The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.
The perception of communications executives
in companies: The role and challenges of internal
communication

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has tested the role of internal communication (IC) in managing adaptation to change and digitalisation in companies, in the context of a sudden switch to implementing remote working, the reorientation and temporary interruption of activity and mass redundancies. With the aim of analysing the effect of Covid-19 on the assessment of corporate communication managers regarding the business environment and the challenges faced by IC departments in Spain, a statistical analysis compares data collected in 2018 and 2020 (N=118 and N=69 respectively) on the perceptions of members of Dircom (Asociación de Directivos de Comunicación) [Association of Communication Executives]. In addition, a systematic analysis of the 2020 open questions is carried out. The results highlight an improvement in the perception that investment in IC is sufficient during the pandemic, although it remains among the worst rated aspects of the business context. Managing digital and media developments, linking IC with corporate strategy and strengthening the role of communication in decision-making are the greatest

perceived challenges, with no changes due to Covid-19. On the other hand, the majority of the respondents believe that Covid-19 is having a positive influence on IC, showing its importance for the proper functioning of the business during the pandemic, with an increase in its actions. More than half of the respondents appreciate that IC has driven business values and changes in the way these departments operate; two-thirds have learned lessons for their business; and almost three-quarters perceive that the incorporation of audiovisual and on-line media will continue.

Keywords: internal communication; perceptions; communication executives; pandemic; Covid-19 effects

Resum. *L'impacte de la pandèmia de COVID-19. Percepció dels professionals de la comunicació en les empreses: rol i desafiaments de la comunicació interna*

La pandèmia de COVID-19 ha posat a prova el rol de la comunicació interna (CI) en la gestió de l'adaptació al canvi i a la digitalització de les empreses, en una situació sobtada d'implantació del teletreball, reorientació i interrupció temporal de l'activitat i acomiadaments massius. Amb l'objectiu d'analitzar l'efecte de la COVID-19 sobre l'avaluació que els gestors de comunicació de les empreses fan de l'entorn empresarial i dels desafiaments que afronten els departaments de CI a Espanya, una anàlisi estadística compara les dades recollides el 2018 i el 2020 (N = 118 i 69, respectivament) sobre les percepcions dels socis de Dircom (Associació de Directius de Comunicació). A més, es fa una anàlisi sistemàtica de les preguntes obertes de 2020. Entre els resultats destaca la percepció que la inversió en CI millora durant la pandèmia, si bé continua entre els aspectes pitjor valorats de l'entorn empresarial. Manejar l'evolució digital i dels mitjans, unir la CI amb l'estratègia corporativa i enfortir el rol de la comunicació en la presa de decisions són els principals reptes percebuts, sense modificacions per la COVID-19. D'altra banda, la majoria valora que la COVID-19 influeix positivament sobre la CI, que mostra la seva importància per al bon funcionament empresarial durant la pandèmia amb un increment de les seves actuacions. Més de la meitat dels participants aprecien que la CI ha impulsat valors empresarials i canvis en el funcionament d'aquests departaments; dos terços n'han extret ensenyaments per a la seva activitat; i quasi tres quartes parts perceben que la incorporació de mitjans audiovisuals i en línia perdurarà.

Paraules clau: comunicació interna; percepcions; professionals de la comunicació; pandèmia; efectes de la COVID-19

Resumen. *El impacto de la pandemia de COVID-19. Percepción de los profesionales de la comunicación en las empresas: rol y desafíos de la comunicación interna*

La pandemia de COVID-19 ha puesto a prueba el rol de la comunicación interna (CI) en la gestión de la adaptación al cambio y a la digitalización de las empresas, en una situación repentina de implantación del teletrabajo, reorientación e interrupción temporal de la actividad y despidos masivos. Con el objetivo de analizar el efecto de la COVID-19 sobre la evaluación que los gestores de comunicación de las empresas hacen del entorno empresarial y de los desafíos que afrontan los departamentos de CI en España, un análisis estadístico compara los datos recogidos en 2018 y 2020 (N = 118 y 69, respectivamente) sobre las percepciones de los socios de Dircom (Asociación de Directivos de Comunicación). Además, se realiza un análisis sistemático de las preguntas abiertas de 2020. Entre los resultados destaca la percepción que la inversión en CI mejora durante la pandemia, aunque continúa entre los aspectos peor valorados del entorno empresarial. Manejar la evolución digital y de los medios, unir la CI con la estrategia corporativa y fortalecer el rol

de la comunicación en la toma de decisiones son los mayores retos percibidos, sin modificaciones por la COVID-19. Por otro lado, la mayoría valora que la COVID-19 influye positivamente sobre la CI, que muestra su importancia para el buen funcionamiento empresarial durante la pandemia con un incremento de sus actuaciones. Más de la mitad de los participantes aprecian que la CI ha impulsado valores empresariales y cambios en el funcionamiento de estos departamentos; dos tercios han extraído enseñanzas para su actividad; y casi tres cuartas partes perciben que la incorporación de medios audiovisuales y en línea perdurará.

Palabras clave: comunicación interna; percepciones; profesionales de la comunicación; pandemia; efectos de la COVID-19

1. Introduction

Internal communication (IC) has acquired strategic importance as a key element to achieve organisational success in an increasingly dynamic and changing environment (Ruck and Welch, 2012; Berceruelo, 2014; Ruck, 2020). IC has been approached from different disciplines (Araújo and Miranda, 2021) and linked to an improved organisational climate and employee–manager relationship, which favours various outcomes that support organisational effectiveness (Sinčić-Ćorić, Pološki-Vokić and Tkalac-Verčič, 2020). Its contribution to the management of organisational change and complexity is also highlighted (Yeomans and FitzPatrick, 2017), and as a way to increase engagement (Welch, 2015; Mishra, Boynton and Mishra, 2014). In addition, it favours the sense of belonging and the external projection of corporate reputation (Welch and Jackson, 2007) by increasing staff motivation and cohesion and their alignment with the business objectives (Welch, 2015).

In recent years, communication executives have mostly perceived IC as one of the priority areas of specialisation that will achieve greater prominence in the future (Heide and Simonsson, 2011; Yeomans and FitzPatrick, 2017; Zerfass et al., 2011; Nelli, 2018; Dircom, 2018). However, Heide and Simonsson (2011) conclude that IC has low legitimacy within organisations and, in an emerging central issue such as leadership (Cornelissen, 2020), there is no perceived agreement in the role assigned to IC by managers and communication executives (Zerfass et al., 2014).

Within the scope of its practice in Spain, Miquel-Segarra and Aced-Toledano (2019) note that IC executives are achieving progressively greater autonomy in organisational structures. According to Nelli (2018), this is an indicator of the recognition that IC is an important activity that requires continuous and well-structured management. However, they conclude that IC still lacks its own identity in Spanish companies, to the extent that these executives must usually report to other departments. Multinational and large companies are the best positioned in this regard.

The Covid-19 pandemic has confronted organisations with a new and unforeseen situation in which IC could demonstrate its strategic role, and from

which important lessons for the future can be drawn (Xifra, 2020). For a long time, attention to the positioning of IC in organisations has been subsumed (and relegated) to the interest of theorists in the recognition of the status and conditions in which communication executives work in organisations. In this context, this study seeks to discover the effect of pandemics on this area of activity and its environment in organisations, from the perspective of the executives who work in this field.

2. Contributions and lessons from Internal Communication during the Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic tested the role of IC in managing adaptation to change and digitalisation in companies, in the context of a sudden switch to implementing remote working, reorientating and temporarily interrupting activity, mass redundancies, and the establishment of new health and safety protocols (Neill and Bowen, 2021). This exceptional circumstance forced organisations to implement new communication channels and tools to facilitate the management of remote tasks and to keep employees informed. However, in this context of physical remoteness, there are also vital issues such as the loss of engagement or the disconnection of employees with the organisation's objectives and values (Fábregas, Tejedor and Salla, 2021).

Besides the communication requirements of implementing remote working, companies have had to inform employees about new health and safety measures to protect both their employees and their customers/users. And not only that: they have had to involve them in the adoption of remote working in times of confusion and in the face of sometimes contradictory and highly politicised messages from the authorities and experts (Tejedor et al., 2020). Therefore, beyond the aspects strictly linked to job performance, organisations have had to train employees to cope with the ambiguity and uncertainty of this situation of unplanned change (Sun et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021), to ensure their commitment to the organisation and their psychological well-being (Ruck, 2020).

In addition, Chon, Tam and Kim (2021) point out that employees may question the capabilities and ethics of their organisations and leaders to deal with the problems and consequences of the pandemic, despite being an external and uncontrollable crisis in which organisations find themselves as victims. The organisation's actions will be key to ensure that this situation does not lead to a crisis of confidence among employees, who may spread information which damages the organisation's reputation.

Several studies have supported the role of IC in managing organisations during the pandemic, providing knowledge applicable to crisis and change communication management. Sun et al. (2021) have demonstrated the role of symmetric IC in enhancing organisational identification, considering the intermediation of perceived quality of change communication, perceived organisational support and positive emotions during the change process.

Focusing on employee–organisation relationships, Ecklebe and Löffler (2021) point out the impact of the perceived quality of IC on trustworthiness, commitment and satisfaction; they highlight communication both at the beginning of and during the pandemic, substantive information, participatory communication and rejection of secrecy as key to this assessment. Moreover, Li et al. (2021) have explained the effectiveness of transparent communication in the quality of employee–organisation relationships by fostering proactive coping with change and reducing uncertainty.

On the other hand, Neill and Bowen (2021) have highlighted the crucial role of listening, in a context where increased moral sensitivity is critical to address employee concerns and build trusting relationships. Men, Qin and Jin (2021) also emphasise the latter aspect, and show the role of supervisory leadership communication in encouraging trust towards the leadership and the organisation. These authors consider that employees' psychological need for competence and relatedness are met through their supervisors' use of meaning-making, as well as through empathetic and direction-giving language.

In accordance with the challenges and opportunities that IC has had to face in this unprecedented context, the aim of this research is twofold. On the one hand, to analyse the changes that Covid-19 has brought about in the evaluation made by company communication managers of the business environment and the challenges faced by IC departments in Spain; and on the other hand, to gather their impressions regarding the effects that the pandemic has had on IC in companies. A further objective is to find out whether the views of the executives who manage IC are influenced by the size and territorial location of their companies.

3. Methodology

3.1. Design

Based on databases of the Spanish professional association Dircom (Asociación de Directivos de Comunicación) [Association of Communication Executives], which collects members' perceptions regarding the state of IC in Spain [Estado de la CI en España], two quantitative cross-sectional analyses were carried out, in 2018 and 2020. They focus on the business context and the priorities, problems and challenges of IC. In addition, a qualitative analysis of the 2020 data was conducted on the opinions of executives on the effects that the pandemic has had on companies' IC.

3.2. Population and sample

The population under study are members of Dircom, an association that brings together communication managers and executives from companies, institutions and consultancy firms in Spain. The sample was non-probabilistic by self-selection (Couper, 2000).

In 2018, out of a population of 1,022 members to whom the questionnaire was sent, 118 responded (a response rate of 11.5%). 45.8% of the participants worked at a multinational company based in Spain, and the remaining 54.2% at a national company. Regarding the size of the organisations, 72% of the participants worked at a large company (more than 250 employees), 9.3% at a medium-sized company (between 51 and 250 employees), 10.2% at a small company (between 11 and 50 employees) and 8.5% in a micro-company (between 1 and 10 employees).

In 2020, out of a population of 881 members, 69 questionnaires were obtained (a response rate of 7.8%). 59.4% of the participants belonged to a multinational company and 40.6% to a national company. Regarding size, 79.6% worked at a large company, 10.2% at a medium-sized company, 8.6% at a small company and 1.4% at a micro company.

3.3. Instruments

To collect the data in 2018, Dircom developed a structured questionnaire based on research previously conducted by the Italian IC Association (ASCAI) and the European Association of Internal Communication (FEIEA) (Nelli, 2018). The questionnaire consisted of 37 items organised under five headings: positioning of the IC team; their strategies, objectives and activities; their evaluation processes; the business context; and the priorities, issues and challenges they faced.

In 2020, the questionnaire was adapted to reflect the effects that Covid-19 was having on IC in Spanish companies. The questionnaire was reduced and redefined to a 20-item instrument, 15 of which covered the same five sections as the initial document, with five new, open-ended questions with reflections on the effects of the pandemic. All items were rated on a Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree* and 5 = *Strongly agree*), in relation to the last six months.

3.4. Procedure

In the first phase, data collection was conducted during the first quarter of 2018. The online questionnaire was sent to members and completed by the executives responsible for managing their company's IC. It took approximately 20 minutes to complete. In the second phase, data was collected during October 2020. The link to the online questionnaire was sent to members again for completion. In this case, it was expected to take approximately 15 minutes to complete. In both cases, the confidential and anonymous treatment of the information was guaranteed in accordance with Spanish Organic Law 15/1999 on the Protection of Personal Data.

3.5. Quantitative data analysis

To study the differences between the participants' evaluations in the two years, a Student's t-test for independent samples was applied and, considering the inclusion of the factors of the companies in which the respondents work (size or territorial scope), 2x2 between-subjects factorial ANOVAs were carried out for each criterion. The data was analysed using the statistical program SPSS, version 22, and the level of statistical validity was p < .05.

3.6. Qualitative analysis

After a process of analysis of the information collected in the qualitative items of the questionnaires, a system of codes was drawn up relating to the main discursive lines identified. Based on this coding scheme, the contents of the responses were examined to capture and transpose the experiences and considerations of the participants. The analysis of the information was carried out with the MAXQDA 2018 qualitative analysis program.

4. Results

4.1. Business context of IC departments

Table 1 shows the level of agreement that participants have with the items raised regarding the business context. The importance of IC channels, sense of belonging and integration between internal and external communication are the aspects of the business context most highly rated by participants in 2018 and 2020. However, employee participation in decisions that affect them, their role in networks as guarantors of the company and the company's commensurate investment in IC are the least rated issues (and do not reach the average value of 3).

Comparative analyses of the context indicators before and after the pandemic show that there are significant differences in evaluation only when it is stated that the company invests sufficiently in IC (from 2.41 to 2.86) (t (185) = -2.481; *p* = .014; *d* = 0.38); for the other items, although the scores are slightly higher, the differences are small and not significant.

Looking at the relative positions attributed to the items in each period, slight variations are observed in the ranking: during the pandemic, the assessment that employees have easier access to information necessary for their performance exceeds the degree of agreement of executives regarding the integration of internal and external communication. And something similar occurs with sufficient investment in IC, which exceeds the degree of agreement with the statement regarding the participation of employees as advocates of the organisation.

Other factors, such as the size of the organisation or the territorial scope in which the company operates, have been included in the analysis of the business environment. However, significant differences are only found in

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and t-tests for the business context items, in 2018 and 2020

	2018		2020**		t	p
	n	M (SD)	n	M (SD)		
Internal communication channels are very important	118	3.85 (1.18)	69	4.06 (1.06)	-1.222	.223
Employees feel proud to work for their company	118	3.82 (0.94)	69	4.03 (1.01)	-1.411	.160
Internal and external communication are perfectly integrated	118	3.81 (1.28)	69	3.91 (1.29)	-0.511	.610
Employees have easy access to key information to be able to perform their work properly	118	3.80 (1.10)	69	3.97 (0.99)	-1.088	.278
Employees have all the facilities to communicate directly with their managers	118	3.57 (1.20)	69	3.84 (1.15)	-1.524	.129
Employees have a good understanding of the company's goals and values	118	3.47 (1.15)	69	3.57 (1.06)	-0.534	.594
Employees see the link between their jobs and the company's objectives	118	3.45 (1.08)	69	3.57 (1.01)	-0.729	.467
The leaders of each team understand that communication is essential to their role	118	3.35 (1.18)	69	3.52 (1.11)	-0.997	.320
CEOs consider the communication aspect in each of their decisions and actions	118	2.99 (1.16)	69	3.09 (1.21)	-0.535	.593
Employees are involved in making decisions that directly affect them	118	2.94 (1.09)	69	3.07 (1.02)	-0.818	.415
Employees actively participate in networks and are relevant watchdogs for the company	118	2.56 (1.15)	69	2.64 (1.07)	-0.461	.646
The company invests enough in IC	118	2.41 (1.13)	69	2.86 (1.30)	-2.481	.014*

*p < .05
Source: Own elaboration.

the item stating that internal and external communication are perfectly integrated ($F(1,183) = 4.131$; $p = .044$; $\eta^2_p = .022$), with the differences in 2018 ($p < .001$) being located between national companies and multinationals in which this integration is much greater (3.38 vs. 4.33).

4.2. Priorities, problems and challenges for IC departments

Table 2 shows the level of importance of the priorities, problems and challenges facing corporate IC in the medium term. Managing digital and media developments, linking IC to business strategy and strengthening the role of communication to support management decision-making are the most important challenges for participants in 2018 and 2020. In contrast, aspects more related to the social responsibility of IC, such as implementing a code

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and t-tests for the items referring to IC priorities, problems and challenges in the next three years, in 2018 and 2020

	2018		2020**		t	p
	n	M (SD)	n	M (SD)		
Managing digital and media developments	118	4.27 (0.95)	69	4.22 (0.87)	0.385	.700
Linking IC with business strategy	118	4.26 (0.95)	69	4.25 (0.93)	0.115	.909
Strengthening the role of communication to support management decision-making	118	4.25 (0.85)	69	4.14 (0.97)	0.804	.422
Adapting to the volume and speed of information flow	118	4.08 (1.03)	69	4.07 (0.96)	0.025	.980
Reaching employees using mobile technology	118	4.05 (1.15)	69	4.07 (1.12)	-0.126	.900
Establishing new methods for assessing and demonstrating the value of communication	118	4.04 (0.99)	69	3.91 (1.11)	0.824	.411
Helping managers and team leaders to build their communication skills	118	3.97 (1.00)	69	3.94 (1.03)	0.213	.832
Adopting measures that inspire employees to create and share valuable content	118	3.94 (1.02)	69	3.86 (1.14)	0.529	.598
Integrating employee-generated content into corporate communication	118	3.88 (0.99)	69	3.70 (1.23)	1.069	.287
Addressing the demand for transparency and more active audiences	118	3.86 (1.02)	69	3.87 (1.06)	-0.087	.931
Implementing advanced monitoring and active listening strategies	118	3.80 (1.03)	69	3.81 (1.06)	-0.095	.925
Explaining the value of internal communication to managers	118	3.77 (1.23)	69	4.01 (1.08)	-1.413	.160
Combining the need to target more audiences and channels with limited resources	118	3.74 (1.09)	69	3.84 (1.15)	-0.614	.540
Teaching employees how to use social media to generate valuable content	118	3.66 (1.21)	69	3.48 (1.08)	1.038	.301
Achieving the integration of "digital natives"	118	3.61 (1.14)	69	3.54 (1.16)	0.425	.671
Replacement of print media by digital media	118	3.58 (1.19)	69	3.51 (1.28)	0.417	.677
Supporting multicultural integration	118	3.53 (1.17)	69	3.45 (1.27)	0.417	.677
Identifying sustainability policies in IC	118	3.45 (1.08)	69	3.61 (1.23)	-0.929	.354
Implementing a code of ethics for process and actions in IC	118	3.44 (1.31)	69	3.28 (1.16)	0.867	.387

Source: Own elaboration.

of ethics in IC, identifying sustainability policies in IC, and supporting multicultural integration, are considered less important, although they are scored above the average of 3.

Comparative analyses of these items before and after the pandemic show that there are no significant differences in participants' evaluations. However, differences in the relative position of the items assessed by the interviewees can be observed. It is worth noting that during the pandemic, digital and media developments are displaced by the link between IC and business strategy as the priority for the interviewees. Along the same lines, the concern to explain the value of internal communication to managers (from 9th to 3rd place), combining the need to address more audiences and channels with limited resources and identifying the sustainability policies of the IC process all move up several places in the ranking. By contrast, the challenge of integrating employee-generated content into corporate communication moves down a few places.

The results obtained do not reflect significant differences when we include in the analyses the size and territorial scope of the companies in which the participants work. The only exception is found in the priority of meeting the demand for transparency and more active audiences. In this area, significant differences were obtained in the interaction between the period of analysis and the size of the organisation ($F(1,183) = 4.487$; $p = .036$; $\eta2P = .024$), with the differences during the pandemic ($p = .048$) being located between small and medium-sized companies and large companies, in which the relevance of this priority is lower (4.36 vs. 3.75).

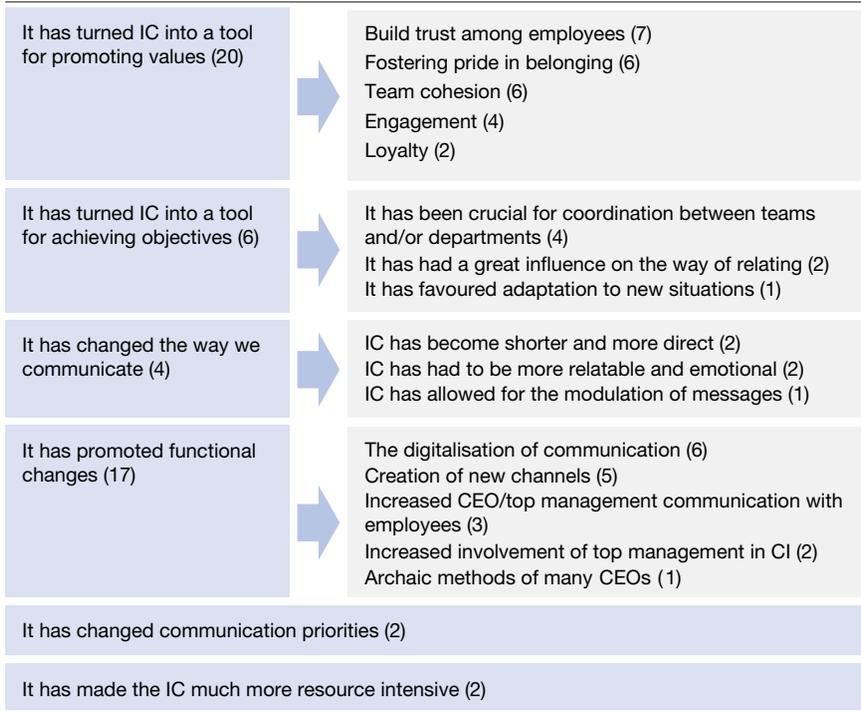### 4.3. How Covid-19 has influenced internal communication

When analysing the perceptions of the participants in the 2020 qualitative research on the influence that the pandemic has had on IC, it can be seen that the majority, 84.3%, consider that Covid-19 has influenced and is influencing IC positively. Only 5.9% believe that it has had a negative impact, and 9.8% think that it is having a strong influence on IC, but without assessing whether that influence is positive or negative.

The main reasons used to argue for the positive influence are that the pandemic has shown the importance of IC, IC has been essential for the good functioning of the company in the current situation, and the pandemic has increased IC actions. The negative arguments they put forward are that Covid-19 has led to a lack of budget for communication, and that more attention has been paid to other issues. Moreover, for those who do not rate the influence of the pandemic on IC, this is either because they think it has had a variable effect or because it is not clear what needs to be communicated in this context.

Figure 1 shows the aspects of IC that have been influenced by Covid-19. In detail, more than half of the participants consider that IC has become a tool to promote the company's values. However, only six of them consider

that it has become a tool through which they can achieve their goals. It is worth noting that almost half of those who consider that Covid-19 has promoted changes say that these changes are reflected in the functioning of IC departments and, above all, in the involvement of senior management.

Figure 1. Aspects of IC that participants believe have been influenced by Covid-19

It has turned IC into a tool for promoting values (20)	Build trust among employees (7) Fostering pride in belonging (6) Team cohesion (6) Engagement (4) Loyalty (2)
It has turned IC into a tool for achieving objectives (6)	It has been crucial for coordination between teams and/or departments (4) It has had a great influence on the way of relating (2) It has favoured adaptation to new situations (1)
It has changed the way we communicate (4)	IC has become shorter and more direct (2) IC has had to be more relatable and emotional (2) IC has allowed for the modulation of messages (1)
It has promoted functional changes (17)	The digitalisation of communication (6) Creation of new channels (5) Increased CEO/top management communication with employees (3) Increased involvement of top management in CI (2) Archaic methods of many CEOs (1)
It has changed communication priorities (2)	
It has made the IC much more resource intensive (2)	

Source: Own elaboration.

4.4. Covid-19 lessons for IC

Participants in the qualitative research (2020) perceive that there are four types of lessons to be learned from the pandemic (Figure 2). The most frequently mentioned lessons are those related to work. Participants have discovered, on the one hand, priorities that companies have (such as digitalisation, remote working, collaboration, etc.); on the other hand, attitudes that agents must have (adaptation, flexibility, etc.) and, moreover, shortcomings of companies (such as the lack of crisis management teams, etc.). It is also interesting to highlight the lessons that refer to the discipline of IC. In this regard, they highlight that the pandemic has served to emphasise its strategic role, as well as the need for clarity, speed and transparency.

Figure 2. Lessons learned by the participants during Covid-19

Related to work in general (37)	
Priorities (19) →	Importance of digitisation (9) Work works (5) Importance of collaboration between groups (3) Imagination and a good team are the most important thing (2) It is good to combine remote working and face-to-face work (1) A lot can be done with very little if the objective is clear (1) Cultural processes can be accelerated (1) The importance of a job well done (1) Finding the balance between digitalisation and humanisation (1)
Attitudes (19) →	Adaptability (16) Importance of flexibility (5) Importance of dynamism (2) Looking to the future with positivism (1)
Deficiencies (6) →	Need for crisis team with experts from all areas (3) Need to regulate remote working (1) Corporate speeches are useless if the facts do not go hand in hand (1) Instability must have indicators (1)

Related to objectives and strategies (4)
Plans and strategies are provisional (3) Focus on what you bring to the table, a differential value (1)

Related to the work team (13)
Importance of emotional management and human relations (7) Importance of employee autonomy (3) Staff need to feel a sense of security from superiors (2) Training communication staff (1) Importance of trained spokespersons (1) Can be united online (1)

Related to internal communication as a discipline (17)
Communication has been strengthened and has a strategic role (13) Clarity, speed and transparency are essential (3) Importance of IC and EC (1) Communication is still not strategic in business (1) Lack of business culture regarding the role of communication (1) Importance of crisis communication (1)

Source: Own elaboration.

5. Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to analyse the impact that Covid-19 had had on IC, using the evaluations made by IC managers. The results allow us to make interesting observations regarding the effects that Covid-19 has had on the IC of Spanish companies. In the opinion of all the experts, this pandemic was an opportunity to demonstrate the value of IC in organisations (Xifra, 2020). However, IC made very little progress during the pandemic.

First, we could say that the business context prioritises a tactical and non-strategic use of IC. This idea can be seen in the responses that the executives interviewed gave concerning the importance of IC channels as one of the key aspects of the context. On the other hand, they recognise that investment in the area of IC is the aspect that is most lacking. This situation improved slightly during the pandemic, and is an indicator that companies tried to formulate a response to this unprecedented scenario. However, as Miquel-Segarra and Aced-Toledano (2019) note, these data also show the lack of importance and the low strategic weight that this area is still given in organisations. This argument is strengthened if we note in the results that the views of executive directors of communication is still not very representative in decision-making. In this sense, we can say that there has been an improvement in one of the requirements demanded by IC executives (Miquel-Segarra and Aced-Toledano, 2019).

Second, the data reveal that employee participation, whether on social networks or in decision-making, continues to be at the bottom of the ranking of indicators that describe the business context, a context that is seldom participative and where two-way communication and internal dialogue is scarce. Nevertheless, and as an indicator that was highly valued by the interviewees, greater involvement and participation of top management is observed during the period of the pandemic. At the same time, although with minimal variation, during the pandemic there was an improvement in the evaluation of employees regarding the ease of accessing the information necessary for them to do their work. These data are consistent with the efforts made by companies to report on the effects of the pandemic on different aspects of employees' working lives. It has placed value on transparency, and demonstrates the contribution of internal communication in managing organisational change and complexity (Yeomans and FitzPatrick, 2017).

Third, it should be noted that the majority of those interviewed believe that Covid-19 is having a positive influence on IC, showing its importance for the proper functioning of the company, as well as an increase in its activity. In this sense, more than half of the executives appreciate that IC has boosted business values, and 4 out of 10 affirm that it has promoted changes in the functioning of IC departments. In addition, executives consider that they have learned lessons for their activity, and even consider that some changes will last over time (e.g. the incorporation of audiovisual and online media).

Fourth, the results reveal the existence of a series of common challenges. Aspects such as monitoring and adapting to digital and media changes, linking IC with corporate strategy, or strengthening the role of communication in decision-making are the most prominent. Although the mean difference test does not allow us to conclude that there are significant differences in the ratings of these challenges, significant changes are observed in the relative position that different items occupy in the ranking. Thus, it is observed how the need to link IC with business strategy becomes the key challenge during the pandemic.

The fifth relevant contribution of the research is along the same lines. Even though Covid-19 is considered to have served to highlight the strategic nature of IC, it has also made executives aware of the need to point out the value of IC in their own organisations. In this sense, it can be seen how the concern for explaining the value of IC to managers is growing, climbing six positions in the ranking, into the Top 10. In contrast, and even though digitisation and employee engagement are important objectives before the arrival of the pandemic, more tactical issues, such as integrating content generated by employees into corporate communication, and teaching employees to use social networks to generate valuable content, are objectives that lose importance.

In short, Covid-19 was an unprecedented crisis, in which the role of internal communication as a tool for managing the ambiguity and uncertainty faced by employees was reinforced (Sun et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021). In this sense, the IC carried out during the pandemic prioritised the generation of trust in the organisation and its leaders through transparency and the use of emotional communication, as Chon, Tam and Kim (2021) argue. However, although communication executives perceived the opportunity to reclaim the strategic role of communication vis-à-vis top management, the efforts of organisations seem to have been oriented towards the reorganisation and coordination of remote work. And although the physical distance produced by work could affect engagement and could disconnect employees from the organisation's objectives and values (Fábregas et al., 2021), it is still not presented as a priority objective.

Among the limitations of the study, it is worth mentioning the self-selected nature of the sample, which limits the generalisation of the results, and its restricted size. This latter aspect can lead to a type II error or false negative, which infers, incorrectly, that it is not possible to conclude that there are significant differences. On the other hand, although communication executives are aware of the reality of the company and its internal communication, the results could be influenced by social desirability biases. In other words, the respondents might have adjusted their statements to what is considered valuable in the field of communication, even more so if they perceive that their work may be being judged.

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