

HUMAN CONNECTION IN A DIGITAL WORKPLACE

AUTHORS: ANA TKALAC VERČIČ, UNIVERSITY OF ZAGREB & DEJAN VERČIČ, UNIVERSITY OF LJUBLJANA

HUMAN CONNECTION IN A DIGITAL WORKPLACE

AUTHORS: ANA TKALAC VERČIČ, UNIVERSITY OF ZAGREB & DEJAN VERČIČ, UNIVERSITY OF LJUBLJANA



The digital transformation in the workplace has shifted many employee and management interactions from face-to-face to online channels. While this shift offers greater convenience, it may also reduce satisfaction with internal communication. This article presents findings from a study examining how digital and face-to-face interactions affect employees' communication satisfaction and whether attitudes toward digital technology influence this relationship.

A DIGITAL AGE DILEMMA

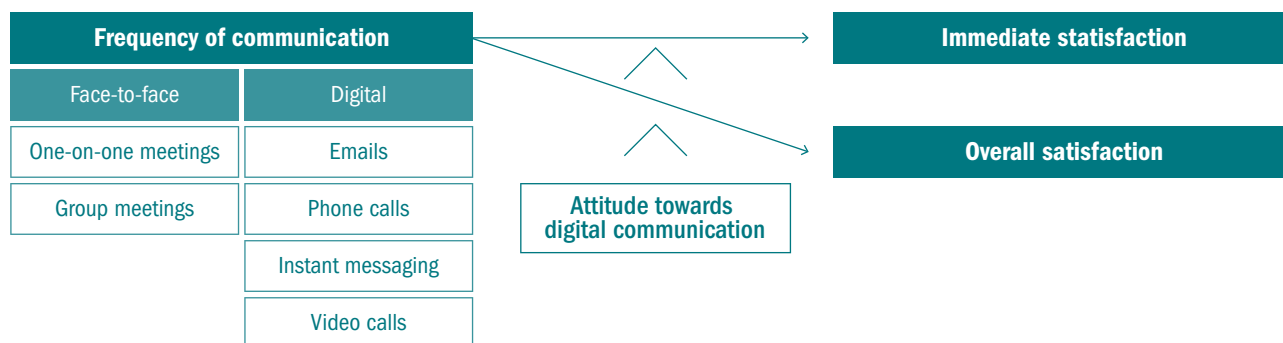
Digitalization has transformed the way employees communicate. Email, instant messaging, and video conferencing platforms dominate daily work routines. They offer speed, flexibility, and convenience. They also dismantle traditional barriers between departments, fostering transparency and accountability. The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated this shift, embedding digital communication into everyday work. Even after offices reopened, hybrid work – where employees split their time between home and the office – became prevalent. Flexible work arrangements have now become a key factor in employee retention and satisfaction (Smite et al., 2023). But a paradox has emerged: While digital tools make work faster and more flexible, they often leave employees feeling less connected. This contradiction lies at the

core of what we call the “Internal Communication Paradox”.

***The Internal Communication Paradox:
Digital channels offer convenience and efficiency, yet face-to-face interactions provide greater satisfaction.***

Digital tools enhance efficiency, accessibility, and connectivity, but they also introduce challenges such as information overload, increased interruptions, and heightened expectations of constant availability (ten Brummelhuis et al., 2021). This paradox extends beyond stress to include tensions between autonomy and surveillance, collaboration and overload, and engagement and exhaustion (Kokshagina & Schneider, 2023). The loss of casual interactions that occur naturally in shared workspaces can lead remote workers to feel isolated, weakening collaboration. The digital transformation therefore impacts various facets of the organization, including employee roles, leadership dynamics, and the organizational culture.

Analyzed variables associated with satisfaction with internal communication



Source: Tkalac Verčič & Verčič, 2025

Studying communication in real time

To better understand this paradox, we conducted a diary study with 104 employees of a large telecommunications company in Slovenia. Over five consecutive workdays, participants logged every communication activity, from one-on-one conversations to instant messages. After each interaction, they rated their level of satisfaction. This approach provided real-time insights into communication practices, avoiding the recall bias common in surveys. To measure satisfaction, we applied established internal communication tools and recent conceptualizations of communication acceptance, building on emerging literature that shows how communication infrastructure, digital platforms, and hybrid meeting arrangements are reshaping organizational life (Ellis et al., 2022; Zeffass, Buhmann, Tench, Verčič, & Moreno, 2022).

Methodology in glance

Key aspects of the study are:

- > **Sample:** 104 employees, telecommunications company (Slovenia)
- > **Design:** Five-day diary study recording all communication interactions
- > **Channels studied:** one-on-one meetings, group meetings, email, instant messaging, phone calls, video calls
- > **Measures:** immediate satisfaction (7-point scale);

overall satisfaction (Internal Communication Satisfaction Questionnaire); digital attitudes (Digital Communication Acceptance Scale)

- > **Frameworks applied:** research on hybrid meetings, CommTech, and remote communication

The study is embedded within a larger research initiative examining the impact of digitalization on internal communication, funded by the Croatian Science Foundation and the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency.

KEY FINDINGS: FACE-TO-FACE STILL WINS

The study confirmed the central argument of the Internal Communication Paradox: Employees rely on digital tools for efficiency but draw the greatest satisfaction from face-to-face encounters.

- > **One-on-one, in-person conversations** were the strongest predictor of communication satisfaction. These interactions provide trust, immediacy, and emotional richness that digital tools cannot replicate.
- > **In-person group meetings** also contributed positively but less consistently, perhaps reflecting differences in meeting quality.
- > **Emails, instant messages,** and phone calls were the most frequently used channels, yet their frequency had little to no impact on satisfaction. They deliver information efficiently, but rarely foster engagement.
- > **Video calls** were satisfying in individual cases, but their frequency did not predict higher overall satisfaction.

Even employees with positive attitudes toward digital communication did not report greater satisfaction from using digital channels. This echoes findings that remote communication may maintain efficiency but does not automatically translate into higher engagement or well-being (Dhanesh & Picherit-Duthler, 2021).

THE PARADOX IN PRACTICE

The pandemic accelerated the adoption of remote work and digital communication tools, offering a window of opportunity for both employees and employers to explore new ways of working. Video conferencing platforms like Google Meet, Teams, and Zoom demonstrated that many tasks could be effectively managed from home, leading to spread enthusiasm for hybrid and remote work models. Many organizations seized on the opportunity to reduce physical office space and cut costs associated with real estate and in-person infrastructure. While this initially seemed like a win-win situation for both employers and employees, our study supports the idea that long-term reliance on digital communication alone may have unintended consequences, particularly regarding organizational commitment and employee engagement. Organizations, therefore, need to strike a new balance between digital and live communication that meets the need for one-on-one interactions.

While digital tools such as email, instant messaging, and video calls have become indispensable for day-to-day operations, organizations should not over-rely on them to drive communication satisfaction. Digital channels are undoubtedly efficient, but they can lack the emotional richness and immediacy required for more complex or relational exchanges. This calls for a more intentional approach to integrating both digital and in-person interactions to maximize satisfaction and engagement. For example, routine tasks and updates may be efficiently handled through digital means, but discussions requiring deeper emotional engagement or complex decision-making should be reserved for in-person interactions or high-quality video meetings.

While technology can enhance efficiency, it cannot fully replace the human need for direct, personal contact. Simply increasing the use of digital tools will not lead to higher levels of satisfaction; instead, organizations should focus on creating environments where digital and face-to-face communication complement each other. Hybrid work

models should be designed such that employees have regular opportunities to meet in person, collaborate, and build relationships. Occasional social gatherings or team-building events are not enough; regular, face-to-face communication is needed that can sustain interpersonal connections. As hybrid work becomes the norm, organizations must consciously create opportunities for meaningful, in-person interaction, ensuring that technology enhances rather than replaces the human element in place communication.

Managing the Internal Communication Paradox

To navigate this paradox, organizations must:

- > Rebalance digital and face-to-face communication;
- > Create intentional opportunities for personal interaction;
- > Focus on the quality of exchanges, not just their volume; and
- > Train leaders to prioritize genuine conversations with their teams.

DESIGNING COMMUNICATION FOR CONNECTION

The Internal Communication Paradox highlights a critical organizational challenge. Leaders often invest heavily in digital platforms, believing they will improve communication. Yet, if face-to-face conversations are neglected, employees may feel increasingly disconnected despite being digitally “connected” all day long. This challenge resonates with recent reviews of internal communication research showing that while digitalization dominates the field, the human and relational aspects of communication remain central to employee motivation and organizational culture (Yue et al., 2025).

The paradox is not a call to abandon digital communication. On the contrary, digital tools remain indispensable for modern organizations. But the study shows that efficiency without connection is not enough. To thrive in the digital workplace, organizations must recognize that satisfaction comes from being seen and heard. This requires balancing high-tech solutions with high-touch interactions.

REFERENCES

Dhanesh, G. S., & Picherit-Duthler, G. (2021). Remote internal crisis communication (RICC): Role of internal communication in predicting employee engagement during remote work in a crisis. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 33(5), 292–313.

Ellis, R., Goodacre, T., Mortensen, N., Oeppen, R. S., & Brennan, P. A. (2022). Application of human factors at hybrid meetings: Facilitating productivity and inclusivity. *British Journal of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery*, 60(7), 740–745.

Kokshagina, O., & Schneider, S. (2023). The digital workplace: navigating in a jungle of paradoxical tensions. *California Management Review*, 65(2), 129–155.

Smite, D., Moe, N. B., Hildrum, J. J., Gonzalez-Huerta, & Mendez, D. (2023). Work-from-home is here to stay: Call for flexibility in post-pandemic work policies. *Journal of Systems and Software*, 195, 111552.

ten Brummelhuis, L. L., ter Hoeven, C. L., & Toniolo-Barrios, M. (2021). Staying in the loop: Is constant connectivity to work good or bad for work performance? *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 128, 103589.

Tkalac Verčič, A., & Verčič, D. (2025). The internal communication paradox: Balancing digital convenience with face-to-face satisfaction. *Public Relations Review*, 51(1), 102318.

Yue, C. A., Zhou, A., Page, T. G., Morehouse, J., Capizzo, L. W., & Toth, E. L. (2025). The past, present, and future of internal communication in public relations: A computational review of the emerging literature. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 37(1–2), 4–30.

Zerfass, A., Buhmann, A., Tench, R., Verčič, D., & Moreno, Á. (2022). Digitalization in corporate communications: Understanding the emergence and consequences of CommTech and digital infrastructure. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 27(3), 456–475.

AUTHORS



DR. ANA TKALAC VERČIČ is a professor at the University of Zagreb, Croatia. Her expertise includes internal communication, public relations, and marketing communication. Email: atkalac@efzg.hr



DR. DEJAN VERČIČ is a professor and head of the Centre for Marketing and Public Relations at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. His research focuses on globalization, internal, and strategic communication. Email: dejan.vercic@fdv.uni-lj.si

MORE INFORMATION

A detailed description of this study is available in Tkalac Verčič & Verčič, 2025, as listed above.