
Miscellaneous

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Employee engagement and trust relationships during COVID-19 pandemic: the expanded role of internal communication.

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Employee engagement and trust relationships during COVID-19 pandemic: the expanded role of internal communication

Abstract

Internal communication turns into the most valuable aspect of strengthening the relationship between an organization and its employees since it causes employees to become involved in maintaining an organization's sustainability during times of crisis, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. By interviewing 10 Human Resource Officers (HROs), this study examines how to engage with employees and enhance trust relationships through expanding the role of internal communication when COVID-19 was at its peak. This study reveals that, as a department with a major responsibility in building relationships with employees during this most recent pandemic, HROs utilized various methods to communicate with employees, including face-to-face and mediated communication. Internal communication built during this pandemic encourages trust and engagement with the employees. HROs expand their internal communication role to strengthen employee engagement and build trust relationships, particularly in mediated communication. This study advances knowledge of the significance of HROs' roles in selecting internal communication strategies to foster employee engagement and trust during these times of crisis.

Keywords

COVID-19 pandemic, employee engagement, internal communication, trust relationships, organizational sustainability.

1. Introduction

COVID-19 has ruined most organizations' business since countries implemented their lockdown policies to avert the massive 'blowout' sustained by the virus. Industries, such as travel, hotels, food and beverage, and retail, were harmed by the uncertainty of the situation (*The Jakarta Post*, 2020) and battled to survive while staying focused on protecting their employees' health and safety (Santoso *et al.*, 2022) as the organization's primary stakeholders (Gill, 2015; Kang & Sung, 2017). Thus, organizational leaders were critical in creating engagement in employees' daily lives through internal communication, connecting with and motivating people to better understand their feelings and needs.

Improved productivity and profitability can only be achieved if employees are engaged in their work. Research has shown employee engagement is a requirement, indeed, a

prerequisite to increased job satisfaction and commitment (Kular *et al.*, 2008; Lu *et al.*, 2016). Employee engagement is crucial, especially during times of crisis, as employees play a critical role in sustaining an organization and serving as its brand promoters. They will promote the corporation favorably to coworkers, prospective employees, and consumers (van Rooy *et al.*, 2011). Indeed, employee engagement is crucial to resolving the crisis since engaged personnel are more committed to the missions and goals of their employers, despite uncertain times (Akhmetshin *et al.*, 2019). Conversely, employee engagement contributes to accelerate employees' trust in the(ir) companies through effective communication. The ties between them, employer and employee, will often be stronger and of a higher quality because of such crises (Mazzei *et al.*, 2012).

Transparent communication is critical for increasing employee engagement (Men & Stacks, 2014) since it demonstrates that the organization is honest, caring, and eager to listen to them. It is worth noting that when confronted with the COVID-19 pandemic issue, good internal communication should be prioritized since it has the potential to retain internal trust (David, 2011) and limit harm (Mazzei *et al.*, 2012). Positive organizational and employee outcomes, such as employee engagement, are correlated with internal communication (Karanges *et al.*, 2015). As Hayese (2009) reveals, that internal communication drives employees' huge organizational commitment, voluntary effort, and meaningful work, supporting workplace relationships. In short, good communication promotes more engagement. Highly engaged employees communicate more than disengaged employees. Therefore, employee engagement and internal communication reciprocally influence each other. Karanges *et al.* (2015) find that employee engagement becomes a critical factor in internal communication. Meanwhile, Vora and Patra (2017) reveal that internal communication becomes an important element in achieving employee engagement in the workplace.

When dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, internal communication is essential for ensuring its long-term survival as part of the organization's strategic communication. Scholars have studied internal communication and employee engagement extensively and how they relate. Although internal communication is typically associated with human resources (Mishra *et al.*, 2014), scholars have discovered that internal communication can help drive engagement between the organization and its employees (Mishra *et al.*, 2014; Karanges *et al.*, 2015), implying that human resources can help improve employees' feelings and emotional attachment to the organization through the role they play in internal communication.

Although some researchers have also looked into the role of employee engagement in boosting business performance (Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Gruman & Saks, 2011; Anitha, 2014), these studies were conducted in normal, pre-pandemic circumstances before the COVID-19 epidemic, and mainly focused on the economic aspect (van Rooy *et al.*, 2011; Jaupi & Llaci, 2014). As such, and from an internal communication viewpoint, few studies examined employee involvement and its relationship to trust during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on four industries that were most affected by the epidemic. As a result, this study examines how to engage employees and build trust through increased internal communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the objective of this research is to contribute to the understanding of the expanded role of internal communication in engaging with employees and enhancing trust relationships during COVID-19.

In addition, this study advances knowledge of the significance of HROs' roles in selecting internal communication strategies to foster employee engagement and trust during times of crisis. To this end, after this introduction, the next parts focus on a review of the current literature, methods, findings, and discussion. At the end, conclusions are provided.

2. Literature review

2.1. Internal communication and crisis

Some studies, such as those conducted by Meng and Berger, have commented on the significance of internal communication in an organization (Meng & Berger, 2012; Thornton, 2018). It has a significant impact upon employees' trust, satisfaction, responsibility, and adhesion to company principles (Pološki Voki *et al.*, 2020; Mazzei, 2014; Asif & Sargeant, 2000), whilst impacting too on employee participation, job satisfaction, and encouraging employee performance (Ćorić *et al.*, 2020). With a view to strengthening employee commitment, fostering feelings of belonging inside the organization, and increasing employee understanding of organizational needs and environmental change, employee commitment is strengthened (Welch & Jackson, 2007; Mazzei, 2010). The interactive sharing of information through two-way communication, which has the potential to improve employees' performance, is what is meant by internal communication (Mazzei, 2014). As such, internal communication is also dynamic and practical in both official and casual situations (Asif & Sargeant, 2000; Ćorić *et al.*, 2020).

Internal communications can be considered a way of establishing relationships (Asif & Sargeant, 2000). Employees feel empowered, and their voices are heard when two-way symmetrical internal communication is implemented (Mazzei, 2010; Sedej & Justinek, 2013; Pološki Vokić *et al.*, 2020). Thus, through information exchange and receipt, including downward, upward, and horizontal modes of communication, internal communication helps maintain connections with internal stakeholders within companies (Ćorić *et al.*, 2020); something of a behavioral manifestation of loyalty, according to Mazzei (Mazzei, 2014).

Indeed, an organization's performance is dependent on its ability to communicate effectively with its employees (Sedej & Justinek, 2013). Furthermore, this communication promotes organizational change, a collaborative workplace, and organizational well-being (Mazzei, 2010). In order to continuously connect with employees, the organization has managed its internal communication channels using websites, intranets, blogs, e-newsletters, meetings, and printed materials (Ingelmo Palomares *et al.*, 2018). These channels have been demonstrated to be highly helpful in establishing solid ties with employees (Men, 2014; Ruck & Welch, 2012). However, with the advent of social media, these latter platforms have made it even easier for businesses to engage with their employees. Communication activities conducted via these platforms have developed into significant determinants of the effectiveness of internal communication (Ingelmo Palomares *et al.*, 2018). They create connections, foster relationships, encourage employee collaboration, and open new information and knowledge-sharing channels (Sedej & Justinek, 2013).

Social media channels are essential to an organization's success. They enable two-way communication between employees and management (Ingelmo Palomares *et al.*, 2018; Sedej & Justinek, 2013; Linke & Zerfass, 2011) and aid in distributing organizational messages to employees (Sedej & Justinek, 2013). According to a specific study, social media platforms are utilized to satisfy employees' communication needs, maintain an adequate flow of information, and provide ongoing employee feedback about personal and organizational concerns (Ingelmo Palomares *et al.*, 2018). Consequently, these platforms are excellent instruments for enhancing internal communication, especially during the COVID-19 crisis, when people are compelled to use a social distance approach. They cannot, however, be a substitute for human contact inside an organization (Sedej & Justinek, 2013).

Nevertheless, information exchange, teamwork, and innovation foster the development of active communication behaviors in internal communication (Mazzei, 2010). Through sharing this vision (Asif & Sargeant, 2000), management and employees primarily create this climate (Parent & Lovelace, 2018). This climate, i.e., one of open communication, is crucial in increasing employee engagement, favorably affecting job performance, and preparing

individuals to adapt to changing situations (Parent & Lovelace, 2018). Thus, the organization's support for employees is critical as it enables them to adjust to a changing work environment more easily (Nazir & Islam, 2017), with internal communication enabling employees too to adapt to these changes (Linke & Zerfass, 2011; Mazzei, 2010).

When confronted with a crisis, employees might be mobilized as both recipients and senders of messages. They can take proactive measures to address the situation (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011). When faced with a crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, employees may experience certain emotional and cognitive reactions and feelings, such as those of insecurity and uncertainty, chaos, stress, betrayal, fear of losing their job, status, position, or esteem, along with good social networking, even anger (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011). As a result, managers or leaders can express the organization's status to employees plainly and get their response directly. Feedback can then be addressed directly by them. Managers and employees can predict the formation of communication issues through listening to one another via face-to-face or mediated communication (Ingelmo Palomares *et al.*, 2018). This is because internal stakeholders may have diverse interests, which can lead to varying reactions (Ravazzani, 2016).

Thus, internal communication as an interactive activity of sharing information can function to foster good relationships between employees and the company through its channels. Moreover, it encourages the employees to keep engaged with the company when bearing the crisis so that organizational performance can be maintained.

2.2. Employee engagement

Because definitions of employee engagement are at times inconsistent, some studies have found that the concept of employee engagement, as becoming fundamental knowledge for doing research, is still unclear (Kular *et al.*, 2008). Employee engagement is then a dynamic notion (Tomlinson, 2010) that changes according to the study situation. Communication scholars connect the concept of employee engagement with internal communication. In order to promote engagement, they highlight the value of effective internal communication (Welch, 2011; Mishra *et al.*, 2014).

On the other side, employee engagement is crucial for the business. As a result of an organization's increased financial performance and profitability (Suan Choo *et al.*, 2013), it facilitates the organization's success (Popli & Rizvi, 2015) and sustainability (Saratun, 2016). Employee commitment and performance are greatly impacted by employee engagement (Nazir & Islam, 2017). Employees must conceptually believe that their work is worthwhile, safe, and accessible (Popli & Rizvi, 2015) in order to feel fully engaged and motivated in contributing to the success of their organization (Joo & Lee, 2017).

When a business is confronted with a catastrophe, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, it understands the critical nature of employee engagement. Engaged employees are more motivated and productive, often going above and beyond the organization's expectations. They achieve happiness at work by being more proactive, approachable, enthusiastic, invested in their work, compassionate (toward their coworkers), and persistent in the face of obstacles (Joo & Lee, 2017). Also, they are willing to work together and help and support each other (Santoso, 2022). As a result, it is critical to boost employee engagement. Employee engagement can be increased through motivational messages such as offering performance feedback, acknowledgment, and appreciation (Suan Choo *et al.*, 2013).

Certain research has demonstrated that internal communication is a significant aspect of achieving higher levels of employee engagement (Pološki Vokic *et al.*, 2020; Mishra *et al.*, 2014). Additionally, these studies demonstrate that when the organization communicates successfully with its people, they enjoy increased levels of engagement. As a result, the organization can prosper if it increases these internal communications by building employee engagement (Tomlinson, 2010), thus increasing their efficiency and inventiveness to innovate (Pološki Vokic *et al.*, 2020). To be effective, an organization must also interact with its

employees regularly and ensure they are aware of the organization's progress, accomplishments, and future plans (Tomlinson, 2010).

It can be said that employee engagement is affected by the effectiveness of internal communication implemented in the company. Well-maintained internal communication enables employees to be more engaged and motivated so that it can contribute to the innovation of business operation.

2.3. Building trust with employees

Trust is crucial throughout many facets of human existence, especially within organizations. Without trust, an organization cannot run or grow successfully, as it affects workplace performance (Brown *et al.*, 2015; Hungerford & Cleary, 2020). When an organization establishes a strong bond of trust with its employees, employee engagement and commitment can be increased. As a result, objectives can be accomplished. Additionally, trust can help employees grow their talent, inventiveness, and ability (Serrat, 2017).

Establishing trust with employees may motivate them to go forward and perform at their best since they are pleased to be a part of the firm. Employee trust may also motivate employees to think creatively and innovatively while developing the organization's products, with employees prepared to take prudent risks. Additionally, this trust may motivate employees to share knowledge, collaborate, and actively exploit one another's skills and abilities for the firm's benefit (Reina *et al.*, 2017).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, trust becomes vulnerable since the organisation's environment has suddenly changed. Therefore, building/rebuilding trust becomes critical for the organization to sustain itself, since it is the foundation for building effective relationships with the employees, that could lead to better business results (Reina *et al.*, 2017). Without trust, it cannot build that relationship (Serrat, 2017).

Scholars highlight that trust could improve employee engagement (Osborne & Hammoud, 2017; Hungerford & Cleary, 2020; Reina *et al.*, 2017). In building trust with one's employees, the organization should consistently practice transparency, communicating openly and honestly (Reina *et al.*, 2017), since it creates a more comfortable workplace where employees enjoy working and become productive (Hungerford & Cleary, 2020). Thus, leaders should be initiators in building trust, and play a central role in developing trust at all levels of the organization (Serrat, 2017).

The trust relationship, which is built and maintained through internal communication, potentially triggers the engagement and motivation of employees. By open and honest communication, the trust relationship keeps growing. Moreover, employees can enjoy their work and become productive, even when the company is facing a crisis.

3. Methods

Because it is the best technique for focusing on a certain manner of defining situations, a case study approach was used to achieve the goals of this research. The case study method is an empirical inquiry investigating a contemporary phenomenon on a single instance of a bigger event (Gerring, 2004) within its real-life context (Crowe *et al.*, 2011). Besides, the researchers deliberately wanted to cover a contextual pandemic condition faced by four businesses most affected by the COVID-19 epidemic in Indonesia. As such, this method focused and provided researchers with tools for researching complex phenomena in their contexts (Baxter & Jack, 2008), especially in the expanded role of internal communication in engaging with employees and enhancing trust during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.1. Sample

This article was based on interviews conducted between July 14 and 30, 2020, with ten Human Resource Officers (HROs) from the four businesses most affected by the COVID-19 epidemic:

travel, hotel, food and beverage, and retail (*The Jakarta Post*, 2020). Purposive sampling was used to determine their level of experience and information-richness, ensuring that they were reasonably knowledgeable, and as such, reliable for the purposes of this research.

After listing potential and purposeful participants, the researchers contacted them via WhatsApp and told them about the objective of the study. Then, the researchers verbally informed them of their rights and responsibilities in participating in this study. Once they understood their rights and responsibilities, they were asked to voluntarily consent to participate in the research.

Table 1: Informant identity.

Informant	Organizational Sectors	Working Years
Informant 1	Travel	3 years
Informant 2	Hotel	5 years
Informant 3	Hotel	3 years
Informant 4	Retail	19 years
Informant 5	Retail	13 years
Informant 6	Retail	10 years
Informant 7	Hotel	4 years
Informant 8	Food and Beverage	18 months
Informant 9	Travel	19 months
Informant 10	Hotel	2 years

Source: Own elaboration (interview, 2020).

3.2. Data collection

The data for this study was gathered using a semi-structured interview. The open-ended questions provided wide latitude for sequencing and elicited a variety of replies from the informants (Marshall *et al.*, 2015). The interview guide is based on the concepts of internal communication, employee engagement, and trust relationships to stay on the objective track (Table 2). Before conducting the actual interview, researchers informed the study's participants of its purpose. Then, researchers asked permission from the participants to record the interview and to use their data. However, that the participants' identities were to be kept confidential to ensure respect for their privacy.

Table 2: Matrix of Interview Guide.

Interview Guide	Sources
Importance of internal communication	Asif & Sargeant, 2000; Ćorić <i>et al.</i> , 2020
Internal communication and social media channels	Ingelmo Palomares <i>et al.</i> , 2018; Sedej & Justinek, 2013; Linke & Zeffass, 2011
Internal communication and crisis	Frandsen & Johansen, 2011
Internal communication and employee engagement	Welch, 2011; Mishra <i>et al.</i> , 2014; Popli & Rizvi, 2015; Pološki Vokic <i>et al.</i> , 2020
Employee engagement during a crisis	Joo & Lee, 2017
Establishing trust	Reina <i>et al.</i> , 2017
Trust, employee engagement, and internal communication	Osborne & Hammoud, 2017; Hungerford & Cleary, 2020; Reina <i>et al.</i> , 2017; Hungerford & Cleary, 2020
Leaders in building trust	Serrat, 2017

Source: Own elaboration (interview, 2020).

Interviews began with a social talk to establish a casual atmosphere. It was then followed by primary questions designed to elicit narrative responses from informants about their experiences and perceptions of internal communication and employee engagement in the organizations for which they worked during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interview lasted between 24 and 57 minutes per source and was done through WhatsApp calls and Google Meet.

3.3. Data analysis

The researchers transcribed the interview recording after data collection. Interviews were then carefully listened to while the transcripts were examined to ensure correctness and comprehension. The data coding approach produced 45 initial codes, all of which were relevant to the research problem. Three themes were created from these codes, and each theme was given a textual description from the transcription. Then an inductive analysis was performed.

4. Findings

4.1. The internal communication during the COVID-19 pandemic

The role of internal communication, during the COVID-19 pandemic, has been expanded, as evidenced by HROs' responses. It helped strengthen the(ir) organization's ties with its employees and fostered employee connectedness and human solidarity. HROs pay attention to the situation of employees, particularly if the owner mandates it.

Our owner told me "Handle this café! Never close it! Please be mindful to employees! Don't let them not get an income, because they have a family." That's why I take care of them (Informant 8, food and beverage industry).

The fact that internal communication positively impacts promoting equality during the COVID-19 epidemic is also noteworthy. The HROs listen to and respond to the issues among both employees and managers. The managers then promise to be inclusive, fair, and equitable to all employees, regardless of their degree of responsibility. This treatment can immediately affect employees' hearts and works to improve their family bonds, as they feel linked in the face of this pandemic.

We have a WhatsApp group consisting of me and all employees at this café (Informant 8, food and beverage industry).

While the COVID-19 pandemic offers challenges for a business in terms of adapting to the scenario, internal communication functions to instill hopeful values in employees in order for them to remain optimistic throughout times of emotional distress. On the other hand, optimism is critical in assisting employees in navigating this pandemic and encouraging their spirit to continue performing at a high(er) level. Additionally, internal communication assists employees in reinforcing their motives for working. According to HROs, employees earn money to meet their daily necessities and develop and foster solid relationships with their coworkers. Thus, corporate communication that fosters internal networking is critical for employee productivity and intimacy, even more so during the current pandemic.

We have weekly calls once a week. The CEO gives an update on his business, where we are going to, and what we can do. More or less, it can provide motivation to work better. Our CEO never forbids employees from wanting to work from home. We don't have to work eight hours as usual. Most importantly, the jobs can be done well (Informant 9, travel industry).

While internal communication serves various purposes, it is significant for keeping current information on COVID-19 up to date. The HROs contended that employees require a fundamental grasp of the COVID-19 virus, how it would spread, how to avoid or reduce transmission, and the number of affected individuals and red zone locations. Additionally, internal communication can assist HROs in addressing employees' anxieties and concerns

around the COVID-19 pandemic. HROs stated that they, or the organization's executives, speak with urgency, candor, and empathy to alleviate these feelings. These methods may assist them in empathizing with the employees' feelings. As a result, they may devote their whole focus to ensuring that employees feel comfortable and safe at work during this uncertain period by considering their health and welfare, providing health protection equipment and aids, and upholding employees' rights.

HROs communicate with employees in two ways during the COVID-19 pandemic: face-to-face and through mediated communication. According to health regulations, they performed face-to-face communication meetings, through the inclusion of wearing a mask, restricting the number of participants, and adopting social distancing. These gatherings aimed to solicit direct feedback from employees and invigorate their spirits in the face of the crisis by motivating and praying with them. On the other hand, executives or HROs used face-to-face communication to solicit comments from employees that may be considered when making choices and understanding better the employees' concerns and conditions during the COVID-19 crisis. They contended that a more personal approach could help alleviate employee concerns and foster trust. A financial issue, for example, becomes a major source of stress for employees. As a result, organizations approach the issue delicately, appreciating the importance of resolving the issue through aids. As such, executives can engage employees directly and physically meet and speak with them to assure their safety.

Our company gives full attention to all employees during this pandemic. For example, by aiding in the form of fulfilling daily basic necessities for employees and not laying off employees so that they can continue to earn income and not lose their jobs (Informant 3, hotel industry).

The HROs who can be targeted for this research used both classic and new media in their mediated. In the face of COVID-19, traditional media such as a notice board and memos are still utilized to transmit information about the organization. Meanwhile, digital media is critical for rapidly distributing information about the pandemic, health protocols, and the organization's response to COVID-19. Employees can contribute via digital media by reacting to or providing feedback on communications.

WhatsApp, email, Telegram, Instagram, Facebook, Zoom, and Google Meet evolve into enterprise-focused digital platforms. Due to the COVID-19 crisis, these digital networks, mainly WhatsApp and Telegram, assist employees in remaining linked. These digital tools make it simple to interact and collaborate with coworkers in the same department or across departments. Organizations can have many WhatsApp or Telegram groups by segmenting them according to departments or levels, to help manage workflow better. As a result, leaders ensure that all employees receive communications, and employees can directly respond to messages or assist in resolving problems.

[...] The WA group, for sure, contains all employees, and each individual ensures (person) at two levels below them must check the information. The director must make sure that the senior managers must get informed. Seniors must also ensure a certain level of information. So, we make that communication tiered (Informant 4, retail industry).

HROs stated that for organizations with thousands of employees spread across the country, Instagram might efficiently provide employees with the information they need in this uncertain moment, particularly for organizations with a high proportion of millennial employees. Instagram fosters collaboration among employees from various departments. Surprisingly, Zoom and Google Meet have become the organization's new favorite platforms since the onset of the pandemic. Due to the fact that these platforms provide a virtual meeting capability, employees can attempt to retain some semblance of business as normal. As a result, leaders must provide support to teams via online meetings. Additionally, employees embraced online meetings, which have been shown to be more effective than in-person meetings.

4.2. *Employee engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic*

Employee engagement is critical in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, and plays a crucial role in preventing the spread of the disease. To preserve employee engagement throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, HROs affirmed that they empowered employees, encouraged them to evaluate their peers, and placed complete trust in employees, which benefited the organization's employee development. Additionally, the organization gives training to staff during this time to help them build the skills and knowledge necessary to adapt to the new circumstances. On the other hand, this organization's support is critical for increasing employee dedication to the organization's mission.

Despite the COVID-19 crisis, employee feedback is critical in fostering employee engagement. As a result, HROs urged that employees objectively evaluate their coworkers' performance. This evaluation attempts to boost employee performance. By reacting to employee feedback, HROs are willing to listen to them to comprehend their conditions and issues. Additionally, to engage employees amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, HROs organized events such as communal prayer and helped distribute aid to communities, thus emphasizing their appreciation.

We continue to do prayer together so that this crisis is quickly over, keep doing social services in the form of non-cash food assistance to our environment, especially for people who cannot. [...]. Besides sharing with others, we want to cultivate gratitude to our employees that in this time of the pandemic, [...], *alhamdulillah* can we give God sustenance (Informant 1, travel industry).

HROs asserted that employees worked more during the COVID-19 pandemic, despite some working remotely. They have taken on their own initiatives to complete their tasks and maintain performance, having recognized that these measures are critical for the business's survival. On the other hand, this arrangement encourages the organization to assume that its employees responded admirably in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, even though HROs cannot directly monitor what employees do. Additionally, this situation may motivate HROs to sustain employee engagement by providing particular information and clear instructions on how to handle their tasks and motivation. Furthermore, the organization that requires employees to work in the office, provides proper Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) such as masks, gloves, and face shields to safeguard them. Temperature checks on personnel prior to entering the office are also necessary for safety reasons.

Additionally, HROs stated that employees become an integral component since they have potential economic value. They devote their efforts to running the organization's business under pandemic conditions. On the other hand, employee support becomes critical too to an organization's survival. Supporting one another, not just inside departments but also across, emerges from confronting the pandemic, which becomes a strength for the organization. In addition, all HROs acknowledged that employees are proactive and willing to lend assistance to one another. Selfishness has been set aside, as their mission is to preserve their organization's operationalization. They collaborate to assist one another, which develops into a robust technique to struggle in this, or across similar situations. Thus, this pandemic benefits employees by encouraging them to band together, enhance the work environment, and develop a sense of entitlement.

In this pandemic, employee involvement is very important. Proactive employees will be very helpful to the company in dealing with the pandemic [...]. Employees who intervene actively and independently during this pandemic will greatly help the company survive. [...] All teams from all departments with compact and spirit help each other to the sustainability of the company during this pandemic both in terms of service and sales and marketing (Informant 3, hotel industry).

According to HROs, the spread of COVID-19 has helped employees feel more connected to their workplace(s). They make personal sacrifices to ensure the organizations' continued success/existence and actively contribute to its ability to conduct business. Thus, inspiring employees during the COVID-19 crisis is critical for increasing work performance, as emotional and economic strain can sap an employee's spirit. Through motivation provided by owners or HROs, employees demonstrate gratitude and admiration for the organization, as they continue to have employment opportunities.

Engaging employees during COVID-19 can also help reinforce employee commitment, as evidenced by job satisfaction. The HROs confirmed that this environment fosters employees' pride and a sense of obligation to help one another. Additionally, they feel energized and inspired when they express their gratitude for their work's additional worth. By maintaining tight relationships among employees during a pandemic strengthens their resolve to deal with the crisis.

4.3. Building trust during the COVID-19 pandemic

Based on the responses of our 10 HROs, there are five ways in building trust relationships with employees during the COVID-19 pandemic: being honest, motivating employees, boosting hope, conducting charity, and being equitable (fair) to all employees. The HROs admitted that honesty is the foundation of building trusting relationships with the employees, particularly in this COVID-19 pandemic, where employees need definitive answers. As such, an organization should be transparent by clearly communicating its condition affected by the pandemic, such as its financial condition, since vague communications work to decrease employee trust. In addition, to strengthen open communication, leaders must be transparent in communicating updated organizational information, including their future plans in the face of the COVID-19 crisis.

Leaders communicate openly and transparently, what is happening in the organization, and also what is our plan in responding to this pandemic [...] To handle it, we maintain a transparent and straightforward communication flow. Even when there is a new policy, we continue to communicate it by hoping that will be well-received (by employees) (Informant 3, hotel industry).

We inform the condition of the organization to employees in a transparent manner, starting from the losses suffered by the organization to what future steps management will take if the pandemic is continuing (Informant 2, hotel industry).

When the organization is honest with its employees, by transparently communicating its conditions and plans to recover during (and after) the pandemic, it could encourage the employees' willingness to support the organization to sustain its business actively. The HROs witnessed that the employees were willing to help other employees from other departments across the course of the crisis. This way could also be a working collaboration strengthening their connection. Indeed, the organization's honesty makes the employees feel empathy for their second home to earn money and build networks. Therefore, they show their considerable efforts to support its sustainability.

Employee participation during this pandemic will greatly help the organization to keep surviving [...] All teams from all departments are united and enthusiastic about helping each other for the sustainability of the organization during this pandemic, both in terms of service and sales and marketing (Informant 3, hotel industry).

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought stress and uncertain times. Therefore, as the HROs shared, the role of leaders to ensure the employees' concerns is crucial since it helps improve their focus and ability to complete their work. In doing so, leaders should keep them motivated by involving themselves in their activities, having personal communication with them, and encouraging them to be grateful since they still have a job.

We have one program during the pandemic, namely *Manajemen Menyapa* (Greeting from Management). All directors were involved, came to the shop, then chatted while bringing *takjil* (sweet food eaten upon breaking the fast). If it's at the branch level, yes, the branch headers and human development departments do that (Informant 4, retail industry).

In facing the crisis of COVID-19, the HROs argued that boosting hope becomes vital, since it can keep the(ir) employees engaged. Communicating 'hope' during the COVID-19 pandemic works to encourage optimism, correlating with positive outcomes, since the employees believe that post-COVID-19 will be better. On the other hand, boosting the hope of one's employees makes the employees themselves feel enthusiastic about keeping the quality of the organization's product high, even though the situation is uncertain.

It's just that from the owner's point of view, if the hotel is closed, it means that we have no hope to sustain the business. But, if the hotel opens, we still have hope to sustain the business (Informant 10, hotel industry).

Although the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affects the economy, the HROs believed that doing charity programs could strengthen employee trust. This method could teach employees that in this challenging situation, they have to be grateful by giving aid to others, either to other employees, or communities such as people staying nearby the organization, pedicab drivers, for example, or online motorbike taxi drivers.

We try to be employees' friends and we share what we feel and have to others (Informant 7, hotel industry).

We are open. If there are employees who do not have anything (lack financial resources), we, in the management, will discuss it and collect social funds. Then we distribute to employees in the form of basic foodstuffs (Informant 2, hotel industry).

Fairness could promote employee trust. It can also enhance feelings of safety and nature for employee engagement. Lack of fairness could drive up fear among employees. Therefore, the HROs confirmed that all employees from different departments should be fairly treated. All members of the organization should equally access new policies to diminish feelings of fear.

We continue to strive fairly to treat all employees, from staff to manager levels, all employees receive the same treatment, from policies related to employee benefits to policies requiring changes in working hours (Informant 3, hotel industry).

5. Discussion

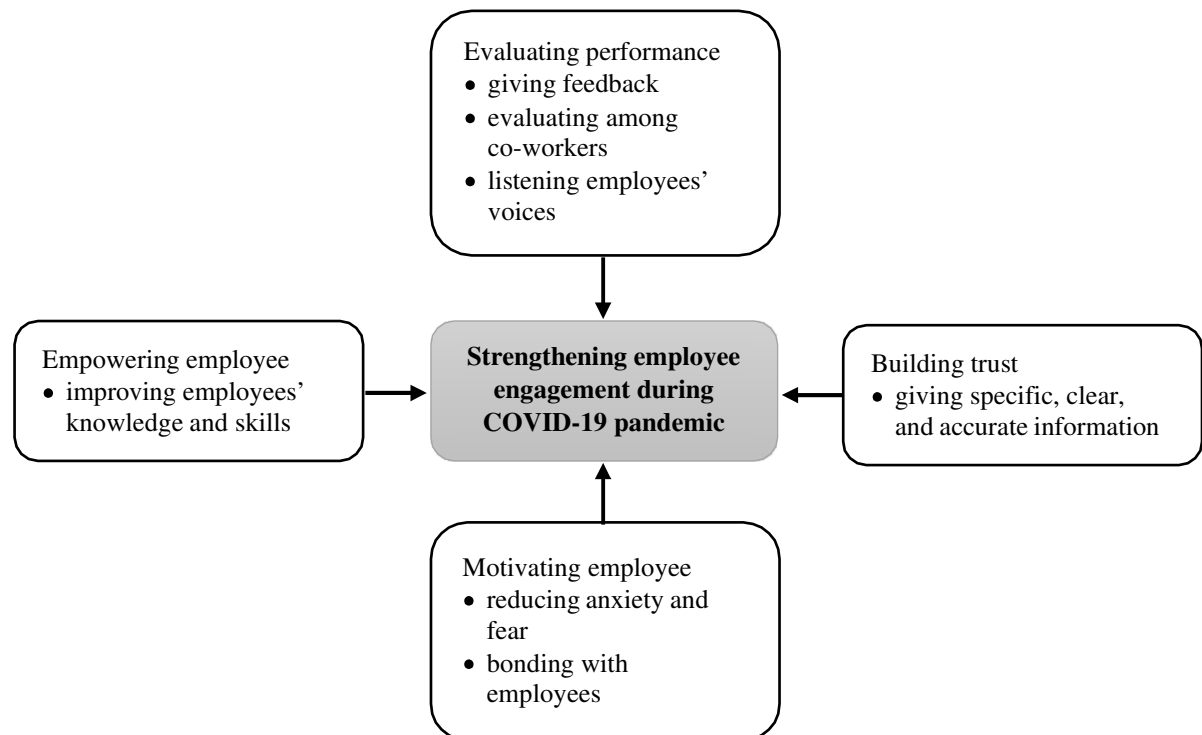
Employee engagement is crucial to an organization's success, particularly in the face of crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, since it helps in an organization's survival through employees' support and efforts to sustain the organization. Therefore, based on the HROs' responses, four approaches are made to strengthen employee engagement during this pandemic: empowering employees, evaluating performance, building trust, and motivating employees (Figure 1). Empowering employees has been done through employee training. It aims to enhance employees' knowledge and skills. The HROs perceived empowering employees during the pandemic as critical, since it is they who must adjust to these new ways of working. The organization's goals can be achieved by empowering employees, since employee development is key to the successful maintenance of their work and wellbeing (Mohan & Gomathi, 2014). Since COVID-19 has dramatically changed the way employees work, improving their knowledge and skills must be seen as an organization's (crucial) investment. This investment generates employees' commitment, job satisfaction and pride, even though they did not get full payment as salaries 'dipped,' particularly in the early days of the pandemic.

When working from their homes during the pandemic, employee performance evaluations –giving employees feedback, evaluating among co-workers, and listening to

employees' voices– help an organization maintain continuity of business operation. Goler *et al.* (2016) argued that performance evaluations could mitigate problems and enhance employees' performance. During the COVID-19 pandemic, HROs should ensure that performance evaluations become a fundamental consideration to improve employees' performance despite employees being in a virtual working environment. Also, it is worthy to note, that the willingness of the HROs to listen to employees' voices matters in boosting their spirits in the workplace and preventing potential problems.

On the other hand, the responses of the HROs indicate that the organization cares for employees in order to build and sustain trust during the pandemic. Brown *et al.* (2015) opined that trust generates employees' performance. Although the HROs cannot directly supervise employees, since most of them work from home in the early pandemic, they should fully trust employees in completing their work. In building trust, the HROs give specific, clear, and accurate information, disseminated through the most appropriate channels, to impress upon the employees' the importance of working during and post-pandemic. Likewise, some scholars cited that motivation could generate employees' productivity and commitment (Achim *et al.*, 2013; Hanaysha & Majid, 2018). In such a response, by engaging with employees during the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders motivate employees whilst dealing too with the frustration and stress in adjusting to an uncertain situation. This motivation could also reduce employees' anxiety and fear, and help them focus on their job. Therefore, HROs communicate with urgency, transparency, and, above all else, empathy. These ways help employees fully understand the situation faced by their organization and encourage them to give their best performance to support their organization's sustainability. Also, the motivation of leaders promotes employees' gratitude as they retain job security.

Figure 1: Strengthening employee engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Source: Own elaboration (interview, 2020).

In strengthening employee engagement, due to the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, the responses of the HROs uncovered that leaders and employees are willing to build an intimate

bond in the face of this crisis by listening to and responding to each other to keep the business of the organization surviving. Osborne and Hammoud (2017) shared that the bond between leaders and employees is critical to engaging with employees and impacting organizational profitability. Therefore, in bonding with employees, leaders motivate employees by clearly directing them to complete their work, boosting their spirit to give their best performance, and building teamwork during the pandemic. Moreover, to strengthen the bond, leaders commit to being inclusive, fair, and equitable to all employees at all levels. These treatments can personally touch employees' hearts and directly strengthen their bonding as 'a family,' as they come to feel connected in the face of this pandemic.

In addition, based on the responses of the HROs, leaders must focus on building trust with employees. Five ways have been used to build trust relationships with employees: being honest, motivating employees, boosting hope, conducting charity, and being fair to all employees. Employees trusting the organization will be more motivated to work (Farahbod *et al.*, 2013). These findings showed that motivated employees are willing to do anything to keep the organization surviving. Therefore, employees support each other in the same department and cross-department to improve the work environment.

The findings highlighted that internal communication is critical during the COVID-19 pandemic in building employee engagement and trust. Internal communication functions to internalize optimistic values to employees to stay positive during emotional disruption. On the other hand, internal communication also functions to update current information on COVID-19 needed by employees, since they must consider it to prevent themselves from falling ill or effecting organizational sustainability. Moreover, one essential contribution of this study is highlighting HROs' importance of mediated communication as the central internal communication with employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, face-to-face communication is used to conduct meetings by strictly following the health protocols –wearing a mask, limiting the number of participants, and practicing social distancing. These meetings aim to directly get feedback from employees and to boost their spirit in the face of the crisis by motivating them and praying together, along with personally asking for their suggestions (that could be considerations) in making decisions and gaining a better understanding of what problems and circumstances are faced by employees during the COVID crisis.

As the central internal communication during the COVID-19 pandemic, mediated communication through digital technologies provides easy ways to communicate and coordinate with other employees, either in the same department or cross-departmentally. Using digital platforms, leaders facilitate groups, such as a WhatsApp group, to easily disseminate essential and updated information and keep connected during the pandemic. Zoom and Google Meet, on the other hand, become new media darlings since they can maintain some semblance of business as usual, as these platforms provide a virtual meeting feature conducive to employers' needs. Therefore, it is pivotal for leaders to support teams through online meetings when face-to-face meetings cannot be held due to this challenging situation.

On the other hand, the role of mediated internal communication has been extended. It not only strengthens the relationships between organization and employee, but also promotes connectedness between employees, that is, human solidarity –paramount to responding to the impact of this pandemic. Verčič and Špoljarić (2020) are of the view that the ways in which internal communication have changed due to the dramatic development of technologies, this extended role of mediated (internal) communication drives the flexibility of organizational communication as a whole. However, it should be stressed, the ethical and unethical aspects of internal communication through digital platforms should be further discussed, if these platforms are to remain in wide use across an organization. All employees could directly communicate with the leaders, particularly those connecting in the same social media groups.

Allen *et al.* (2013) suggested that HROs work with leaders to help them strengthen relationships with employees in order to sustain the organization. The HROs in this study play a crucial role in building trust and engagement with employees through internal communication. In understanding employees, they use a personal approach to listen to and feel what employees feel. As such, employees feel secure and safe working during the pandemic.

This study contributes too to our understanding of how HROs adopt various digital media to maintain employee trust and engagement. They perceived that such digital platforms bring benefits to keep connected with employees and to ensure that employees can optimally perform their roles in the business. Indeed, some scholars (see Men, 2014) argue that face-to-face communication is positively associated with employee satisfaction. This channel might be more credible from an employees' perspective. However, this may change, even if gradually, since most employees are not currently allowed to work at the office due to public restrictions and health safety. Mediated communication becomes an alternative to effectively communicate with employees, mainly through social media that provide virtual meeting features such as Zoom and Google Meet. Therefore, when employees start working at the office once more, these platforms will enrich channels in communicating with employees. Leaders and employees will not always use face-to-face communication in disseminating information, solving problems, and planning goals. A lot of consideration goes into the fastest, easiest, and most effective method (Mishra *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, leaders and employees will always work to find the most appropriate method(s) to communicate. Printed messages may not always be favorable since face-to-face communication has been gradually changed into mediated communication. However, HROs should still consider face-to-face communication to personally touch employees' hearts and help build a bond with the organization.

6. Conclusion

Efforts to build and maintain employee engagement and trust through internal communication during the COVID-19 pandemic are critical to the organization's survival. Employee engagement is done through four approaches: empowering employees, evaluating performance, building trust, and motivating employees. Meanwhile, five ways have been used in building trust: being honest, motivating employees, boosting hope, conducting charity, and being fair to all employees irrespective of role or department. Furthermore, HROs play an essential role in internal communications to make employees more engaged and trusted in the organization.

As such, engagement and trust encourage and motivate employees to enhance their performance, even though in times of crises, such as the COVID pandemic, makes them feel stressed and anxious. Therefore, building a bond with employees in the face of COVID-19 is essential to keeping them connected through mediated communication. Mediated internal communication then becomes a center for maintaining employee engagement and trust. The role of mediated internal communication has been extended to strengthen the relationships between the organization and its employees and among employees themselves. It promotes too an interconnectedness among all employees, whilst strengthening the bonds of human solidarity and equality. Whilst it is interesting to note that face-to-face and mediated communication will still be critical and interchangeably used by leaders and employees, it will be a continual process of evaluation to find the most appropriate and favorable method.

7. Limitation and studies going forward

This study was limited to data from four businesses that were most affected by the COVID-19 epidemic in Indonesia; therefore, the results cannot be generalized. However, the findings emphasize the relevant discussion on theories and practices of internal communication, employee engagement, and trust relationship. Also, in selecting the informants, this study

only accommodates the perspectives of HROs and does not consider their working experiences, since no organization, to date, has ever experienced bearing the pressures of such a pandemic. Nevertheless, the findings of this study can be an alert, or, 'heads-up,' to the important role of HROs in managing internal communication so that employee engagement along with trust relationships can be achieved in order to sustain a business during any crises, the COVID-19 pandemic included. Moreover, this research can be developed further in a specific context considering the organizational culture, such as value and behavioral aspects, that potentially affect the way to implement the most effective internal communication so that it enables trust relationship and employee engagement.

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