We Are Listening to You (as Good as We Can): A Qualitative Study on the Potential of Internal Corporate Social Listening as a Strategic Approach for Corporate Communication

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WE ARE LISTENING TO YOU (AS GOOD AS WE CAN)

A Qualitative Study on the Potential of Internal Corporate Social Listening as a Strategic Approach for Corporate Communication

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to identify the potential of internal corporate Social Listening for corporate communications. To this end, the following research-guiding question is posed: What potential does internal corporate Social Listening offer as a strategic approach for the corporate communication of groups and group-affiliated subsidiaries with a branch office in Germany? To answer this question, qualitative, partially standardized guided interviews were conducted with communication experts from twelve corporate groups or subsidiaries with branches in Germany. The study explores in detail how internal corporate Social Listening is used in corporate communication, to what extent it is integrated into the respective communication strategy, and what strengths and weaknesses it offers for corporate communication. The results suggest that internal corporate Social Listening can contribute to corporate value creation, especially in the context of reputation, issue and stakeholder relationship management. However, this potential has not been fully exploited, as the inbound dimension of corporate communication is still underestimated. Internal corporate Social Listening should be actively incorporated into a company's communication strategy.

Keywords: Social Listening, Internal Social Network, Internal Communication, Strategic Communication

1 Introduction

Nowadays, a company's actions are no longer tailored to the interests of just one stakeholder group, such as, for example, its shareholders. Instead, based on Freeman's stakeholder approach (2004) according to which companies cannot be considered independently from their socio-economic environment, it is essential to take into account a wide variety of stakeholders (Karmasin & Weder, 2014, p. 82). The employees of a company represent one of the most important stakeholder groups (Kirchgeorg & Springer, 2009, p. 210), which is why factors that strengthen said group's satisfaction are increasingly becoming the focal point of corporate management. One of these factors is successful internal communication (Mishra, Boynton & Mishra, 2014, p. 184). While the most prominent role in shaping this is undoubtedly the sending of messages, one dimension is significantly underestimated: listening.

This deficit is also evident in the current state of research on the commonly named corporate listening, as studies have so far focused almost exclusively on communication impulses from the corporate environment (Borner & Zerfass, 2018; Ingenhoff, Borner, & Zerfaß, 2020; Macnamara 2020, Stewart & Arnold, 2018). Internal communication impulses, on the other hand, are strongly neglected in the research, even though the increasing adaptation of internal social networks makes more places for employees to exchange ideas available than ever before. In Germany, more than half of the 500 companies with the highest revenues already started implementing internal social networks in 2017, and they were implemented in 90 percent of Fortune's 500 companies as early as 2014 (Sievert & Scholz, 2017, p. 896). In the near future, the design of internal communication will continue to be largely determined by internal social networks (Sievert & Scholz, 2017, p. 902).

By focusing on listening to communication on internal social networks, companies could open up a variety of value-adding opportunities (Ingenhoff et al., 2020, p. 15; Sievert & Scholz, 2017, p. 894). For a comprehensive, practical understanding

We Are Listening to You (as Good as We Can): A Qualitative Study on the Potential of Internal Corporate Social Listening as a Strategic Approach for Corporate Communication

134

of the extent to which communication departments can benefit from listening on internal social network media, the concept of *internal corporate Social Listening* will be introduced over the course of the following definitions of internal social networks and existing listening terms. First, however, an overview of the relevant theoretical frame of reference will be provided, and key research findings and theoretical foundations on success factors and (effective) applications of listening will be presented. In addition, the following section highlights the strategic perspective on listening and the possible strengths and weaknesses of its application.

2 Theoretical Background

The following chapter describes the theoretical background on which this study is based. First, internal social network media and their technical possibilities are considered, from which the necessity of listening arises. Based on existing definitions, a working definition for internal corporate social listening is derived. This is followed by success factors and application examples of listening in corporate communications as well as the strategic use of listening. The chapter ends with the elaboration of strengths and weaknesses of listening and the systematic derivation of research questions from the state of research.

2.1 Internal (Social) Networks

As the channel with the widest reach, the intranet with its diverse applications represents a central instrument of internal communication (Bahrt, Böhm, Mann, Reuter & Schlesinger, 2021, p. 25). An intranet is a computer network that can be used to exchange data within an organization (Däbritz et al., 2020, p.135). Due to the increasingly interactive and collaborative elements implemented on intranet platforms, the social intranet emerged (Hirsch, 2012, p. 24). This is "an intranet enriched with social media functions, which enables, for example, options for commenting, creating wiki pages or finding experts based on topics" (Meier, Lütolf, & Schillerwein, 2015, p. 18). Overall, there are various ways of implementing

social media in the internal communication processes of companies, which can be described as "social software, employee portals, business-to-employee portals, wikis or weblogs, enterprise social software platforms, intra-organizational electronic networks, and enterprise social networks" (Büttner, 2015, p. 1820).

In addition to enabling dialog and feedback from the workforce, internal communication teams can use internal social networking media to authentically set topics and maintain direct contact with employees (Hirsch, 2012, p. 25). The platforms engage employees in increasingly digitized organizational frameworks and can contribute to their motivation (Ewing, Men, & O'Neil, 2019, p. 126). Overall, they are among the most flexible and comprehensive corporate feedback systems (Kolb, 2012, p. 58). The behavior and attitudes of the workforce on certain topics can be made visible through internal social networks (Kolb, 2012, p. 58) and, as a result, internal social media platforms can also become trouble spots (Mast, 2014, p. 1137). Büttner (2015) furthermore shows that concerns about data protection can negatively influence employees' intentions to use said internal social media (p. 1821).

Against this background it becomes essential not only to moderate but also to listen to the dialog on internal social platforms (Hirsch, 2012, p. 25). Platforms with social functions and infrastructures were created specifically to listen and network (Macnamara, 2020, p. 12). Corporate communication must therefore take on the role of trend scouting and think across departments to exploit the innovative potential of internal social networks (Altenberger, Eisenkern & Schader, 2012, p. 172; Hirsch, 2012, p. 25).

2.2 Social Listening in Corporate Communications - A Definition of Terms

The term Social Listening originates from the marketing field and refers to the observation and analysis of user interactions in social network media, to identify product trends and potential customers (Rosenblatt, Curran & Treiber, 2018, p.

We Are Listening to You (as Good as We Can): A Qualitative Study on the Potential of Internal Corporate Social Listening as a Strategic Approach for Corporate Communication

136

71). While Social Listening in marketing aims to promote sales medium term, the tool is used in corporate communication with the long-term goal of maintaining stakeholder relationships, as well as of identifying trends and issues in society (Macnamara, 2018, p. 5). Furthermore, Social Listening refers to the monitoring of media-mediated interactions, which needs to be distinguished from interpersonal listening in the context of face-to-face interactions (Crawford, 2009; Kotras, 2020; Stewart & Arnold, 2018).

Ewing et al. explicitly apply the notion of listening to the output of monitored internal organizational social media platforms to examine the impact of listening on employee engagement (2019, p. 111-112). This form of listening is also the focus of this paper. The listening term used by Ewing et al. (2019), as well as adjacent terms such as Organizational Listening (Macnamara, 2019), Corporate Listening (Macnamara, 2020; Zerfass & Sherzada, 2015), or Leader-centric Listening (Cardon, Huang & Power, 2019), however, are applied to different processes without definitional changes. Therefore it must be noted that the so far established terms do not describe the phenomenon examined in this paper with sufficient precision. For this reason, the term Internal Corporate Social Listening (CSL) is introduced in this study, which explicitly describes the targeted monitoring and analysis of communication impulses on internal corporate social network media. Internal corporate Social Listening thus directs the inbound perspective inward and places the focus of listening activities on internal communication impulses.

2.3 Effective Listening - Success Factors and Application

Macnamara conducted a transdisciplinary study, The Organizational Listening Project, to determine how, and how effectively organizations are listening (Macnamara, 2016). His findings show that listening on a large scale can no longer be done interpersonally. A lot of the data - mostly in text form - has to be gathered and analyzed using technology. He identifies eight success factors for effective Organizational Listening, realized in the "Architecture of Listening" (p. 162-163).

Ingenhoff et al. (2020) adopt measures for corporate listening from issues management. Surveys and monitoring serve the perception function of articulated impulses. In a second step, the large amounts of collected data can then be analyzed by "interpretation processes based on them, such as (media) content analyses, issues monitoring, network analyses, data mining, and Big Data applications" (Ingenhoff et al., 2020, p. 5).

Among the research-related methods, analyses of surveys and interviews, content analyses, social network analyses, sample polls, analyses of behaviors, and the methodology of sense-making can be identified. Textual analysis is given a great deal of importance in exploring listening. To be able to analyze such data, automated applications and suitable software such as bots are needed. However, topics such as digital surveillance and algorithms deciding on "important" and "unimportant" information need to be critically reflected upon (Macnamara, 2019, p. 5196).

Overall, it can be noted that the comparatively small body of research on the specific communication phenomenon corporate listening already contains many concrete design recommendations for practice. However, Willis (2015) notes that organizations are still far from listening well, as they supervise rather than use data to understand their organization (p. 3). Recent studies also suggest that organizations have not yet practiced competent listening on social channels (Maben & Gearhart, 2018, p. 112).

2.4 Listening as a Part of Strategic Corporate Communication

Borner and Zerfass (2018) place the strategic mode of corporate listening in the inbound dimension in their research on corporate listening and corporate value. Embedded in corporate communication, they argue that strategic decisions are made about how many resources are invested in listening and messaging respectively. "This decision depends on the design of the communication function (emergent or functional) and the inbound orientation of the company (sensitive or

We Are Listening to You (as Good as We Can): A Qualitative Study on the Potential of Internal Corporate Social Listening as a Strategic Approach for Corporate Communication

138

insensitive)" (Borner & Zerfass, 2018, p. 17). Flexible structures allow corporate listening to be conducted across departments, common processes are standardized, and interpersonal conversations are used as informal stimuli. The communication strategies are thereby dynamic and can be equally influenced by listening.

Ingenhoff et al. (2020) also view corporate listening as a sub-strategy of an overarching communication strategy designed to guarantee the most effective listening possible. The results of corporate listening processes are intended to flow into entrepreneurial decisions and the resources for this are consciously used to generate entrepreneurial value. The corporate listening strategy itself may be planned, "but it may well emerge from emergent practices, solidify, and then be legitimized by the management level" (Ingenhoff et al., 2020, p. 5).

In research and practice, internal and external communication are seen as increasingly linked domains (Macnamara, 2020, p. 3). As a result, corporate listening must be carried out across departments. Authors of strategic approaches recommend guidelines for this purpose that allow situational decision-making and response (Borner & Zerfass, 2018; Ingenhoff et al., 2020). Possibilities of structuring the process can be drawn from the more researched issues management (Ingenhoff et al., 2020, p. 6). Empirically, little consideration is given to the strategic mode of corporate listening. Only slightly more than half of the communication departments surveyed in Europe had a dedicated listening strategy as a part of their communication strategy in 2015 (Zerfass et al., 2015, p. 52). The importance of corporate listening for corporate communications still needs to be emphasized to allow for a more strategic implementation of listening.

2.5 Strengths and Weaknesses of Listening

Regardless of the specific integration of listening into corporate communication, the literature indisputably reveals many strengths of listening, as well as some weaknesses that should be considered. Corporate listening can help capture trends

and needs from the employees' perspective, through which the company can then again ultimately gain innovation potential (Borner & Zerfass, 2018, p. 19; Cardon et al., 2019, p. 19) and a better understanding of their employees, which in turn can lead to greater employee satisfaction, higher productivity, and lower turnover (Ingenhoff et al., 2020, p. 3; Johnston & Reed, 2017, p. 76-78; Macnamara, 2020, p. 393; Reed et al., 2016, p. 329). Intra-organizational influencers and social groups can also be identified, which in turn can be leveraged to better reach and connect employees on internal platforms and foster internal dialog (Ewing et al., 2019, p. 123). Cardon et al. also highlight that by addressing the concerns of the workforce, corporate culture can be strengthened and thus intangible corporate value can be created (2019, p. 19). Borner and Zerfass also show that Social Listening makes an important contribution to a company's value creation, arguing that it not only increases the company's tangible and intangible value but also expands its scope for action, which can again open up strategic development opportunities (2018, p. 18). Furthermore, Social Listening is considered an integral part of issues management in corporate communication. Within this framework, potential conflicts with company stakeholders can be identified at an early stage and even prevented (Borner & Zerfass, 2018, p. 14).

Providing sufficient resources for a structured listening process is seen as difficult in many cases. This is because dedicated listening requires both extensive human and financial resources (Crawford, 2009, p. 532-533; Macnamara, 2016, p. 157). In many cases, however, only a small portion of the annual budget is devoted to establishing workflows, technologies, and other resources for listening activities. Moreover, many companies mainly measure the quantitative output of their own communication activities, without analyzing the contributions from other stakeholders (Macnamara, 2016, p. 156). In this context, the desire for a sophisticated Social Listening tool is expressed: "We would like to use listening tools such as more sophisticated social media monitoring tools to track comments and public opinion on issues. But it is a trade-off on how much we can spend" (Macnamara, 2016, p. 158). Another

challenge is related to the management acceptance of the process, as the sending, but not the capturing of communication impulses is still considered more important by the majority of companies (Zerfass & Sherzada, 2015, p. 305).

One further weakness of Social Listening is that only those impulses, which have reached a certain level of awareness, can be recorded (Ingenhoff et al., 2020, p. 4). Subconscious needs, then again, can only be captured through behavioral observation. Another problem is posed by employee self-censorship on internal social networking media. For various reasons, employees use so-called "self-censorship strategies" such as temporarily or permanently not using corresponding media or writing exclusively positive posts (Madsen & Verhoeven, 2016). These diminish the authenticity of the posts. Building on this, Cardon et al. note that anonymization may help employees speak more sincerely about specific issues and problems within the organization (2019, p. 20).

2.6 Derivation of the Research Questions

It can be stated that listening – despite some challenges – can hold a great strategic added value for corporate communication. With the establishment of social intranets, the employees of a company in particular gain a stronger voice. Against this background, the following research question arises:

> *What potential does internal corporate Social Listening offer as a strategic approach for the corporate communication of groups and group-affiliated subsidiaries with a branch in Germany?*

In order to ultimately assess the potential of this specific form of listening, it is first necessary to clarify whether and in what way CSL is practiced in companies and whether the relevance of listening observed by the researchers is also noted by the communicators. This leads to the following first, subordinate research question:

RQ 1: How is internal corporate Social Listening applied in corporate communication?

It has been shown that insights and information from the listening process can generate previously unused value creation potential for the company. In this respect, the type of strategic integration of the CSL must be ascertained to finally be able to correctly classify potentials:

RQ 2: To what extent is internal corporate Social Listening integrated into the communication strategy of companies?

Several studies on listening in corporate communication reveal various strengths and weaknesses of the instrument. For the concrete application of internal corporate Social Listening, it should be clarified against this background which strengths and weaknesses those responsible are aware of:

RQ 3: What are the strengths and weaknesses of internal corporate Social Listening in corporate communication?

3 Methodology

In this explorative study, semi-standardized, qualitative interviews were conducted with employees of companies with a communication focus, who actively observe and analyze employee communication on internal social network media (Gläser & Laudel, 2010, p. 42). Specifically, this refers to employees who are involved in the strategic planning, organization, implementation, and monitoring of internal communication within the communication departments of corporate groups and affiliated companies in Germany. The selection of the method results from a lack of knowledge regarding the research subject of this specific form of listening.

For this purpose, the relevant research dimensions and the structuring of the interview guideline are based on the previously formulated research questions: the

application of CSL, the integration of CSL into the communication strategy, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of CSL. The open-ended interviews allow for the interviewees to freely structure the main narrative. The interview questions refer to the named focal points in an orienting way. To answer the research questions, various experts were selected based on the principle of "theoretical sampling" (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Saar, 2014, p. 181), who fulfilled the following criteria:

Employees of companies that have a communication connection and actively observe and analyze the process of employee communication on internal social network media. The companies must be part of a group structure and have their location in Germany.

The restriction to companies within a group structure was made due to the required distinctive internal communication infrastructure. To ensure comparability among data protection laws and regulations on the processing of personal data, only German branches were chosen (Basic Data Protection Regulation, Federal Data Protection Act). By March 10th, 2021, a total of 86 experts with the above-mentioned characteristics had been contacted through various channels, and interviews were conducted with 12 of them (equalling a 14 percent success rate). The experts came from 9 different industry sectors and held various hierarchical positions in the communication departments of their companies, with a distribution of 9 women and 3 men (see table 1).

Company	Position
Pfizer Germany	Senior Manager Communication Corporate Affairs Germany
Daimler Group Services Berlin	Employee Corporate Communication
Automotive company (anonymized)	Corporate Communication Manager
Aviation company (anonymized)	Head of Internal Communication
Microsoft Germany GmbH	Trainee Corporate Communication
Otto Group	Communication Manager Cultural Change 4.0
Bosch Rexroth	Employee Corporate Communication
Deutsche Post DHL Group	Team Lead Digital Content
Utility vehicles company (anonymized)	Content Manager international Employee Communication
Nestlé Germany	Head of Internal Communication
Mobility company (anonymized)	Head of Employee and Executive Communication and Corporate Media
Software company (anonymized)	Employee Site Communication

Tab. 1: Sample description

The interviews were conducted over approximately 10 weeks, from January 7th until March 17th, 2021. With an average interview duration of 39.25 minutes, the interview material comprises a total of 7 hours and 51 minutes of audio material. Due to the Corona lockdown during the spring of 2021, all interviews were conducted online. The transcription followed Gläser and Laudel (2010) and Dresing and Pehl (2018). Only uttered word sequences were transcribed to be able to fully focus on content-related statements, prosodic features were deliberately neglected. The evaluation of the transcripts was carried out in a rule-guided and systematic manner with the help of a qualitative content analysis following Mayring (2010). Since the analysis was carried out with "MAXQDA2000", aspects of Kuckartz's content-structuring approach (2016, p. 97) specifically intended for this software, were used as a supplement.

A deductive analysis grid based on relevant previous literature and the interview guideline served as the basis for the categories of the content analysis (Gläser & Laudel, 2010, p. 204). The categories and subcategories were further developed, differentiated, or supplemented inductively over the course of the coding. Following

the first complete trial coding, all categories and subcategories were again revised and selectively separated from each other, so that the existing material could be exhaustively mapped using the final category system in the following coding run. The coding carried out with the final category system was then checked again in a final run and, in individual cases, passages were recoded or removed.

Main Category	Subcategory
Personal Data	
Organizational Structure	
Social Network Media	Type, Structure and Use
Direct CSL	Monitoring, Discussion
Actors	Internal Actors, External Actors
Tools/Software	
Frequency of Use	Frequency of Monitoring, Frequency of Discussion
Planning/Goals of CSL	
Measures of Utilization	Immediate Response, Added Value for other Divisions
Control of Results	
Strengths	
Weaknesses	
Challenges	Organizational limitations, Data Protection, Representativeness of Content, Authenticity of Content
Outlook	

Tab. 2: Main categories and subcategories

At the end of the evaluation, there were a total of 30 categories, 16 of which were subcategories, and 894 recorded quotations (see table 2). The information obtained from the transcribed interviews was analyzed individually after the evaluation and then examined for intersections and differences (Lamneck & Krell, 2016, pp. 379-381).

We Are Listening to You (as Good as We Can): A Qualitative Study on the Potential of Internal Corporate Social Listening as a Strategic Approach for Corporate Communication

145

4 Results

In this chapter, the twelve interviews are evaluated and results are presented. In particular, the tools, actors, types of social network media, monitoring, and discussion are in focus first. Subsequently, the results on the integration of CSL into the communication strategy are described. This is followed by a presentation of strengths and weaknesses of CSL, the results of the third research question.

4.1 Usage of Corporate Social Listening

To be able to go into more detail on the benefits of CSL for corporate communications, it is first necessary to look at internal social network media, as well as their use and structure, since these provide the working and data basis for the CSL process. Within the interviews, the experts report on various social network media they implemented. The focus here is on social intranet solutions from providers such as Jive, Sharepoint, Staffbase, or Facebook. The Microsoft solution Yammer is described most frequently. In addition, the experts report on app extensions to the social intranets.

Uses available to employees within the social intranets vary. Like buttons, comment sections, posting opportunities and group formations are described as possible by most experts. Furthermore the intranets are often used to provide information for everyday work within departments, to allow for the exchange of contact data and for general contact between employees.

Monitoring of the internal communication is carried out sporadically by the majority of companies, though it rarely follows a fixed process with clearly defined responsibilities. A smaller number of experts, however, reports a consistent monitoring process that is carried out regularly and according to a plan from within the department. These interviewees state that the observation can be carried out via the corresponding intranet solution. It is mostly carried out quantitatively based on

We Are Listening to You (as Good as We Can): A Qualitative Study on the Potential of Internal Corporate Social Listening as a Strategic Approach for Corporate Communication

146

previously defined key performance indicators (KPIs). The frequency of observation differs and is influenced by various factors, e.g., the existing reporting obligation.

Furthermore, there is also often only little systematic discussion of the information gained from the CSL process, although individual statements indicate a structured and regular procedure. Not only those directly responsible are included in the discussion, but also the department management. In principle, various topics of discussion can be gleaned from the expert interviews. The focus is on communication impulses, such as the question of reactions to comments. Analogous to monitoring, some companies regularly create space for discussion, while others attribute less importance to this. The time periods range from once a week to only annually. Overall, a discussion of the information occurs much more irregularly than monitoring.

Concerning the tools used in the CSL process, half of the experts denied the use of any software. Tools can be broken down into applications that are already part of the respective social intranet software solution, and of additional external software for further processing and graphical preparation of quantitative data.

CSL is implemented by various players. The interviewees most frequently refer to employees in internal communications. Other players involved are experts from the relevant departments or employees from the respective divisions, human relations departments, and employees from external corporate communications or service providers such as agencies.

Some companies have already expressed concrete plans for the further development of their respective CSL process. These include implementing technological support for the listening process and educating management. Overall, the interviews clearly show that many companies are striving for a professional approach to internal listening. For the majority of those interviewed, technological support plays a decisive role in this process.

4.2 Integration into the Communication Strategy

The second research question considered here was dedicated to the embedding of CSL in the communication strategy of the interviewed companies. Half of the interviewees mention that CSL is a part of an overarching strategy at their company. Here, CSL is connected to the general communication strategy, especially in the context of internal communication. Strategy and technological feasibility determine individual CSL measures. Planning marks the first step of a strategic application of CSL. This can be done, for example, using performance measures such as KPIs or objective and key results (OKRs). However, in some cases, there is no systematic planning behind implemented CSL processes or they are only planned for issues that are likely to be relevant and highly debated. The most frequently cited goal of CSL is topic identification. Interaction rates or outreach are identified as goals as well. Other aims include filtering out the mood in the workforce, promoting exchange, and showing appreciation to employees. Dissatisfaction is to be countered and change processes such as cultural change are to be driven forward, but CSL must not be misused to control behavior.

Through CSL processes obtained data serves as a basis for different communication measures. The most frequently named immediate reaction is the channeling of issues, problems, and suggestions observed in social intranets into internal communication measures such as articles, town hall agendas, and newsletters. CSL is also frequently used as an issue management tool that constantly accompanies communication processes to catch negative comments and emergent criticism on time, by permanently answering questions, responding to criticism, and, in rare cases, deleting comments. Measures like initiating virtual or face-to-face dialogs based on points of contact identified through CSL processes and the use of multipliers to increase the reach of internal communication were also mentioned. A second major part of the utilization measures is the distribution of the gained information to other business units. External communication has an interest in the identified topics because often these

are trend or conflict subjects, to which an external relevance is attributed in addition to an internal value. Business units also benefit from the quick and direct employee feedback, which can be assessed based on CSL results: Specialist divisions benefit from the subject- and topic-specific questions and discussions, HR departments and managements are interested in the sentiment of the employees, and strategy departments, boards, and (project) managements benefit from access to informal feedback on strategy changes, project launches, and their progress.

Half of the companies surveyed do not formulate any statements on the monitoring of results. Only two companies mention that they carry out partial performance reviews. One company evaluates the previously set KPIs on a professional basis using a traffic light system. Another company also notes that performance reviews based on KPIs should be viewed critically. According to this, unpleasant topics do not receive as many likes as joyful ones. Therefore, a purely number-driven performance review should be treated with caution.

4.3 Strengths and Weaknesses

The majority of interviewees see a major strength in the aforementioned identification of relevant topics, which not only provide insights into employees' interests but can also reveal overarching trends in the entire industry. Number-driven listening in particular can provide a clear data basis for trends and support for decisions that were previously made based on the subjective gut feeling of those responsible. CSL offers the potential to reflect the mood of employees in the company and can thus serve as a substitute for internal company surveys. All interviewees consider the contributions and opinions expressed on internal social network media to be authentic. Critical contributions in particular are very common compared to external platforms. The clear majority of interviewees state that posts on internal social network media are made exclusively under the person's real name. With the help of CSL, it is also possible to show appreciation to employees and to receive feedback on the company's communicative work. The majority of the experts also identify the

transfer of gained information to other areas of the company as a strength of CSL. Furthermore, the early identification of issues and the ability to react to potential problems at an early stage is perceived as a strength of CSL. Data protection in the context of their CSL does not play a serious role for almost all interviewees, as no personal data is collected.

In addition to numerous strengths, the experts also described some weaknesses of CSL. The lack of representativeness of the interactions on internal social network media and the associated low significance of the data obtained is seen as one weakness by some interviewees. Thus, it is mentioned that in most cases only a few interactions take place on the internal platforms and many of the posts come from a small, rather active group of employees. Four of the interviewees consider it more realistic that CSL can be used to identify only a tendency of the general opinion of the workforce. Employees therefore must generally be encouraged to be more active on internal social network media. In addition, negative dynamics can develop around critical issues, inhibiting and even preventing the expression of positive opinions. According to some interviewees, (quantitative) listening on internal platforms is not sufficient to reflect the overall tenor of the workforce and must be expanded, for example, through surveys. Above all, personal feedback in the form of conversations should additionally be obtained. Furthermore, the limited usefulness of the data obtained through CSL is pointed out. Not all figures collected are useful or helpful for capturing the overall mood within a company. In general, technological support for the CSL process is missed. It can be stated that a weakness of CSL is seen in its resource requirements in terms of budget, personnel, and working time. Against this background, it is pointed out that awareness of the importance of the tool must first be created. Another challenge mentioned by the interviewees is the possibility of employees' being afraid of being spied on.

5 Discussion

In this chapter, results are discussed against the backdrop of the existing research literature and condensed into hypotheses.

5.1 Interpretation of the Usage of Corporate Social Listening

The increase in the relevance of social intranets as described by Bahrt et al. (2021) can be confirmed by the results generated within this study. The application basis for the use of CSL is provided by the use of social intranets for all respondents. There is no uniform design. The attempt to merge data management, knowledge management, or even the networking of employees into one or a few platforms, as described by Beimel and Gonsior (2018), is made. In addition, the functional diversity of social intranets is striking. They serve as a feedback channel and enable the move to real dialog, as described by Hirsch (2012). However, this is not desired by all companies. The experts report that management is sceptical about giving too much weight to the voice of individual employees and work councils as well as compliance with data protection guidelines. They thus echo concerns raised by Büttner (2015).

The findings fundamentally suggest that social intranets enable employee listening and networking (see Macnamara, 2020). Furthermore, organizations have recognized the need for regular listening on internal social networking media. It is, however, equally clear that the listening process has only rarely been professionalized.

This is supported by Willis (2015) and Maben and Gearhart (2018). Listening can only be considered a professionalized process when consistent, structured performance can be ensured independently from individuals. This professionalism cannot be demonstrated in the entirety of the interviews.

The discussion of aggregated information occurs less frequently than monitoring processes and correlates with its application. Quantitative information is often

collected in the context of listening, while qualitative information is collected less frequently. These findings are consistent with Macnamara's (2016) results that quantitative evaluation using KPIs is much more common than qualitative evaluation of communication stimuli.

The interviews also show that the professionalization of the CSL process is hampered by a lack of software. At the same time, conversely, the low use of professional CSL conditions the lack of appropriate technological solutions. CSL is often located in internal communication, but there are also interfaces with other departments. Here, the first approaches to the cross-sectional function of corporate listening can be found by Ingenhoff et al. (2020). External service providers for CSL are also mentioned, but their usefulness is questioned by Crawford (2009). Employees and departmental experts are often brought in after a listening process for further content creation, idea input, and queries. According to Altenberger et al. (2012), this makes it possible to exploit the innovation potential of internal social network media.

Overall, it can be stated that the information collected from the interviews in this study is consistent with findings and opinions in the relevant literature. This study, however, also shows that not all of these findings are transferred to German corporate communication practice. This suggests that despite relevant research findings, the relevance and potential of listening are not recognized. Against this background, the following hypothesis subsequently needs to be verified in future research:

> *H1:* The more professionally internal CSL is conducted, the greater the attributed relevance with regard to listening across the entire company.

5.2 Interpretation of the Integration into the Communication Strategy

The results of the interviews support an increasingly strategic approach to CSL, which is integrated into communication strategies (Ingenhoff et al., 2020). Since all but one company encountered CSL strategically − recognizable through explained

We Are Listening to You (as Good as We Can): A Qualitative Study on the Potential of Internal Corporate Social Listening as a Strategic Approach for Corporate Communication

152

plans and pursued goals in the interviews − it can be assumed that the topic of listening has received more attention in companies since Zerfass and Sherzada's (2015) survey. Nevertheless, only half of the interviewees talk about planning the processes along the lines of communication strategy. Objectives such as identifying topics and mapping the mood of employees were evidenced in the survey (Crawford, 2009; Ewing et al., 2019; Ingenhoff et al., 2020). Other goals mentioned in the relevant literature, such as the promotion of feedback and exchange, as well as showing appreciation towards employees, can also be found in the research results (Borner & Zerfass, 2018; Kolb, 2012).

The findings on the operational implementation of direct follow-up measures by immediately involved actors also support the central outcomes of previous studies. It can be confirmed that the strategic linking of issues management processes and corporate listening proposed by Ingenhoff et al. (2020) is of great advantage for communications departments, for internal listening. However, it also becomes apparent that this has so far only rarely been undertaken in the course of the generally inadequately developed listening strategies. Nevertheless, the time-consuming monitoring and interpretation processes would already be worthwhile, as they allow for derivation of communication follow-up measures tailored specifically towards target groups, which in turn promotes exchange with employees due to their dialogic character (Ingenhoff et al., 2020). Technological professionalization could significantly accelerate the time-consuming processes. Considering the added value of CSL for other business units, the results replicate Macnamara's assessment (2020) that a separation between external and internal listening limits the horizon of opinion that can be observed by communication departments. Even though internal and external stakeholders assess topics differently in terms of relevance due to different interests, the results show that internally observed trend and conflict topics are relevant for external target groups in most cases. CSL can therefore serve as a reliable topic radar, enabling companies to establish competitive advantages over time compared to companies without CSL. Since the identification of topics

We Are Listening to You (as Good as We Can): A Qualitative Study on the Potential of Internal Corporate Social Listening as a Strategic Approach for Corporate Communication

153

described above is successful in practice without cross-departmental CSL planning and implementation, the previous assumption that corporate listening must be organized cross-departmentally cannot be confirmed (Ingenhoff et al, 2020). One aspect that should definitely be organized on a cross-departmental basis, however − and these results support previous assumptions − is the employee dialog in the course of issues management and the forwarding of CSL results, because in addition to internal communication, business units and management can benefit most from receiving feedback from outside their division.

The monitoring of the results of listening processes has not yet been addressed neither in the relevant literature, nor in most companies. However, since the control of the previously set goals is a component of classic strategy processes, it can be assumed that this will find its way into the practice of companies with a further professionalization of CSL. Based on the previously discussed results, the following hypothesis emerges for follow-up research:

> *H2:* The more comprehensively CSL is embedded in the communications strategy, the more efficient the exploitation of results and subsequent monitoring of success will be.

5.3 Interpretation of Strengths and Weaknesses

The present research can confirm the findings of earlier studies regarding the added value of Social Listening in the context of internal corporate communications (see chapter 2). As already recognized by Ingenhoff et al. (2020), in addition to internal and external corporate communication departments, other corporate divisions can benefit from the data obtained. Kolb (2012) states that internal social network media can increase the feeling of appreciation and, consequently, employee satisfaction. Contrary to this, this is mentioned by only one expert in the context of this study. It should be pointed out, however, that the interest in the employees' opinions, which forms the basis of CSL, indicates such appreciation.

Although concerns about data privacy on internal social network media are expressed in the literature (Büttner, 2015), the interviewees in the given research project put this assessment into perspective. This can be explained by the data protection-compliant handling of the observation and exploitation of employee interactions taking place on the platforms (see chapter 4). Only the collection, transfer, or further use of personal data over the course of CSL processes can become problematic.

Similar to Macnamara (2016) and Crawford (2009), the present study concludes that certain resources such as personnel, working time, or tools must be made available on the part of the companies, or a certain infrastructure must be in place for CSL processes to be effectively operationalized and utilized. The technical support already called for by Macnamara (2016) continues to represent an unfulfilled ideal with which not only quantitative but also qualitative interactions on internal social network media could be monitored and evaluated more effectively. Both the interviewees and Zerfass and Sherzada (2015) see the reason for the lack of resources in the lack of awareness of the relevance of CSL on the part of the respective management. There is still a need for education here.

The communication experts interviewed perceive the majority of employee contributions as authentic. In contrast, Madsen & Verhoeven (2016) argue that the use of clear names could lead to employees behaving differently on internal platforms than on private, external network media. Such a conclusion would also be supported by the assessment of Cardon et al. (2019), who see anonymizing posts as a way to reduce employees' inhibitions about voicing certain concerns and problems within the organization. Respondents' beliefs regarding the authenticity of observable contributions must be critically questioned in the context of these research findings. Last but not least, it is evident from the results of this study that no concerns are expressed on the part of communication experts about the fact that no subconscious needs, but only consciously articulated concerns can be identified through CSL (Ingenhoff et al., 2020).

The present study gave way to new insights concerning the representativeness of the content of the communication impulses captured by CSL, which has not extensively been explored in previous studies. The research results allow for the assessment that, in most cases, the observed interactions are exercised by a small, above-average active group of users within the organization. As a result, the representativeness of the data collected through CSL is often considered to be low. Madsen and Verhoeven (2016) identify inhibitions and trends toward self-censorship by employees on internal social platforms as the reason for this. In general, the following thesis can be put forward with regard to the representativeness of employee contributions in terms of content:

> *H3:* The higher the number of active users on internal social networking media, the more CSL's strengths can be leveraged.

6 Limitations

The present study is based on a mono-methodical, qualitative research design. Although the transferability of the results was strengthened by adhering to the quality criteria (see chapter 3), the results presented here can only be related to the population with extreme caution (Lewis, Ritchie, Ormston & Morrell, 2013, p. 248).

The sampling of the present study must also be critically reflected upon. The decision to use a qualitative approach is always accompanied by comparatively small samples, but a higher number of cases would still have been desirable. The aim was to achieve maximum variation in terms of sectors, positions, and interviewees. A lack of comparability in terms of company size, number of employees, turnover, or similar factors was therefore consciously accepted (see chapter 3). Quantitative research would have to clarify whether these parameters influence listening.

Further limitations of the study are due to the chosen method of partially guided interviews. Numerous interview effects can influence respondents' answers (Brosius, Koschel & Haas, 2016, pp. 129-131). Although the interviews were guided, they are not uniform. (Häder, 2019, pp. 234-244). Conducting the interviews by telephone entailed further limitations: e.g., facial expressions and body language could not be perceived.

Furthermore, the present work must be critically reflected upon against the background of the novel topic and the accompanying conceptual ambiguities. Furthermore, sensitive topics were addressed, such as the handling of data protection issues or the strategic integration of listening in the context of corporate communications. In this context, it can be assumed that corresponding passages may not have been answered comprehensively by the respondents.

The research project was conducted as a group. It should be borne in mind that the individuals have had different experiences with conducting research on their previous educational paths. Through deliberate rotation, thought patterns and experiences were redistributed in order to achieve the greatest possible intersubjective comprehensibility.

7 Conclusion

For research question I, it can be stated that internal corporate Social Listening is primarily used in social intranets. The listening process is often carried out with the help of the intranets' board software by actors in the field of internal communication. The majority of the companies surveyed use internal corporate Social Listening regularly, but the process is not very professionalized.

Research question II shows that rough strategic goals are defined by those responsible for implementing internal listening, thus enabling CSL to be linked to communication strategy. Frequently, the formulation of objectives is kept very vague

and an explicit internal listening strategy is not pursued by any of the companies, although a listening strategy would not only bring about a general improvement in the communicative follow-up measures and more effective handling of issues but would also make it possible to monitor the success of the processes.

Research question III addresses the strengths and weaknesses of CSL. Strengths include early identification of issues and trends, capturing trends in the company's sentiment, feedback of work, and dissemination of information to other areas of the company. However, due to the low representativeness of the interactions on internal network media, the limited usefulness of the data must be emphasized as a weakness. For this reason, (number-driven) listening alone is not sufficient for capturing the overall sentiment in the company. In addition to resources such as budget, working time, skilled personnel, and technological support, there is often a lack of understanding of the potentials or professionalization of CSL.

From the previous three research questions, the answer to the guiding research question can be derived. The strengths offered by CSL have already been emphasized several times. Accordingly, CSL is able to influence the success of a company. Especially in the context of reputation and issues management as well as stakeholder relationship management, it makes a relevant contribution to the overall corporate value creation. Empirically, strong indications were found that the potential of CSL is not being fully exploited. In summary, it is also clear that CSL is extremely valuable for obtaining an impression of the mood within the workforce. However, it cannot and should not replace other methods such as opinion surveys. Rather, it offers the possibility of integrating other instruments with the same or similar objectives. In this respect, CSL can provide the foundation for a trusting and dialogic communication culture at eye level.

For future research, it can be deduced from the findings in the literature as well as from this study that the strategic mode of listening has not been sufficiently considered so far. In education, communication should be taught more as a

dialog. In this way, a new generation of young professionals learns the relevance of listening. In practice, it became apparent that internal CSL has not yet drawn on the comprehensive findings of research such as Macnamara's Architecture of Listening (see chapter 2). The use of social intranets should be encouraged in organizations to address the weakness of lack of representativeness. With representative use and authentic interactions, listening insights could gain validity. In addition, awareness should be created that CSL requires resources such as budget, time, and personnel.

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We Are Listening to You (as Good as We Can): A Qualitative Study on the Potential of Internal
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166

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