thrive, and produce more expeditious innovations (Zhang, 2016). Personalised interfaces and DWPs are related to the intrapersonal level. For example, individualised learning platforms can offer online courses

that focus on the individual's strengths and potential for improvement (Singh and Hess, 2017). Overall, digital transformation goes well beyond mobile gadgets and apps. Technology is increasingly interrelated with social elements such as digital leadership, culture, training, collaboration and skills. By becoming more 'social' and 'digital', digital transformation in organisations is getting more conversational and dialogical, interactive, and humanised (Ewing et al., 2019). Dialogue, in turn, may become a tool of strategic communication (Kent, 2022).

Examples. A practical example of 'Digital channels' is a company, which introduced an app called StarMeUp for thanking employees and recognising the company's values in other coworkers (Berges and Kon, 2019, p. 213). In another organisation, "call centre employees set up social media platforms (e.g., on Facebook) to share ideas, collaborate across silos and self-organise" (Dery et al., 2017, p. 140).

Digital Policy. On an organisational level, the digital policy is important for the responsible and appropriate use of digital technologies and DIC communication content. Ewing et al. (2019) argue that clear social media policies are required to guide employees on what to use the platform for. Indeed, the line between internal and external digital communication is blurred, and effectively managing insiders-outsiders interaction in the online environment is a challenge (Kulik et al., 2012). Therefore, employees across the organisation need to know what internal content can be communicated externally and how it should be done. Hence, social media policies should provide codes of conduct and guidelines for employees' access to social media platforms, information sharing, and preferred tone of voice (Mazzei and Butera, 2016). To effectively embed policy, including guidelines and codes of conduct, within the organisation and its culture and thus manage employees' behaviour, digital communication training and skills development play a vital role. Ewing et al. (2019) highlight that training should support open communication, rather than controlled communication, and Thelen (2021) affirms that organisations should take the time to educate their employees on employee advocacy. Such a strategic training initiative is linked to digital leadership and anchored in a DIC strategy. As employees' online behaviour is critical for organisations, digital policies and guidelines addressed to employees, and related digital training initiatives aimed at enhancing collaboration can be key to crisis prevention (Mazzei and Butera, 2021; Mazzei et al., 2012). Overall, DIC policies should address two main issues: communication effectiveness and prohibitions (Sussman, 2008). Communication rules are more likely to be understood and followed by individuals and teams when they are integrated within the organisational culture and communicated through dialogue; illustrated arguments explaining the risks and the costs of failing; and framed in a win-win instead of a punitive perspective (Sussman, 2008; Gilsdorf, 1998; Stohl, 1986).

Structurally, Rokka et al. (2014) suggest integrating digital policies, such as social media policies, with human resources management practices, including open communication, fair treatment, and well-being programs. In contrast, other authors (e.g., Johnston, 2015; Mazzei and Butera, 2016) consider social media policies as part of corporate governance. For example, Mazzei and Butera (2016) in their study found that the companies were mainly concerned with the avoidance of legal, ethical, reputational and security risks, indicating that

social media policies are a corporate governance instrument. Hence, it appears fair to say that either position has its merits, and as there is no one-fit-all recipe, organisations should take the approach that fits best with their circumstances.

Examples. Duke Energy SMP provides a prescriptive policy stating, for instance, that “[i]nappropriate and/or unauthorized posting of internal reports, policies, procedures, contracts or other internal business-related confidential communications is also prohibited” (Mazzei and Butera, 2016, p. 9). As an example of employee training, the 3M’s social media policy requests that “[i]n order to conduct any business as a representative of 3M on social channels, you must first complete mandatory training” (Mazzei and Butera, 2016, p. 11).

Digital Leadership. It is important for leaders to create a clear digital vision (Musundire et al., 2020; Singh and Hess, 2017), which will be an asset for organisational success. Companies with a strong digital vision, in which technologies such as big data, cloud, mobile and social technologies are a crucial part of the infrastructure, are profitable on average and achieve a higher market valuation and higher sales than competitors without such a vision (Schwertner, 2017).

Overall, in the context of digital transformation, organisational leaders need to ensure that their employees develop a digital mindset that can respond to “disruptions associated with the use of digital technologies” (Vial, 2019, p. 129). In other words, as felicitously expressed by Chanas et al. (2019, p. 22), organisations need leaders who want to “surf the digital wave” rather than “get ahead of the digital tsunami”. Overall, leadership with digital skills is in demand as it is likely to enhance DIC along with DWP strategies, organisational cultures using digital technologies, and thus unifying the workforce.

Example. Gilli et al. (2023, p. 6) put it in a nutshell that

[p]eople, not technology, drive digital transformation, and organizations require leaders, not necessarily technological specialists, to manage the complex changes that comprise an organization’s digital transformation. Technical and methodological skills can be substituted with the use of new technologies, but leaders’ interactional, social, strategic and conceptual skills are gaining in importance.

Digital culture. DIC goes beyond technology and requires the right set of values, beliefs, and organisational culture (Berges and Kon, 2019; Fenech et al., 2019). Such values may, for example, incorporate digital inclusion comprising digital literacy and training for the entire workforce (Bejaković and Mrnjavac, 2020). By enacting values across all employees, an organisation increases its digital authenticity (Neher et al., 2022) and thus establishes its digitally safe culture. Implementing DIC strategies in organisations goes along with cultural change. Leadership is vital in promoting values and leading organisational cultural change (Barratt-Pugh and Bahn). In change processes, even when driven by new procedures and policies, employees are requested to take greater ownership of their actions and thus have increased responsibilities (Limwichitr et al., 2015). Hence, alongside leadership, fellowship is needed to implement successful change towards digital culture. While in the past digitalisation was mainly attributed to technology, successful organisations today jointly use technology, leadership, and culture to access opportunities offered by digital transformation.

Altogether, digital leadership, values, and culture interlinked with digital affordances are strong themes discussed in the extant literature on the level of organisational communication (Wuersch et al., 2022). Therefore, social and technical organisational elements are connected and determinants of DIC.

Examples. In workplace practice, “having a digital mindset is equivalent to having an organisational climate or culture that emphasises the importance of, and supports, digital transformation” (Solberg et al., 2020, p. 3). Such a digital mindset can “entail identification of the changes needed in processes, technologies, culture, and leadership approaches to get marketing, supply chains, and people engagement more in tune with the needs of new customers” (Natarajan, 2016, p. 37), and thus generate added value and competitive advantage.

Digital training. Digital training involves digital channels (technical elements), such as internal social media, and the capacity to learn and empower people (social elements). For instance, online platforms allow employees to share knowledge with their peers, and by learning from each other, employees are empowered and motivated (Metin, 2019; Woo, 2021). Digital training enables employees to use digital platforms and tools, and provides an understanding of the content’s relevancy and what they are allowed to share; that is, not to share proprietary, confidential, or offensive content (Ewing et al., 2019). Therefore, to effectively use DIC, an organisation requires to provide clear policies and guidelines, which also need dedicated training to allow and increase employees’ confidence and trust in themselves and the organisation. Consequently, there are links between competency development, interpersonal trust, and collaboration and innovation (digital channels) (Bulińska-Stangrecka and Bagieńska, 2019). Hence, using digital technologies to learn together and collaborate contributes to trustful relationships in organisational settings.

Example. In a DIC setting, agility can be regarded as a strategic advantage because “[t]he essence of [an] agile approach is the mindset of constant learning, designing, delivering, getting feedback, adjusting and re-delivering. Companies that create an environment in which [an] agile approach flourishes find that teams can churn out innovation faster in both new products and services” (Zhang, 2016, p. 4).

Digital collaboration. Digital tools can support collaboration; therefore, many companies make investments in the digital transformation of their organisation (Peter et al., 2019). For example, using interactive features, such as internal social media, is effective in empowering employees and stimulating the dialogue between them. Such increased interactions intensify employee engagement, support employees to build relationships, which then increases mutual understanding, encourages collaboration, and eventually facilitates interactions with management (Ewing et al., 2019). As a result, employees increasingly embody organisational values motivating them to engage in their work activities and show more dedication and commitment to accomplish their tasks (Neher and Maley, 2020). Social media platforms also enhance connectivity between employees (Dery et al., 2017). When strongly connected with each other, team orientation is strengthened, fostering cooperation across the organisation. Such increased collaborations support organisations to be innovative

and thus align with the digital age requiring digital skills (Bulińska-Stangrecka and Bagieńska, 2019).

Example. Ewing et al. (2019, p. 123) interviewed senior-level IC practitioners working for global companies where “many of the interviewees recommended providing guidance with helping employees find like-minded peers who can help them become more empowered both personally and professionally through using internal social media”.

Digital skills. Developing digital skills requires flexibility, learning abilities, and an open attitude. Thus, digital competencies are not restricted to data analysis or programming but include a wide range of skills, from digital problem-solving to knowledge about privacy principles and cybersecurity (Dobrowolska and Knop, 2020). Adequate digital hard skills, such as digital literacy and social media proficiency, are commonly seen as the main precondition for an employee to succeed in the DWP (Bejaković and Mrnjavac, 2020). Digital literacy allows employees to use online applications with confidence, maintaining an adequate level of privacy in workplace settings (Boerman et al., 2021). Additionally, a mindset of continuous learning is a crucial component of digital transformation in organisations, including testing innovative ideas, being flexible and collaborative, and learning autonomously (Iordache et al., 2017; Kovaitė et al., 2020; Solberg et al., 2020). Digital soft skills include an open attitude towards digital transformation, teamwork, leadership skills, and emotional competencies (Dobrowolska and Knop, 2020). Having technical tools and a digital mindset allows employees to play an important part in the organisation and increase their engagement and communication (Ewing et al., 2019; Solberg et al., 2020).

Examples. Case studies in the government sector revealed that “[d]igital skills are essential for driving digital transformation efforts in organisations. ... [K]ey enablers for developing digital skills [are] ... financial resources, access to technology tools and formal training. The barriers to acquiring digital skills were noted as budget and infrastructure constraints, as well as a lack of agility in organisations.” (Manana and Mawela, 2022, p. 144). Besides the formal training, a manager noted that “for [developing] digital skills, the communications department conducts annual workshops as per the request from employees or as per their in-house survey” (p. 147).

3.2 Developing competencies and trust at the centre of DIC

Besides the socio-technical elements exemplifying DIC on the intrapersonal, interpersonal and organisational levels, these socio-technical elements are interlinked and, when applied in conjunction, create trust-building processes of learning and development at all organisational levels. It can thus be argued that the interplay of the socio-technical strategic elements enhances learning. It can also be reasoned that creating a holistic DIC strategy leads to competency development, which – supported by technological tools, systems and processes – occurs at the intrapersonal level through digital skills development; at the interpersonal level via training and online collaborations; and at the organisational level through a learning-oriented workplace culture. Competency development and continuous learning at an organisational level are vital for digital transformation processes, which shift communication from traditional to digital channels. Conversely, the use of digital channels, such as internal

social media, online conferences or video streaming fosters ongoing learning (Men and Bowen, 2016). Furthermore, the digital policy provides guidance and orientation on how to use digital affordances appropriately.

Both managers and employees must share their knowledge and gain a common understanding of digital transformation to facilitate dynamic capabilities and organisational learning (Senge, 2006). This is important as the main challenges for digital transformation do not lie in the technology but in the human being. Employee resistance against DWP transformation can arise if organisational change parallels multiple technical errors hindering daily work tasks (Herrero et al., 2020). Another cause for resistance can derive from a lack of digital skills because if “employees do not feel they are confident in using the new technology, they will give up using it” (Zhang et al., 2020, p. 10). Therefore, vigorous organisations promote skills development and personal growth to enhance employees’ motivation, engagement, satisfaction, and, as Yeomans and FitzPatrick (2017) advocate, well-being in organisational workplace settings. Fenech et al. (2019) conclude that human capital, intellectual capital, and knowledge developed through digital transformation are increasingly recognised as competitive advantage of organisations.

One of the primary purposes of IC is to develop employee education (Wasiela-Jaroszewicz, 2008). Individual learning and personal mastery at the intrapersonal level are preconditions for organisational learning and, ultimately, lead to organisational growth and development (Senge, 2006). Developing personal mastery of competencies, such as digital skills, leads to improved collaborations and organisational excellence. Competency development also supports the trust-building processes of individuals, groups and teams, and organisations (Bulińska-Stangrecka and Bagieńska, 2019), stimulating personal confidence and interpersonal trust. Hence, training throughout the organisation using digital communication channels as an integral part of DIC can help create and maintain trustworthy employee relationships and establish trust in management; or, in the words of Kovaitė et al. (2020, p. 175), “achieving mutual trust is essential for digital internal communication”. Employees need to feel safe using internal social media; thus, mutual trust is a precondition for successful DIC. Being confident is one of the ten most desirable soft skills in the workplace (Robles, 2012), and trust has been acknowledged as a key component of relationships (Welch, 2006). Strong relationships based on trust support internal collaboration and contribute to a healthy workplace climate (de Graaf, 2016). Such facets of IC stimulate employees’ satisfaction and contribute to organisational trust-building linked to organisational functioning and success (Vokić et al., 2020). Without trust, there are no relationships (Welch, 2006), which, in turn, constitute organisations; organisations are created by people relating to each other (Shockley-Zalabak, 2014). Hence, as a strategic key advantage, trust is needed for organisations so that energy can flow. As a result, trust, including digital trust, contributes to organisational outcomes as there is a direct relation between trust in an organisation and the organisation’s overall performance (Shockley-Zalabak and Morreale, 2011).

4. Conclusion, limitations and future research

4.1 Conclusion

The purpose of our conceptual work was to illustrate the multidimensional perspective of DIC, which supports organisations in creating a holistic DIC strategy. The conceptualisation showed the interplay of the technical and social organisational elements and DIC levels, with key elements being digital channels, digital policy, digital leadership, digital culture, digital training, digital collaboration, and digital skills. The socio-technical elements conjunctly create trust-building processes of learning and development at all organisational levels. While developing competencies is at the heart of DIC, trust is the bedrock of intrapersonal processes, interactions and relationships, and organisational functioning and success.

Overall, our study conceptualises how digital transformation impacts socio-technical elements on all DIC levels. To guide organisations toward successful DIC, a digital strategy is recommended, which must be people-driven. The proposed template (Table 1) helps organisations in creating their own holistic DIC strategy for being successful in the digital age.

4.2 Limitations and implications for future research and practice

This study has limitations that need to be acknowledged. The research is based on extant literature, extends a previous theoretical study, and thus makes a novel contribution to the organisational communication literature. However, the proposed template to develop a holistic DIC strategy has not been applied to practice yet. Using this template in a case organisation would validate the template and offer insights into the value of a strategy for DIC practice, including opportunities for improvement of the template.

Overall, a subsequent case study could provide a deeper understanding of the interplay of socio-technical elements of DIC on the various organisational levels. The template could then be further developed into a maturity model with specific criteria for each socio-technical element. Using such a maturity model, organisations could assess the maturity level of their DIC. Likewise, the template in Table 1 could be extended by a psychological dimension adding depth to our framework. Integrating a third column with psychodynamic forces could underpin each of the five ‘Social elements of DIC’ in the second column. These forces could then be further explored using a case approach, leading to a more nuanced understanding of the interplay of socio-technical elements on the various organisational levels.

Furthermore, future research could investigate the central concept of competency development, for example, how digital skills and training could be best promoted on the different communication levels. Such an investigation would offer a better understanding of how a human-centred approach to DIC could effectively be developed in the digital age. Finally, building organisational trust through IC has variously been investigated (e.g., Vokić et al., 2020; Welch, 2006). These previous works could be extended using a digital dimension. By exploring the link between trust in organisational settings and DIC, new insights could show how relationships and interactions can be strengthened in DWP settings of the ‘fourth revolution’.

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