

# Adapting Internal Communication to Hybrid Work: Identifying Strategies for Government Institutions

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## Abstract

The emergence of hybrid work, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, prompted organizations to transform their internal communication processes and structures. Ministries, as policy-making institutions, faced various challenges in managing internal communication, including increased stress levels, a lack of feedback from managers, and difficulties in fostering strong interpersonal relationships and a sense of teamwork. This paper analyzes the internal communication challenges faced by public sector organizations in the era of hybrid work and examines how a particular Lithuanian ministry

addressed these challenges. The study presents suggestions from semi-structured interviews with unit heads and internal communication specialists on improving internal communication management at both the organizational and unit levels within ministries, as hybrid work becomes part of the new normal. Based on the study's findings and academic literature, recommendations are provided on how internal communication management in governmental institutions could be structured during these turbulent times.

Keywords: internal communication, hybrid work, government sector, public sector, ministries.

## 1. Introduction

Over the past quarter of a century, communication has increasingly been identified as a part of strategic management of the organisation (Jakučionienė, 2023; Grunig, 2013; Verčič, Verčič & Sriramesh, 2012; Gudonienė, 2006), helping to achieve its strategic goals. Researchers highlight the importance of internal communication in organisations when structural, process management and other planned changes are taking place (Lewis, 2011; Miller, 2012), and emphasise the need for employees to be adequately informed when crises arise that are directly related to the organisation's activities, decisions or circumstances that the organisation could not have foreseen (Kim, 2018; Frandsen & Johansen, 2011). During crises, leaders are expected to communicate with staff, provide information, make sense of the crisis, and restore trust and confidence among employees (Opatska, Johansen & Gordon, 2024; Heide & Simonsson, 2019). Scientists claim that well managed internal communication is crucial for organisations during the time of war and ongoing uncertainty (Opatska, Johansen & Gordon, 2024) and as because of COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion to Ukraine and intensified conflict in Middle East already affected people's health and healthcare systems worldwide (Kalaitzaki, Tamiolaki & Vintila, 2023; Kilgore, 2023; Ventriglio et al., 2024), organisations are expected to use internal communication to improve mental health of employees (Qin & Men, 2023).

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Though the importance of internal communication is increasing, organisations are still learning to manage internal communication in a new hybrid work era (Černikovaitė & Karazijienė, 2023). Hybrid work is a term, which defines a working arrangement where an employee divides their time between working at a traditional workplace and working remotely (typically at home, or from ‘third places’ such as a coworking space, library, or local café, etc.), which attempts to combine the best parts of both telework and office-based work. It describes an employee’s ability to have some level of autonomy and flexibility over the location where they perform their work tasks (Hopkins & Bardoel, 2023; Moglia, Hopkins & Bardoel, 2021). The transition from office to remote working was rapid, without prior preparation, and the organisational resources that an employee could expect during the usual changes (e.g. training, workplace preparation, etc.) were unavailable (Lazauskaitė-Zabielskė et al., 2022), so managers had to quickly change the usual forms of communication, introduce new ones (e.g. meetings via Teams, Zoom platforms), and learn how to communicate with their employees without possibility to see them live, as was the norm before the pandemic. Later hybrid work became a new reality (Hopkins & Bardoel, 2023; Grzegorzczuk et al., 2021), organizations have to install cloud computing services, new equipment to store data, train employees to use new technologies and thus raise their competencies (Grzegorzczuk et al., 2021, p.13). The shift to hybrid work introduced several challenges for organizations and mid-level managers, such as issues with information technology, including cybersecurity and the integration of new software; concerns over employee productivity while working remotely; reduced social interaction among team members; difficulties in obtaining quick assistance and feedback; and questions on how to improve information-sharing processes as traditional communication methods were disrupted (Černikovaitė & Karazijienė, 2023; Lazauskaitė-Zabielskė et al., 2022; Žilienė et al., 2020).

Similar challenges and the need to keep employees informed and satisfied with the information they receive in recent years faced ministries (Bortkevičiūtė et al., 2021), which are known as institutions which implement executive-administrative and organizational activities aimed at the implementation of laws and other legal acts, execution and initiation (Bakaveckas, 2003) and are often assigned the role of policy-making advisors in the Government (Christensen, Lægrend & Røvik, 2020, p.15). The ministries are institutions responsible for the preparation and formation of the state policy in a certain area, the organizer of state’s policy implementation and the executor of its control. The Ministry prepares and forms policy in the assigned field by preparing, coordinating and submitting drafts of legal acts and other decisions to the Government (Marčinskas & Vaškelis, 2003). Despite the impact of ministries to society and the positive impact of well managed internal communication for employees productivity (Lee, 2022; Madlock, 2008), recently conducted research showed that in ministries the role of professional communicators is undervalued, and a central problem for communication is to get recognition for itself as an important sector, like other organizational areas. Italian experts claim that the problem is internal legitimization of communication and French experts believe that the presence of strategic/managerial role of communication is increasing in the public sector, though understanding of communication as technical/operational functions is still prevalent (Ducci, Lovari & Rizzuto, 2021, p.259). As public sector organisations, ministries differ from private business organisations in terms of their specific characteristics — control over other subordinate organisations, lower motivation capacity of employees, slower decision-making speed, the need to coordinate their actions with a wide range of stakeholders, including politicians, controlling and controlled organisations, business structures (Giedraitytė, 2016; Mullins, 2013; Masiulis, 2007; Boyne, 2002), they heavily depend on legitimacy, which means “a license to operate” that is given by citizens, the main stakeholders of these organizations (Reinikainen & Valentini, 2023; Wæraas, 2020; Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019), as well as the obligation of strict adherence to rules and directives (Baarspul & Wilderom, 2011). These fundamental differences also lead to a slightly different, stricter, more bureaucratic nature of internal communication, which differs from that of private business organisations (e.g. obligation for managers in public sector to organise compulsory quarterly interviews with each employee, obligation to record tasks in an internal system, etc.). Mo-

reover, it should be noted that during the period of the forced transition to teleworking and later hybrid work, ministries faced a double challenge: they had to find ways to inform stakeholders — business, society, subordinate organisations — promptly about the decisions being taken and the changes ahead because of a new reality, and, at the same time, to change the processes of internal communication management themselves, and to ensure that employees were well-informed and motivated to continue their work successfully (Beniušis, 2023, p.98-99). Therefore, given the above-mentioned characteristics of ministries as public policy-making institutions, and the lack of research and recommendations how to improve internal communication in public sector organisations in a period of change and uncertainty (Ndela & Madsbu, 2022; Madsen & Schmeltz, 2022; Trofimovas & Valackienė, 2015; Rubinstein et al., 2016), it is appropriate to carry out a new research on internal communication in this type of organisations during the period of uncertainty, rapid change entering a new hybrid work era.

Therefore, this paper raises a *research problem*: how to manage internal communication (IC) in a hybrid work era in the ministries?

*The aim of the paper* is to provide recommendations on how to improve the management of IC in ministries during the time of uncertainty when hybrid work enters arena, following an analysis of the changes of internal communication in such organisations in the new reality.

The paper has three *objectives*: (1) to identify how IC management in ministries has changed since the introduction of hybrid work; (2) to identify IC challenges in ministries when hybrid work is a new reality; (3) to identify how the ministry's IC specialists and heads of the units suggest to improve IC management in the era of hybrid work.

The methods used in the study were: analysis of scientific literature, synthesis, semi-structured interviews, generalization.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Internal communication is defined as a two-way process that involves the creation, transformation and transmission of information between individuals, groups and the organisation as a whole, and can take verbal, non-verbal or written forms (Rogala & Bialowas, 2016). It has a variety of functions, such as serving as a control and coordination function for employees, providing the information necessary for employees to perform their job functions and to organise work processes (Papa, Daniels, & Spiker, 2008; Kramer & Bisel, 2017; Rogala & Bialowas, 2016), and creating a trustworthy image of the organisation amongst its employees, and a good internal climate (Rogala & Bialowas, 2015; Santoso et al., 2022), fosters employee loyalty and identification with the organisation, explains the rules of belonging and the benefits of being part of the organisation (Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007), emphasises the need for clear, fast and seamless communication to inform employees when crises occur that are directly related to the organisation's activities, decisions made by management, or the organisation is in a period of uncertainty it could not have foreseen (Coombs, 2012; Kim, 2018; Santoso et al., 2022), highlighting the importance of internal communication in the context of organisational change (Lewis, 2011).

In the scientific literature, internal communication is presented as having several directions — top-down, bottom-up, horizontal (Papa, Daniels & Spiker, 2008; Kramer & Bisel, 2017; Rogala & Bialowas, 2016), and some researchers also distinguish diagonal communication (Blažėnaitė, 2011; Papa, Daniels & Spiker, 2008). In this paper, top-down communication will be analysed. This is the direction in which messages are conveyed by senior managers to their subordinates. Information includes instructions about the work to be done and how to do it; information about the organisation's policies, rules, and benefits package; providing feedback to employees about their performance; and other similar information functions. This communication helps employees to resolve uncertainty about what exactly they are expected to do and how they will be evaluated, as well as to learn about the culture of the

organisation. These internal communication channels include face-to-face conversations, emails, newsletters, official organisation publications, the organisation's social networks and other similar means (Rogala & Bialowas, 2016, pp.58).

Before the era of hybrid work, researchers have analysed the impact of internal communication on employee engagement, productivity and job satisfaction (Sheridan, 2012; Marlow et al., 2018), searched for appropriate internal communication channels (Miller, 2011; Sheridan, 2012), and highlighted the importance of well-designed internal communication in organisations undergoing structural, process management and other planned changes (Burnes, 2009; Lewis, 2011). Sheridan (2012) identified a direct link between open communication between managers and employee engagement and job satisfaction, arguing that when managers communicate more openly and frequently with employees, they are more engaged in the organisation and more satisfied with their jobs (Sheridan, 2012, p.123). Marlow et al. (2018) investigated various aspects of internal communication in small teams working remotely and found that the quality of internal communication has a greater positive impact on employee productivity than the frequency of communication, and also identified that immediate, sincere and face-to-face internal communication contributes to organisational effectiveness. Research prior to the COVID-19 pandemic has focused on the selection of appropriate communication channels (Miller, 2011; Sheridan, 2012) and has highlighted the importance of agreeing on a common pattern of behaviour when working in teams for well-functioning internal communication, emphasising the importance for organisations to agree on how, when, and by what means communication is done (McKenna, 2006; Verbung et al., 2013).

Research on internal communication during the pandemic and entering new hybrid work era can be summarised in at least three groups — (1) the impact of internal communication on employee productivity, performance and engagement (Gomes et al., 2021; Mayfield et al., 2021; Špoljarić & Verčič, 2022); (2) on the role of internal communication in change communication (Opatska, Johansen & Gordon, 2024; Zainab, Akbar, & Siddiqui, 2022; Li et al., 2021); and (3) on the role of internal communication in employees' trust in the organisation (Men et al., 2021; Qin & Men, 2023).

Mayfield, Mayfield, and Walker (2021) analysed the impact of leaders' motivational speeches on employee productivity and found that leaders' motivational speeches have a positive impact on employees' productivity, job satisfaction, and contributes to employees' intention to stay in the organisation. Špoljarić and Verčič (2022) investigated the impact of internal communication on employee engagement, job satisfaction and employer attractiveness. A study of 1 800 employees in Croatia found that two-way communication is necessary to improve the attractiveness of an organisation as an employer and to increase employee engagement, managers should provide feedback to employees responsibly, organisations should focus more on informal communication as it allows employees to share information with each other, and employees' needs and preferences for the delivery of information should be taken into account to improve the quality of the information communicated (communication climate). Gomes, Lourenco, and Ribeiro (2021), in their analysis of the impact of internal communication on employee productivity, identified that internal communication, employee perceived organisational support and employee productivity are closely linked. Zainab, Akbar & Siddiqui (2022), who analysed the role of internal communication during change in the banking sector in Pakistan, found that managerial leadership during change and open internal communication before and during change positively influenced employees' attitudes towards the change, and that change was more easily implemented in such organisations. The impact of internal communication during change in organisations has been studied by Li et al. (2021), who surveyed nearly 500 US employees working in organisations of different sizes in the first wave of COVID-19, found that open internal communication helps employees to adapt to change in their organisations, helps them to reduce their anxiety about the change, and at the same time strengthens the bond between the organisation and the employees. Men, Kin, and Jin (2021) analysed the impact of language used by line managers on employees' trust in the organisation. They found that the use of empathy-oriented language by supervisors, and clear explanations of the tasks assigned and their



meaning, helped to strengthen employees' trust in the organisation and in the leaders themselves. Qin and Men (2022) investigated whether and how internal communication at the organisation and unit level during a pandemic, when working from different locations, correlates with trust in the organisation and employees' psychological health. To do so, an online questionnaire survey was carried out with 393 US employees working in different sectors across the country. A strong correlation was identified between effective internal communication when working remotely and employees' trust in the organisation.

Researchers point out that managing internal communication in teams working at a distance is not without its challenges. Teleworking organisations in the late 20th century were associated with innovative business enterprises, and even then, well before the COVID-19 pandemic, the internal communication challenges faced by these teams were of interest to researchers (Ginevičius et al., 2006; Miller, 2011; Sheridan, 2012; Mullins, 2013). Ginevičius et al. (2006, pp. 418-423) investigated the specificities of human resources management in virtual organisations and identified the following challenges for managers: miscommunication between remote members of the organisation; lack of reciprocity in terms of support, information and knowledge transfer; and the resulting lack of organisational culture. Miller (2011, pp. 206-208) identified the following challenges for managers of remote teams: setting priorities and delegating to people working in different locations, choosing the right communication methods, dealing with conflicts when they cannot be resolved face-to-face, misunderstandings related to different ways of reading emails. Sheridan (2012, pp.28) identified four challenges in team leadership: the communication challenge, the challenge of technology and tools, the challenge of building strong bonds and good relationships between team members, and the challenge of trust between manager and employee. Mullins (2013) identified a lack of socialisation of employees as a challenge, linking this to a lack of internal communication within the organisation, pointing out that an increasing number of homeworkers feel disconnected from their colleagues. Author also identified as a challenge the resulting difficulties in balancing work and family commitments, with homeworkers interviewed reporting that they experience stress and often feel exhausted (Mullins, 2013, pp.562).

Research conducted before, during and after COVID-19 pandemic shows that the key internal communication challenges of teleworking identified in the academic literature remain similar — ineffective communication and employee loneliness (Mullins, 2013; Wang et al., 2021; Nakrošienė & Butkevičienė, 2016; WorkAnywhere & Selina, 2022), the dilemma of how to form a team and ensure good relationships between colleagues (Ginevičius et al., 2006; Žilienė et al., 2020; Smoląg & Ślusarczyk, 2021), how to minimize heightened ambiguity and pressure (Coombs, 2012; Žilienė et al., 2020), how to ensure control over the performance of teleworkers but at the same time maintain trust in employees (Sheridan, 2012; Žilienė et al., 2020; Lebopo, Seymour & Knoesen, 2020), how to provide feedback in a timely and appropriate manner (Geister et al., 2006; Wang et al., 2021).

Effective internal communication is crucial for organizational success, yet there is a significant gap of research on its management within organizations funded by the state or municipal budget (Ndlela & Madsbu, 2022; Leijerholt et al., 2022; Madsen & Schmeltz, 2022). Nakash and Bouhnik (2023) after conducting a research in four ministries of Israel found out that remote work had the potential to negatively impact employee morale and engagement because of decline in informal encounters with co-workers in corridors or coffee corners. Researchers stated that decline in information management (IM) quality was reported by those continuing working from the office as IT departments had to focus addressing the challenges and complexities involved in accessing information their colleagues who worked remotely and those who stayed at offices got less attention. Research showed that IM quality was reported to decline in smaller ministries and the authors claimed that it was related with resources – large organisations have more manpower, infrastructure, and resources, this is why they could manage processes more effectively and to handle crisis better (Nakash & Bouhnik, 2023, p.8). Madsen and Schmeltz (2022) conducted a study in a Danish municipality to analyze whether departmental managers, after receiving training, could effectively use the intranet as an internal social network to reach

all employees and convey key messages. The study found that the use of the intranet in the municipality was not successful and that managers failed to use the intranet as a platform for discussion with employees for several reasons: there were too many and too diverse employees, and some employees did not find the communication platform attractive as they preferred live meetings or Facebook with their line managers, and managers themselves did not believe in the potential of intranets. The researchers also found that in order for a communication platform to work, the managers themselves have to believe in the meaningfulness of the platform, which makes it easier to convince employees to use the communication channel (Madsen & Schmeltz, 2022). Leijerholt, Biedenbach, and Hultén (2022) investigated the role of internal communication in enhancing the image of a public sector organisation among its members by analysing a public sector organisation working in the health sector in northern Sweden. They found that consistent and regular internal communication increased employee pride in the organisation, increased commitment to the organisation and increased employee support for the organisation's actions. Ndlela and Madsbu (2022) studied the management of internal communication at a Norwegian public university during the pandemic and discovered that it disrupted traditional communication structures and channels. This included the loss of in-person interactions with employees, the absence of bulletin boards, and the discontinuation of printed newsletters. As a result, new communication platforms such as Zoom and MS Teams were introduced, requiring employees to quickly learn and adjust to these tools. Remote meetings became shorter and more efficient than face-to-face meetings before pandemics. Similar findings regarding more concise and results-driven meetings, which became a new norm, were reported by Toleikienė, Rybnikova, and Juknevičienė (2020). They analyzed how internal communication changed following the introduction of telework in a Lithuanian municipality during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers found that, with the introduction of telework, managers expected employees to respond promptly — within 15 minutes — to assigned tasks. They also observed changes in traditional communication practices: peer-to-peer communication, where two individuals interact directly, became less frequent, while team communication, involving multiple participants, grew more common (Toleikienė, Rybnikova & Juknevičienė, 2020).

The literature analysis revealed various studies on internal communication management, focusing on the shift to hybrid work models. It emphasized the importance of internal communication for employee engagement, productivity, satisfaction, trust-building, and adaptation to change. The challenges of managing communication in remote and hybrid settings — such as miscommunication, employee isolation, and the maintenance of organizational culture — were also addressed. However, a notable gap exists in research exploring specific changes in internal communication within public policy-making organizations following the introduction of teleworking. This includes a lack of studies on the internal communication practices implemented by heads of units and communication specialists in these organizations. To address this gap, the research was conducted in the Ministry of Transport and Communications of the Republic of Lithuania, an organization responsible for shaping public policy.

### 3. Research method

A case study strategy was chosen to address the research problem. The most common use of the term 'case' associates the case study with a location, such as a community or organization. The emphasis tends to be upon an intensive examination of the setting (Bryman, 2012, p.67). Flyvbjerg identifies the following features of case study research: depth of investigation, understanding of context and processes, the ability to identify the phenomenon under investigation (determine causes and effects), and the potential to generate new hypotheses and research questions (Flyvbjerg, 2011, p. 314). Case studies are divided into descriptive, when the aim is to describe a particular phenomenon in a particular organisation or community in detail, explanatory and exploratory, when the aim is to formulate hypotheses by studying a particular phenomenon (Yin, 2014). Exploratory research is characterised by the aim of

gathering knowledge about a phenomenon about which little is known and, based on the results, aims to generate some hypotheses for future larger-scale studies (Swedberg, 2020). An exploratory study was carried out in this instance. Lithuania is a parliamentary democracy with a unitary structure of governance. The legislative power is vested in the unicameral Seimas, whose members are elected for a four-year term. Executive power is shared between the President, elected directly by the citizens, and the Government, headed by the Prime Minister appointed by the President with parliamentary approval. The Government consists of 14 ministries, which are institutions responsible for shaping state policy and overseeing different areas of public administration. Ministry of Transport and Communications of the Republic of Lithuania was chosen as a case study. This ministry is responsible for strategic areas of public transportation, including roads, railways, maritime, and air transport. Seventeen companies, institutions, and enterprises fall under the jurisdiction of the Minister of Transport and Communications. Consequently, its operational efficiency, closely linked to well-managed internal communication, directly impacts the daily lives of citizens and economic growth. Notably, the Ministry of Transport and Communications of the Republic of Lithuania is considered a medium-sized ministry in the country based on the number of employees, with 182 employees as of December 2024, making it a relevant subject for analysis in the context of other ministries.

A qualitative study typically aims to identify the norms, values, and organizational culture of the group under investigation, placing particular emphasis on explaining human behavior (Bryman, 2010, p.48). Qualitative research is characterized by a small number of participants and the avoidance of pre-defined response categories (Kidd, 2002, p.126). Therefore, semi-structured interviews are well-suited for this type of research. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) in data collection process trustworthiness (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) is very important. They stress that semi-structured interviews help achieve this by enabling rapport-building and in-depth exploration of participants' realities. The authors advocate for a flexible approach to interviews, where researchers adapt questions and probes based on the interviewee's responses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Similar approach present Lindlof and Taylor (2017) as they stress the iterative nature of interviews, where follow-up questions arise organically from participants' responses, and add that this method allows depth and richness of data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). They defines semi-structured interviews as a flexible method for gathering in-depth qualitative data, particularly effective in understanding participants' experiences, values, and meanings within specific cultural or social contexts.

*Selection of Interviewees.* The interviews were conducted in 2022, during which the Ministry of Transport and Communications of the Republic of Lithuania consisted of ten structural units. The author randomly selected five unit heads for the interviews, along with two individuals responsible for internal communication at the Ministry level. In the following text, these two individuals are referred to as internal communication specialists. Thirteen questions were designed for internal communication specialists and seventeen have been prepared for heads of units. Some questions were repeated for both groups. For example, heads of units and internal communication specialists were asked how internal communication could be improved at ministry and unit level.

*Interview Techniques.* At the time, the Ministry operated under a hybrid working model, allowing staff to work remotely two to three days per week. Due to pandemic-related restrictions, all interviews were conducted remotely via the MS Teams platform with cameras enabled. Informants participated from their usual working environments, either at home or in the Ministry. The use of cameras facilitated the collection of valuable contextual information, including nonverbal cues, and allowed follow-up questions based on the emotional aspects of their responses. On average, each interview lasted 40 minutes to 1 hour. The interviews were recorded, transcribed for data analysis, and securely stored in separate computer files, ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants.

*Data interpretation.* Open coding is the process of mapping interview transcripts so that patterns in the data can be identified, retrieved, and analyzed. Unlike coding survey responses for quantitati-

ve analysis, which requires reducing responses to numeric values, the goal of coding semi-structured interview transcripts is to index the data to facilitate its retrieval, while retaining the context in which data was originally identified (Sankar & Jones, 2007). Researchers such as Strauss & Corbin (1990) and Charmaz (2006) describes open coding is an iterative process that requires constant comparison of data segments to uncover patterns, refine categories, and construct conceptual frameworks. This process is essential for theory-building, as it allows researchers to generate grounded concepts without relying on preconceived notions, making it a flexible and data-driven approach. Similarly, Saldana (2016) underscores the importance of open coding in qualitative analysis, noting that it not only helps in the organization of data but also in identifying initial themes that later inform more refined coding stages, such as axial and selective coding. These authors agree that open coding provides a foundation for deeper analysis and theory development by allowing the researcher to explore and refine categories inductively, contributing to a systematic approach in qualitative research. It is emphasized that open coding is an initial step that leads to the creation of categories and subcategories, key themes or patterns that emerge from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Saldana, 2016). This process provides the foundation for further analysis and interpretation, eventually leading to the development of more complex categories or theories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Saldana, 2016). All informants were coded with numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7. Each informant was assigned a specific number to describe their perspective while anonymizing the data. Subsequently, names were assigned to qualitative data sets, such as sentences or their parts, as well as paragraphs. Thematic analysis was conducted following the transcription of the interviews to systematically identify, analyze, and interpret patterns of meaning within the data. The process began with familiarization, wherein the author repeatedly read the transcripts to gain a deep understanding of the content. Initial codes were then generated by systematically coding significant features of the data across the entire dataset. These codes were subsequently organized into potential themes by identifying broader patterns and relationships among them. A single response or unit could be assigned to multiple categories if the informant addressed several relevant topics within the same answer or sentence. This process helped to identify themes/subthemes and categories/subcategories. Data classification and analysis were then carried out, followed by data interpretation.

#### 4. Findings

***Changes in internal communication management entering hybrid work.*** The interviews identified the changes that have taken place at Ministry and unit level. At Ministry level it showed that the hybrid work has led to a new digital communication culture, with meetings taking place on MS Teams and Zoom platforms. Live meetings and staff training have been replaced by virtual meetings, which have become more efficient, structured and time-saving compared to the pre-pandemic period. The new meeting culture and the opportunities offered by remote meetings during the pandemic led to the involvement of more stakeholders in decision-making, such as business people, citizens, colleagues from other ministries or other public sector organisations. The Ministry also introduced a new format of communication between the Ministry's management and its staff — the so-called Ministry's Hour. It used to take place via the MS Teams platform about once a month. During this time, the political leadership of the Ministry briefed all employees on the most important Ministry's news and upcoming changes, the heads of the units presented their work, and employees could ask questions. During COVID-19, the Ministry launched a new internal communication channel, the Intranet. It was used to host training materials, information about colleagues starting and leaving the Ministry, information about upcoming and ongoing internal events, celebrations, and photos. Changes were also noted at units level, with the usual face-to-face conversations between managers and staff being replaced by emails, a significant increase in the number of emails, and the use of more communication channels by managers at units level (Messenger, Teamschat, etc.), new forms of communication have been introduced to reinforce the sense



of teamwork (e.g. once a week informal chatting among the members of the unit in front of the computer screens, sharing summer plans, showing pets, etc.). There was also a change in the way feedback was given: before the pandemic, managers were more likely to give feedback verbally and in person, whereas with the advent of teleworking, feedback was given in writing or by telephone.

The study identified several **key internal communication challenges** in the context of hybrid work as a new reality, including prolonged problem-solving processes, difficulties in building effective interpersonal relationships, heightened tension levels, and staff reluctance to address issues they once spoke about freely. Additionally, challenges in providing feedback and varying interpretations of information in email communication were also noted.

The interviews revealed that entering hybrid work era it takes longer to deal with the problems that arise, both in terms of the challenges of working from different locations and the challenges posed by technology. It was found that the emergence of teleworking made it more difficult to foster personal connection, especially for new members joining the team. During the pandemic there was a sense of pressure and anxiety in the Ministry. Informants highlighted an increased workload and mentioned that staff became hesitant to speak up about issues they previously addressed without fear before the pandemic. Managers were also found to be less likely to provide feedback due to teleworking, as it is more time-consuming to provide feedback when communicating remotely and without seeing the employee in person, and therefore less likely to use this tool. Informants also highlighted misunderstandings arising from different interpretations of information when communicating via email. Without the ability to see the interlocutor in person, the information was often read with varying tones, sometimes leading to conflicts.

Interviews with heads of units and internal communication specialists revealed *how they propose to improve internal communication management at Ministry and unit level*. The proposals are presented in tables and grouped according to the number of people who proposed them — ideas proposed by more people are presented at the beginning of the table, while those with the least support are listed at the end. The majority of proposals for improving internal communication at the ministry level focused on the regularity of the Ministry's Hour — as many as four informants emphasized this internal communication tool, suggesting it be held regularly, on a monthly basis. Three informants proposed strengthening collaboration between the ministry's structural units, while the same number suggested making better use of the intranet's potential for internal communication. Two informants highlighted the necessity of sharing important information with employees first, before communicating it to external stakeholders.

**Table 1. Suggestions for better internal communication at Ministry level.**

Category	Subcategory	Interview statement
<b>Establish the regularity of the Ministry's hour</b>	Proposed to organise a regular, monthly presentation of the overall picture of the Ministry	<p>&lt;...&gt; <i>There is no official set time for the Ministry's hour. We'd like to see it every month. [Participant 6]</i></p> <p><i>What we hear from the staff, everyone loves (Ministry's hour). &lt;...&gt; You can see the minister and understand what he is thinking. &lt;...&gt; Someone who sits in his or her own sphere, feels distant and withdrawn, not part of the process. You don't see how your part contributes to the overall picture of the ministry. &lt;...&gt; That's why, as far as we hear from the staff, everybody is very keen on those Ministry's hours. [Participant 7]</i></p> <p><i>The format of the Ministry's hour should be maintained - presenting innovations, newcomers. [Participant 2]</i></p> <p><i>It's working – Ministry's hour - it helps you feel your pulse. [Participant 3]</i></p>
<b>Fostering cooperation between departments</b>	Suggested that departments should be more open about their expectations of each other	<p><i>Inter-departmental cooperation should be encouraged - at the initiative of the internal customer. For example, employees from one department meets with colleagues from another and sets out their expectations - we expect this from you, we expect that from you. [Participant 3]</i></p> <p><i>Periodic meetings once a week would be helpful to better understand each other's work. [Participant 7]</i></p> <p><i>&lt;...&gt; talking and negotiating - if employees can't agree, then managers must step in. [Participant 4]</i></p>
<b>Better use of the Intranet</b>	Suggested to put as much information as possible on the Intranet	<p><i>It needs to give as much information as possible - put it on the Intranet. Who joined the team, who left, colleague awards, organisational changes in the structure, invitations to training. The internal kitchen should be put on the Intranet. [Participant 3]</i></p> <p><i>In another institution, the Intranet used to be warmer - birthdays, it was alive, everyone could write on it. [Participant 2]</i></p>
	Proposed to make the Intranet more user-friendly	<p><i>The Intranet is embedded as a browser homepage, but people don't develop that skill. [Participant 6]</i></p> <p><i>&lt;...&gt; It's annoying that when you want to go to Google, you have to close your Intranet. &lt;...&gt; [Participant 2]</i></p>
<b>Informing Ministry staff before information is shared externally</b>	Suggested ensuring that employees are the first to know key information	<p><i>&lt;...&gt; it is good practice for people to learn from the inside, which was not the case here, we learn a lot from the outside - from the media. People complain that they don't know a lot inside. [Participant 5]</i></p> <p><i>&lt;...&gt; It would be a good idea to send press releases to all staff first before they are distributed to the media. [Participant 2]</i></p>
<b>Providing training relevant to all staff</b>	Offered meetings with experts to help address the challenges of a period of uncertainty	<i>Meetings should be organised for staff with specialists in mental health, emergency management and other fields. [Participant 2]</i>
<b>Organise creative presentations of Unit activities</b>	It is proposed to regularly present each unit's activities, using creativity and involving all the staff of the Ministry	<i>Regular meetings and activities could be held to present the activities of each division. &lt;...&gt; present the work of the division from the inside, in a fun way. [Participant 6]</i>

Source: compiled by the author

The study also highlighted the informants' perspectives on improving internal communication at the unit level. Four informants suggested that regular informal conversations within units on non-work-related topics — such as discussing team members' leisure activities, holiday plans, or books they have read — would be beneficial. Notably, this finding supplements existing research on public sector organizations, which emphasizes the value of strengthening interpersonal relationships through virtual coffee breaks. These informal discussions on non-work-related issues help mitigate stress and reinforce team spirit during challenging times (Jämsen, Sivunen, & Blomqvist, 2022; Babapour Chafi, Hultberg,

& Bozic Yams, 2021). The study's findings revealed that managers in the Ministry view such non-work-related discussions with all unit members as essential for maintaining team cohesion and productivity. Among other suggestions for improving internal communication, it is important to highlight that two informants emphasized the need for more frequent verbal communication rather than relying solely on email exchanges, as this approach allows managers to better assess employees' moods. Similarly, two other informants stressed the importance of providing regular feedback to team members, particularly in the context of hybrid work models. Additional recommendations are outlined in the accompanying table.

**Table 2. Suggestions for improving internal communication at unit level.**

Category	Subcategory	Interview statement
<b>The importance of regular conversations within units, including the sharing of non-work-related news</b>	Helps maintain team spirit	<i>In our division a new format has emerged, we call it "At the Coffee", we connect via Teams, every two or three weeks: we share non-work related news, i.e. who will go on holiday where, about the books we read. [Participant 3]</i>  <i>Ask people about their personal lives at meetings - show each other's puppies and kittens, tell a joke. [Participant 2]</i>  <i>It could be done informal online meetings - have a fun detail and a drink in everyone's hand and have a topic, e.g. about a film, about a book. [Participant 6].</i>
	Keeping track of the pulse of the unit, who lives what	<i>At unit level, periodic meetings once a week would be an improvement - to better understand each other's work &lt;...&gt; to find out what the challenges are. [Participant 7]</i>
<b>The importance of talking more often instead of communicating in writing</b>	Better identification of employees' emotions and well-being	<i>During a pandemic, people were more sensitive and it is harder to implement change&lt;...&gt;. People want to do what they are used to doing. When you see employees live, you can see their moods. When we work remotely, it's every man for himself. [Participant 3]</i>
	It helps to avoid different interpretations of information and conflicts	<i>&lt;...&gt; You need to pay a lot of attention to humanity, to communicate as often as possible, because there are misunderstandings in emails about who understood what. [Participant 5]</i>
<b>Benefits of providing more frequent feedback to employees</b>	The importance of individual talks with staff	<i>I would recommend to supervisors to have regular conversations with each employee individually about the work, the goals, the difficulties the employee is facing, the expectations, the well-being, the atmosphere &lt;...&gt; [Participant 7]</i>
	The importance of regular remote contact when talking	<i>Middle managers need to call at least once a week to ask how they feel. [Participant 3]</i>
<b>The importance of sharing information with the Unit</b>	Information got from the top management of the Ministry should be communicated to staff	<i>&lt;...&gt; Managers should share what they hear in meetings with top management with their colleagues in the unit, so that there are no secrets. [Participant 3]</i>
<b>Encouraging informal communication outside work</b>	Joint events and trips, contributing to the team spirit of the Unit	<i>I would suggest that all departments in the Ministry have a tradition of informal conversations. For example, in one department, every few months each unit organises a different activity. They go to the theatre, they go on a tour together. Then people get to know each other better. I would very much like to encourage this among other departments in the Ministry as well. [Participant 7]</i>

Source: compiled by the author

## 6. Discussion

In the context of hybrid work, a new digital communication culture has emerged in ministries, as well as in other organizations, characterized by remote meetings predominantly conducted via platforms such as MS Teams or Zoom. These meetings have become shorter, more structured, and more productive compared to in-person meetings held before the pandemic, as noted in previous studies (Babapour Chafi, Hultberg, & Bozic Yams, 2021; Toileikienė, Rybnikova & Juknevičienė, 2020). Moreover, the rise of email-based communication culture in the era of hybrid work has revealed new challenges. It has been observed that managers provide employees with feedback less frequently (Jämsen, Sivunen, & Blomqvist, 2022), which can result in feelings of frustration and lower motivation among employees (Geister, Konradt & Hertel, 2006). The study revealed that entering new hybrid work era, and with a change in the usual communication environment, employees particularly value the feedback from line managers, as well as the opportunity to hear about organisational news and upcoming changes from the organisation's top management in regular remote meetings, and to ask any questions they have. Additionally, conflicts over differing interpretations of information have become more common, as communication increasingly relies on emails rather than face-to-face interactions (Smolağ & Şlusarczyk, 2021). To improve internal communication within public policy-making institutions in the context of organizing hybrid work in a changing environment, several recommendations can be proposed. First, it is essential to identify the primary objectives of internal communication that the political leadership seeks to achieve within the ministry. These objectives might include enhancing staff loyalty to the organization, increasing employee engagement, or improving psychological well-being. Additionally, the institution should map the main internal communication channels and directions within the organization, identifying and addressing weaknesses in the management of internal communication.

Appointing dedicated internal communication officers in public policy-making institutions is also recommended. These officers would focus exclusively on internal communication at the ministry level, addressing the challenge faced by organizations where such responsibilities are either unassigned or combined with other duties, leaving insufficient time for effective communication planning and management. A structured internal communication management plan should be established, with specific responsibilities assigned for its implementation. The heads of units should be directly accountable for the quality of internal communication within their respective units. To ensure a consistent approach across the organization, training programs should be provided for individuals responsible for internal communication. These may include the internal communication officer, the ministry's political leadership, and unit heads who handle communication within their departments. Such training could cover the significance of internal communication, the impact of interpersonal communication at the unit level, and strategies for improving communication skills. Clear rules for remote meetings should also be established, covering aspects such as the use of cameras, pre-distribution of meeting agendas, and defined meeting durations. Finally, it is essential to implement a system that ensures regular feedback for every team member, provided by their manager. Such a system would foster a culture of continuous improvement and support in the workplace. These recommendations aim to enhance internal communication and promote a cohesive organizational culture in the context of hybrid work environments.

The development of a comprehensive internal communication management and evaluation system is also recommended. This system would regularly evaluate the effectiveness of internal communication across the organization and within individual units, ensuring that the stated objectives are met. Since well-managed internal communication is linked to employee productivity and job satisfaction (Lee, 2022; Madlock, 2008), one of the annual performance evaluation criteria for middle managers could be their internal communication management skills.



Furthermore, it would be beneficial to establish a regular format for the ministry's top management to address all staff simultaneously, perhaps on a monthly basis. These sessions, which could be conducted online, would provide updates on the ministry's current situation and upcoming changes, while also offering employees an opportunity to voice their concerns. Such initiatives could help mitigate stress in the face of global uncertainties, such as military conflicts, pandemics, and economic instability. At the unit level, it is critical to agree on standardized channels for task allocation and, if necessary, guidelines for task completion. For instance, tasks could be consistently assigned via email to ensure clarity.

Simulating crisis situations relevant to the organization's operations through structured exercises is another key recommendation. These simulations should focus on timely and appropriate staff communication, followed by debriefing sessions to analyze successes, challenges, and lessons learned. Establishing agreed-upon response times for emails (e.g., within one working day) and codifying these practices in internal documentation can further enhance efficiency.

Limitations of the study include the fact that middle managers and internal communication specialists were present at the study, but not employees. A survey of all staff could provide a better picture of how employees feel about internal communication solutions and what could be improved in internal communication in a period of uncertainty and rapid change.

By identifying the challenges and solutions to internal communication management in a particular ministry, the recommendations could be useful for other public policy-making institutions. It should be noted, however, that it is not possible to generalise from this case study that the challenges of internal communication are being addressed in a similar way by the majority of public policy-making institutions. This would require more in-depth research in other ministries and in more countries.

## 7. Conclusions

The study is one of the first qualitative case studies of its kind to analyse the challenges faced by ministries as policy-making institution in a period of uncertainty, entering hybrid work era, and to reveal how these challenges are addressed by internal communication specialists and managers. The study assesses existing practices described in scientific literature and gathers recommendations from ministry staff on how to improve internal communication management. The study provides answers on how internal communication could be improved in such organisations in these turbulent times and by applying hybrid work formats. The research is also useful for the results obtained — ministries, as public policy-making institutions, are usually seen as rather closed organisations, and the results could serve as hypotheses for future research on how to improve internal communication in other public policy-making organisations. The case study could stimulate the academic debate on the role of internal communication in a public sector organisation during contingencies such as a pandemic, and the recommendations made could contribute to the improvement of internal communication management in ministries.

The forced shift to teleworking and later implementation of hybrid work model required organisations to quickly change their usual internal communication management processes, and managers had to learn how to communicate with their employees in the new reality. Public policy makers also had to make changes, such as moving live meetings, briefings and trainings to the virtual space, and starting to use new communication platforms. The use of technology by ministries during the pandemic allowed them to involve more stakeholders in their meetings — entrepreneurs, citizens, other staff from public sector organisations — which facilitated internal communication between stakeholders who wanted to be involved in decision-making.

In public policy-making institutions, such as ministries, several internal communication management challenges have emerged. Firstly, hybrid work has significantly increased the time required to resolve problems. This delay stems from the fact that team members are working from different locations,

making it challenging to coordinate effectively and resolve issues promptly, as they can no longer meet physically to address problems in real-time as they did before the pandemic. Secondly, maintaining personal relationships between colleagues has become a major challenge, especially between long-standing employees and newer recruits. Working from different locations has limited opportunities for team members to build strong relationships and mutual trust. These interpersonal bonds are essential for fostering team spirit, ensuring psychological well-being, and enabling swift decision-making or efficient problem-solving. Thirdly, a reduction in the frequency of feedback from managers to employees was also observed due to hybrid work practices. Team leaders emphasized that providing feedback remotely is more time-consuming, as it often requires written communication. Unlike in-person feedback, where leaders could quickly share observations face-to-face, written feedback takes longer to compose. Consequently, some leaders admitted to providing feedback less frequently than before the pandemic. Miscommunication in email correspondence emerged as another significant issue, as written messages are sometimes interpreted differently by recipients. This study found that employees often misread the tone or intent of emails, leading to misunderstandings. It was argued that in-person or phone communication could help mitigate these issues; however, hybrid work increasingly fosters a reliance on email communication. Lastly, hybrid working has been associated with increased stress levels among employees. Informants reported that transitioning from traditional office-based work to teleworking or hybrid models has led to longer working hours, heightened stress, and uncertainty. The lack of in-person interaction with colleagues and Ministry leadership has further contributed to this stress.

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