

STRATEGIC INTERNAL COMMUNICATION AND GENERATIONAL CHANGE: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR SEGMENTATION AND CUSTOMIZATION BY GENERATION. A STUDY OF SWISS COMMUNICATION MANAGERS

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ABSTRACT

Effective strategic internal communication is instrumental for meaningful relationships and productive work climates within organizations and, therefore, for overall organizational success. Currently, demographic shifts, the dramatically changing work environments because of pandemics and technology, and longer working lives challenge internal communication experts to assess the implications of generational differences for respective workforce target audiences. Effectively addressing the target audiences requires a focus on and understanding of their needs and behaviours. Surprisingly, little research has been conducted on the segmentation criteria of internal stakeholders, and even less on the implications of different generations for internal communication management. This study is novel as it discusses the value and practicality of different generations as a segmentation criterion for effective internal communication from the perspective of internal communication professionals. A multi-method qualitative research approach was employed,

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including 49 unstructured interviews, eight focus groups and 13 semi-structured interviews with internal communication professionals in Swiss companies on a strategic and operational level. The results show, first, that the segmentation of the internal audiences is dominated by traditional one-dimensional top-down stakeholder-oriented approaches. Second, while an awareness of the importance of generations is high and the need for multi-dimensional segmentation is evident, formal segmentation by generation is rarely implemented and remains controversial. Third, internal communication can foster more inclusive and productive workplaces by better considering the needs and preferences of the different internal segments and by simultaneously standardizing and customizing communication. The study also discusses inherent limitations and suggests avenues for future research.

Keywords: Internal communication; strategic communication; generational change; communication managers; segmentation; customization

INTRODUCTION

Effective internal communication is one of the most pivotal ways to reach and influence the workforce (Ruck and Welch, 2012). Internal communication contributes to employee commitment (De Ridder, 2004), a sense of belonging and identification with shared values and beliefs (Cheney, 1983), and a greater awareness of change and crisis and how they impact the organization (Welch and Jackson, 2007). Furthermore, internal communication is instrumental for focusing on the ‘human element’ by creating meaningful employer–employee relations, for a healthy and productive work climate and for overall organizational success (Adlmaier-Herbst, 2011; Anderson and West, 1998; Jäggi and Egli, 2007; Ruck and Welch, 2012; Smidts et al., 2001). Despite the importance of internal communication, there are still considerable gaps in the academic literature (Welch and Jackson, 2007). First, there is no widely accepted definition of the term – with various terms in use such as employee relations, internal relations, internal public relations and staff communication. Second, an interdisciplinary approach is necessary to conceptualize internal communication by considering public relations, organizational communication, marketing and strategic management. Third, communication to external audiences has dominated the research agenda (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011). In the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, new research points out the key role of strategic internal communication in achieving compliance with safety measures, encouraging engagement, and maintaining long-term relationships (Lee, 2022).

In the last three decades, an integrated, interdisciplinary and holistic approach called ‘strategic communication’ (Falkheimer and Heide, 2018) has been evolving. According to Zerfass et al. (2018, p. 493), strategic communication ‘encompasses all communication that is substantial for the survival and sustained success of an entity. Specifically, strategic communication is the purposeful use of communication to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals’. The concept builds on the stakeholder management theory, considering the

organization and its stakeholders as senders and receivers of information as well as participants in relationships.

To engage the stakeholders in interactions, understanding their characteristics and needs is necessary. Forman and Argenti (2005) point to existing gaps in the literature regarding the mandate and scope of internal communication. They criticize its focus on employees as one undifferentiated group (see also L'Etang, 2005) and on one-directional and one-dimensional communication that does not consider their needs. Segmenting internal stakeholders can be implemented by using their 'stake' and job roles, but it is still underdeveloped compared to the long segmentation criteria catalogues used in marketing (Bruhn et al., 2016; Kotler et al., 2012). This chapter explores the different segmentation criteria used by communication professionals to better understand strategic internal communication from an internal stakeholder perspective.

From a socio-economic perspective, a demographic change has been experienced in most developed countries through an ageing population with an accompanying shift in generations (Klaffke, 2014). While this socio-economic shift is not a new phenomenon (Klaffke, 2014), the parameters of employing and managing different generations, as well as the emergence of new digital communication tools, call into question how companies should engage internal stakeholders.

In recent years, the need for an intergenerational dialogue has received new attention with a general change in perceptions of inclusivity and the promotion of diverse teams regarding gender, race, sexual orientation and age (Dobusch, 2015) as well as the ethical responsibility of a company regarding promotion of inclusivity and diversity (Rabl et al., 2020). Several laws have been passed in different countries to protect employees from age discrimination, for example, the Age Discrimination of Employment Act (1967) in the United States and the 'Gleichbehandlungsgesetz' in Germany (Voss et al., 2018). These legal foundations influence the diversity management of a company or institution (e.g. Ahmed, 2012), which tries to use the diversity of the employees both to increase effectiveness (Rump and Schiedhelm, 2017) or to improve the equal treatment and well-being of employees (Celikdemir and Katrinli, 2020).

Therefore, more inclusive and finely tuned internal communication is needed to stimulate dialogue and create equal opportunities for receiving and understanding information, especially in uncertain times of change and crisis. Several researchers discuss the necessity of a polyphonic communication approach that allows for the unity of strategic goals and strong company culture on the one side and consideration of employee diversity on the other (Simonsson, 2021; Schneider and Zerfass, 2018). Although a consensus exists on the importance of generation-aware management and communication, there has been little research on its actual consideration and implementation in communication practice.

This chapter aims to explore the segmentation of internal stakeholders and the role of generations in the strategic internal communication practices in the context of Swiss companies. The study is unique since it discusses the value and practicality of using generations as a new segmentation criterion for effective

communication with internal audiences. Accordingly, three research questions have been formulated:

RQ1. How do organizations segment their internal stakeholders?

RQ2. What is the role of generation-specific segmentation, and what are the opportunities and challenges of this segmentation?

RQ3. What implications do different generations have for the management of strategic internal communication?

The chapter begins with an overview of the existing literature on internal communication, segmentation criteria of internal stakeholders, generations, and intergenerational and intercultural communication. Next, a qualitative multi-method approach combines unstructured and semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Lastly, the findings are presented, and the theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

GENERATION-SPECIFIC SEGMENTATION IN STRATEGIC INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

The following literature overview is intended to illustrate the connection between strategic internal communication and generation-specific segmentation.

Strategic Internal Communication: Definitions and Key Elements

The nature of internal communication has been investigated in different disciplines, resulting in various definitions. From the perspective of public relations theory, internal communication is an independent element of corporate communication dealing with internal stakeholders (Zerfass, 2014). According to organizational communication, internal communication includes all formal and informal communication processes between members of an organization influenced by that organization (Stohl, 1995). A stakeholder approach defines it as a management of interactions between the stakeholders (Scholes, 1997), and Welch and Jackson (2007, p. 183) formulate the term further ‘as the strategic management of interactions and relationships between stakeholders at all levels of the organization’. For this study, Zerfass’ (2018) definition of strategic communication is adapted as the purposeful use of communication to engage the internal stakeholders in conversations to achieve the organizational goals and strategy and build relationships at all levels within the organization.

An internal communication programme is characterized by goals, target groups, content and messaging, communication channels, coordination and direction-setting (Björck and Barthelmess, 2019). These key elements are presented in Fig. 1. The starting point is communication goals, which are influenced by the formal corporate identity, language and organizational culture on one side and the mission, vision and strategy on the other side. Common internal communication goals include creating an understanding for organizational purpose and strategy, increasing identification with them, promoting a positive sense of belonging, contributing to relationships of trust to foster engagement and

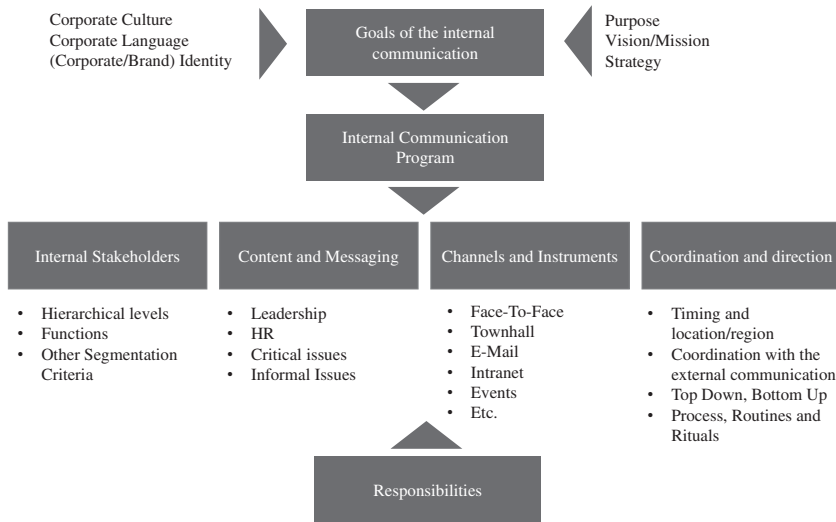


Fig. 1. Key Elements of an Internal Communication Programme. Source: Adapted from Björck and Barthelmeß (2019).

loyalty, and strengthening and shaping organizational culture (Jäggi and Egli, 2007; Welch and Jackson, 2007).

The internal communication programme is governed by the principles of consistency, adaptation and flexibility according to the target group of the communication (for more details, see the Excellence Theory by Grunig, 1992). The content must be distributed consistently and with the correct timing via the channels to display a coherent image and avoid interpretation errors on the part of the recipient (Falkheimer and Heide, 2018). To reach the target audience effectively and avoid potential discrimination, the sender must consider accessibility and the advantages of different communication channels. The choice of channels is influenced by the timing and location, external communication campaigns, planned direction-setting and the organization’s existing processes, routines and rituals (Björck and Barthelmeß, 2019; Welch and Jackson, 2007). Ultimately, choosing the optimal means of communication is a trade-off between factors such as time and available resources, and accomplishing the communication goals.

Segmentation of Internal Stakeholders

The main principle of effective communication is the audience orientation (Falkheimer and Heide, 2018; Grunig, 1992). The receivers of the internal communication are operationalized in different disciplines with terms such as target

groups or audiences, stakeholder or interest groups, or the public (Avenarius, 2008; Choo, 2009).

Welch and Jackson (2007) state that the different internal stakeholder groups need to be identified for internal communication to become the strategic management of relationships within an organization. Next, target audiences should be thoroughly analyzed to choose the strategically important ones, with the goal being ‘to predict the differential responses most important to public relations professionals’ (Grunig 1997, p. 8). The process of identifying groups with similar characteristics is known as segmentation (Tynan and Drayton, 1987). Table 1 summarizes the different segmentation criteria for the internal target groups according to their originating discipline – stakeholder management (Cheney and Christensen, 2001; Freeman, 2010; Welch and Jackson, 2007), situational theory of publics (Grunig and Hunt, 1984; Grunig and Repper, 1992; Grunig, 1997) and marketing management (Avenarius, 2008; Dolnicar et al., 2018; Kotler et al., 2012; Mast, 2010).

Generation-Specific Segmentation

Current studies are making a case for the importance of generation effects on internal communication and understanding the differing attitudes and actions of various age groups in a company (Klaffke, 2014). There are different definitions of the term ‘generation’, which have changed over time. For Mannheim (1928), a generation is not a group in the sociological sense, but rather a coexistence of individuals who live at the same time and in the same social space due to the temporal aspect (birth) and participate in the same historical and social events. This contrasts with a genealogical concept of a generation that is defined in terms of family descent and family membership (Höpflinger, 1999). Similar to Mannheim (1928), Ryder (1965) describes persons born in a similar time period as a ‘cohort’, which he defines as ‘aggregate of individuals (within some population definition) who experienced the same event within the same time interval’ (Ryder, 1965, p. 845). A more recent definition sees a generation as ‘an identifiable group (cohorts) that shares birth years, age, location, and significant life events at critical developmental stages’ (Kupperschmidt, 2000, p. 66). If not only the year of birth is considered in the context of generational affiliation but also the shared experience of historical-social constellations, statements about generations always depend on the respective context (Klaffke, 2014). Accordingly, generations are understood as ‘dynamic constructs’ (Klaffke, 2014, p. 10) that serve as a complexity-reducing categorization scheme. In that sense and considering the different segmentation criteria for internal stakeholders mentioned earlier, generations unite demographic, socio-demographic, psychographic, behavioural and geographical elements.

The differences between various generations have already been examined in various contexts – from the fundamental question of whether generations can be delineated at all (Albert et al., 2019; Mannheim, 1928; Schröder, 2018, 2019) to

Table 1. Theoretical Analysis and Synthesis of Segmentation Criteria.

Term (Originating Discipline)	Characteristics and Theoretical Explanation	Resulting Segmentation Criteria
Internal stakeholders (stakeholder management)	<p>Cheney and Christensen (2001) define segmentation according to the organizational levels such as strategic management, day-to-day management, team and project management. For internal communication this means defining target groups such as in the following (Welch and Jackson, 2007, 184):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All employees • Strategic management (top management or strategic managers – CEO, senior management teams, C-level functions) • Day-to-day management: Middle management (directors, heads of department, division leaders) • Work teams (departments, divisions, functional or regional teams) • Project teams. <p>Another segmentation approach is connected to the various stakeholder mapping models. The most common one classifies the target audiences by their influence and interest and classifies recommended communication effort. The interest level indicates the engagement level and the resulting information demand (Cornelissen, 2014):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High interest and influence: management and engagement. • Low interest and influence: monitor and keep informed. • High influence and low interest: keep satisfied by acknowledging opinions and engagement. • High interest and low influence: two-way communication to identify interests. 	Organizational level; Hierarchy/Stakes; Job roles; Departments/Functions; Interest/Power.
Internal publics (situational public relations theory)	<p>Grunig (1997) suggests a segmentation according to the sensitivity of reaction to issues and topics in the public discourse:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “All-issue-publics” react actively to all topics and issues. • “Apathetic publics” do not react to any of the topics/issues. • “Single issues publics” react actively only to one or few topics/issues that are of interest for the general society. • “Hot issues” publics react actively to only one topic/issue, that is discussed in the society and media outlets. 	Issue/Topic sensitivity and involvement.
Target audiences/target groups (marketing)	<p>In the marketing literature four main categories of segmentation criteria are discussed: Geographic, demographic and socio-demographic, psychographic and</p>	Work location; Age; Gender; Tenure/Education;

Table 1. (Continued)

Term (Originating Discipline)	Characteristics and Theoretical Explanation	Resulting Segmentation Criteria
	behavioural (Kotler et al., 2012). Geographic information is seen as the original segmentation criterion (Tynan and Drayton, 1987), that recognizes work location as an important criterion. Basic employee demographic and socio-demographic variables include age, gender, tenure, education and income levels (Agyeman and Ponniah, 2014, p. 16). Psychographic criteria would group employees according their beliefs, interests, preferences, aspirations or benefits sought (Kotler et al., 2012). The behavioural approach searches for similarities in behaviour, for example, information search behaviour (Kotler et al., 2012).	Income levels; Interests and preferences; Information search behavior at workplace.

Source: Based on Vetsch (2017); further developed by the authors.

the question of how generations should be managed (Bruch et al., 2010; Salahuddin, 2010; Schröder-Kunz, 2019), or what impact generational differences have on the workplace (Jones et al., 2018; Kapoor and Solomon, 2011; Macky et al., 2008; Mehra and Nickerson, 2019; Slupinska et al., 2018).

According to Klaffke (2014), the different expectations of age groups are not a new phenomenon. The basic values are formed in the childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood (Klaffke, 2014). For example, a study by Smola and Sutton (2002) concluded that Generation X is less loyal to the company and more self-centred, expecting to be promoted faster and seeking a balance between doing a job well and achieving individual goals (Smola and Sutton, 2002). Studies often come to different conclusions when it comes to generational attitudes: for instance, Westerman and Yamamura (2007) showed that Baby Boomers had higher levels of satisfaction than employees of younger generations. However, a different conclusion was reached in the study by Cennamo and Gardner (2008), who found no significant differences in job satisfaction between the Baby Boomers or Generations X and Y.

The implications on generations cannot only be observed in the values and attitudes but also in the preferences of tone, style and communication format. Table 2 summarizes these common communication practices, as identified by Mangelsdorf (2015). It becomes evident that a shift from personal and time-intensive, towards more impersonal and efficiency-driven tone and style preferences, is taking place, enabled by the digital revolution and remote and time-independent communication options. Therefore, different generations are accustomed to different communication styles and channels, which bear the potential for misunderstandings and friction.

Table 2. Communication Preferences of Each Generation.

	(Baby-) Boomer	Generation X	Generation Y	Generation Z
Tone and style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal • Formalities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct and concise • Efficiency-driven • Less formalities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Casual • Playful • Contains visual elements and emotions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rapidly consumable • Uncomplicated • Constantly accessible
Typical medium	Personal conversation with verbal- and non-verbal elements	E-mail	Gamification	Social media like Instagram or Snapchat

Source: Based on Mangelsdorf (2015).

Studying generational differences is challenging. On the one hand, there is very little literature with a solid theoretical framework, and generations are defined differently in terms of birth years; on the other hand, it is unclear what is the best method to test for these differences (Costanza et al., 2012).

Intergenerational and Intercultural Communication

In the search for implications of the segmentation according to generations for the strategic internal communication, different perspectives must be integrated. Based on the multi-dimensional nature of each generation, inputs and considerations from intergenerational and intercultural communication can be discussed.

Intergenerational communication can include ‘interactions involving individuals who are from different age cohorts or age groups’ and has ‘a strong potential for miscommunication and unsatisfying interpersonal interactions’ (Hummert, 2015, p. 273). Intergenerational communication is often perceived as unsatisfactory or even problematic (Giles and Gasiorek, 2011). Communication is also frequently guided by stereotypical ideas, and it can lead to ‘overaccommodation’ both in younger-to-elderly communication (patronizing talk, elderspeak or infantilising talk) and in elderly-to-younger communication (non-listening, disapproving/disrespecting, overprotective/parental) (Giles and Gasiorek, 2011).

As a theoretical framework, Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) and the further developed Communicative Predicament of Ageing (CPA) model are both used to explain interpersonal and intergenerational communication. The CAT analyzes the communication process in various contexts and examines how speakers diverge from and converge with each other (Mehra and Nickerson, 2019). Accommodation is defined as ‘the ability to adjust, modify, or regulate one’s language use and communication behaviours in response to their conversation partners, initial orientations, self-systems (stereotypes and existing attitudes), in the situation at hand’ (Zhang and Giles, 2017, p. 2). The CPA model also includes age as an additional factor. The theory then looks at the predicaments that can occur when people change their behaviour and communication style when talking to older or younger people (Mehra and Nickerson, 2019). It also suggests that stereotyped expectations will influence an intergenerational

conversation, probably in a negative way (Harwood et al., 2000). This can lead to people perceiving a situation or communication as patronizing, infantilizing or overprotective (Giles and Gasiorek, 2011).

Principles of intercultural communication can further enhance an understanding of the challenges facing intergenerational communication management. Similarly, intercultural communication includes all communication activities towards target audiences of a different culture (national or organizational) (Schwarz, 2010). The Excellence Theory defines a hybrid approach to communication management that combines culturally neutral and culture-specific activities (Grunig, 1992), and a major strategic issue is the standardization or adaptation of communication activities (Hill, 2014). Historical research stresses the necessity to adapt communications in terms of language, content, non-verbal communication, media consumption, technology use, visual features, rhetoric and argumentation strategies to effectively reach audiences and accomplish the communication goals (Ravazzani, 2016). In addition, the adoption of global values (e.g. global employer branding) and a singular corporate language are suggested as effective instruments to overcome cultural differences and support standardization efforts (Hill, 2014). Therefore, a practical internal communication approach would combine standardized communication to all generations in the workforce and a responsive one customized to their needs and behaviour.

METHOD AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This study aims to contribute to the existing literature by exploring strategic internal communication practices with a focus on generations as a segmentation criterion. The research is conducted from the perspective of internal communication professionals to get an understanding of their segmentation approach and how they consider generations in their daily internal communication practice. In this study, both operational and strategic (i.e. heads of communication and members of executive management) communication managers are included. To investigate this new phenomenon, a qualitative multi-method research design and abductive approach were chosen (Saunders et al., 2016). In the first step, data were collected and themes were identified with the aim to explain the phenomenon. In the second step the themes were connected to existing frameworks and positioned in the literature, and finally, these were further tested and developed in semi-structured focus groups and interviews.

First, unstructured interviews were conducted to obtain informal and unbiased insights of the general understanding of generations in the workplace and how they impact daily business. For this purpose, 49 narrative interviews (Döring and Bortz, 2016) were conducted, i.e. there was no predefined interview guide, instead the interview partners were free to express their opinions and thoughts on the topic. The interviews took place on a one-to-one basis. The interview partners were communication professionals from different company sizes and sectors based in Switzerland. The interviews were conducted in 2019, 2020 and 2021. The answers were analyzed using in-vivo coding as a first step to inductively identify

topics in the data (Saunders et al., 2016). In a second coding cycle the codes were organized around thematic categories (Kuckartz and Rädiker, 2020). Thematic saturation was achieved as the analysis of the dataset with repeating themes showed (Guest et al., 2020).

Second, based on the results from step one, semi-structured focus group topics were developed such as segmentation criteria, application of generations as a segmentation criterion, and the resulting opportunities and challenges. The groups concentrated on the discussion and not on individual opinions, and on the content rather than on interaction between the group members (Lamnek, 1995). Eight focus groups (each with five operational internal communication experts from a variety of industries and organizations of different size based in Switzerland) were selected to develop a group opinion on the topics. Discussions began with an introduction of the questions, followed by a chaired discussion, and concluded with a presentation of the findings. Data were collected in the focus group discussion and documented in a protocol. Data were then analyzed using thematic and analytical coding.

Finally, to deepen and reflect the results from senior management perspective, 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted with strategic communication experts at the level of head of corporate communication and executive management from different sectors industries and company sizes. The list of themes included questions on segmentation practice, relevance, the impact of generations in the workspace, and the opportunities and challenges of generational segmentation. The interviews were conducted in person, and the answers were analyzed using thematic coding (Kuckartz and Rädiker, 2020).

FINDINGS

In the following, the empirical results are explained and related to the corresponding research questions in the appropriate order.

RQ1. How do organizations segment their internal stakeholders?

The most important segmentation criteria at strategic and operational levels are roles and positions within the organizational structure such as hierarchy, departments, functions and profiles. Segmentation by location, such as office and language regions, is another common criterion that reflects the multilingual nature of Switzerland and the international activities of the participating companies. Both levels recognized the widespread use of the undifferentiated 'all employees' segment and emerging segmentation according to the communication tools used. The operational communication managers' perspective revealed a wider variety of segmentation criteria than that of the strategic communication managers. The former mentioned involvement in specific topics, types of projects, know-how, specialization, experience and special groups of former employees such as pensioners. One operational manager described the use of communities around specific topics enabled by recent technologies (such as Yammer) and the possibility of using these communities as a segment for interest-oriented and more targeted communication.

RQ2. What is the role of generation-specific segmentation, and what are the opportunities and challenges of this segmentation?

Ninety percent of the operational managers acknowledged generations as a category in internal communication but assessed their importance very differently – from ‘existing’ (without weighting in the statement) to ‘very high’. The majority defined a generation in terms of age, and in some cases by the seniority/origin/culture of a person as well. Numerous differences in needs, expectations and behaviour were cited as reasons why generations play a role in internal communication (see Table 3). Expectations play a role in how communication occurs (e.g. channels, content and direction), while attitudes and personalities play a role in describing the various approaches to internal communication:

Older generations prefer direct internal communication. Important and complex topics they prefer to discuss ‘face-to-face’. Younger generations on the contrary prefer shorter communication and more indirect channels. (Operational Communication Manager Statement)

However, the operational communication managers did not mention a specific segmentation to balance these differences but simply referred to an ‘older’ and a ‘younger’ generation. Table 4 offers a description of these two polarized segments and their communication preferences as revealed in the interviews:

Table 3. Differences Among Generations Regarding the Internal Communication From Operational Communication Managers’ Perspective.

Different Needs/Expectations/Behaviour in Respect to ... (In-Vivo Codes)	Thematic Codes
Channels Media usage Participation opportunity Depth of information	Communication channels
Content and choice of topics Tonality	Communication content
Speed Frequency	Communication coordination and direction
Life attitude Work attitude Intrinsic motivation Attitude towards innovations Attitude towards changes	Attitudes
Mindset Level of knowledge Culture Language Values/Norms/Goals	Personality characteristics

Table 4. Comparison of the In-Vivo Codes for Different Generations' Characteristics.

"Older" Generation (In-Vivo Codes)	"Younger" Generation (In-Vivo Codes)	Thematic Codes
E-mail Phone Intranet Printed materials Direct communication (face-to-face)	E-mail WhatsApp Social Media Interactive	Communication channels
Informal address rarely	Informal address often	Communication content
Top-down (one-way communication) Hierarchy-led communication	Based on dialogue (two-way communication) Participative	Communication coordination and direction
Weary of change Hesitant Skeptical about digitization Focus on security	Courageous for change Driven Open-minded towards digitalization Search for sense of purpose High will for implementation Expect efficiency	Attitudes
Low level of knowledge about digital Have experience Bring calm	Able to multitask Flexible Creative	Personality characteristics

Although terms such as 'older' and 'younger' appear stereotypical to a certain extent, they reflect the understanding of the communication managers. In turn, this raises the question of whether companies are implicitly using generations as a segmenting criterion. When asked directly, most operational communication specialists denied using a formal procedure for generation-specific segmentation. Only one of the eight focus groups identified a segmentation-oriented effort in forming segments such as trainees, parents, pensionable age and the creation of specific communication content.

Only one head of communication from 13 confirmed that their company addressed and treated generations differently on a strategic level. This respondent reported that the tonality of communication was adapted to the recipient's age and that generation segmentation prevents excluding certain age groups. Additionally, it was stated that intergenerational dialogue and experience exchanges between younger and older employees were actively promoted in the company. The other 12 companies did not practice any form of employee segmentation by age.

The operational and strategic communication managers were asked about the opportunities and challenges of generation-specific segmentation in internal communication. The findings of the focus groups and semi-structured interviews can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5. Opportunities and Challenges of the Generation-Specific Strategic Internal Communication From a Strategic and Operational Perspective.

	Operational Communication Managers Perspective (In-Vivo Codes)	Strategic Communication Managers Perspective (In-Vivo Codes)	Thematic Codes
Chances	Customization (to favourite channels) Higher engagement Stronger identification Better targeting Better channel choice High accessibility for all employees Better information/messaging Acceptance of differences Promotion of diversity – nobody is excluded Stimulates dialogue	More tailored address Higher generation awareness Higher awareness beneficial for collaboration Generations management beneficial as a leadership topic and HR topic Prevents losing certain age groups	Customization Engagement Awareness Accessibility Understanding Acceptance Promotion of diversity Dialogue
Challenges	Needs resources (value/cost), costly/time-consuming Categorization Everybody is important speaks against generalizations Missing individuality Fosters thinking in stereotypes Feeling of being pushed into one group Misunderstanding Mistiming Create double standard Customization leads to slowing down and imbalance in communication Difficult keeping overview over the different messages Information overload Information can get lost when rearranging it Missing authenticity Conflict between strategy/culture and young employees Difficult allocation a topic to a specific generation	Not feasible resource-wise and low cost-benefit trade-off Increases complexity Risk of discrimination Focus shifts from the individual Negative perception of categorization Existing code of conducts prohibiting differentiation between race, age, gender and sexual orientation Use of communication channels according to age Strategic message and other information lost More pressing other challenges (gender asymmetry) Life-long learning must be done by every generation	Resource-intensive Complex Discrimination Stereotypes Missing individuality Misunderstanding Mistiming Slowing down Lost information Information overload Missing authenticity (O) Topic allocation (O) Code of conduct (S) Equal expectations (S)

Note: S = only strategic, O = only operational perspective.

Similar opportunities were acknowledged on a strategic and operational level based on the customization of the message, leading to greater accessibility, awareness and understanding while promoting dialogue and motivation. All communication managers agreed that the most significant challenges were

complexity and resource intensity and the danger of discrimination, stereotyping, resulting in misunderstanding and dilution of information. On a strategic level, managers were additionally concerned with legal and ethical issues and with giving each employee the same set of expectations. Implementation issues such as lack of message authenticity and topic allocation were raised on an operational level.

RQ3. What implications do different generations have for the management of strategic internal communication?

According to the focus groups with operational managers, the internal communication programme should reflect and target different generations in the workforce:

Important is that there is a good mix of tools whereby everybody can choose which they individually prefer. (Operational Communication Manager Statement)

At the same time, communication standards should be the same for everyone – clear, transparent and oriented towards corporate goals. Additional unifying elements for all generations are corporate culture, trust in communication and leadership, guiding corporate values and strategy.

The focus groups further revealed that while all target groups in a company should be addressed, including trainees and pensioners, different issues have different meanings and importance for different generations, and the content and tone of messages must reflect that. Generational preferences and experiences with communication channels were explicitly discussed, and the need to offer various channels was highlighted. Modern media such as apps and videos for the younger generation should be provided alongside direct face-to-face interactions, printed materials and regular e-mails for older employees. Indeed, the coordination and direction-setting of the communication elements are considered a growing challenge when addressing mixed generation teams. Communication managers on a strategic level stressed the need for constant exchanges in the form of workshops and meetings and the establishment of platforms for mutual learning such as reverse mentoring:

We have already carried out pilot tests with generation workshops, which were also labelled that way. We deliberately let young and experienced employees work on a problem. We also have mentoring approaches, but these are strongly HR-driven. From my point of view, it makes perfect sense that people want to make their experience available or get new impulses and young people who are open to it. (Strategic Communication Manager Statement)

Communication tasks should also be executed by diverse internal communication teams in terms of generations. Other codes in our findings pointed to the importance of generation-specific communication in times of change, with different messaging intensities for ‘younger’ and ‘older’ employees.

In our primary research, the results of all three different methods showed similar tendencies. Or as one operational communication manager stated:

Segmentation according to the generations has to be applied as a support. The content must be relevant to the target, prepared carefully (form, format, length), and then suitable channel found. (Operational Communication Manager Statement)

A further suggestion is that a piece of information is distributed through different channels, and employees can decide where they retrieve that information. In addition, the style of communication ('language') is essential to reach everybody in the company. Finally, it is necessary to understand employees' different needs and (personal) attitudes and, if possible, take these into account.

DISCUSSION

Segmentation of the internal stakeholders is an established practice in Swiss companies. While theories such as marketing and stakeholder management recommend various approaches, business practice is dominated by a few, mostly one-dimensional criteria. Stakeholder management-oriented segmentation, such as hierarchy, structure or job role and workplace location (geography), forms the standard inventory reported in our interviews. The different use of communication tools (traditional e-mail vs. social media) is increasingly important as a segmentation criterion. Our study reveals hierarchical, one-dimensional, top-down communication on a strategic level and a more audience-oriented, multi-dimensional and interactive approach operationally, including demographics, socio-demographic criteria, and sensitivity to issues. Psychographic criteria are, by nature, more complex than geographic or socio-demographic ones and use several segmentation variables (Kotler et al., 2012). Although the results point to differences regarding attitudes, mindsets and cultures, these are not used in the segmentation process. At present, criteria depicting motivation, preferences and aspirations are also missing.

As a segmentation criterion, a generation is multi-dimensional, uniting demographic, socio-demographic, psychographic, behavioural and geographic elements (Costanza et al., 2012; Klaffke, 2014). In accordance with the theory (Albert et al., 2019; Bruch et al., 2010; Jones et al., 2018; Kapoor and Solomon, 2011; Klaffke, 2014; Mannheim, 1928; Macky et al., 2008; Mehra and Nickerson, 2019; Salahuddin, 2010; Schröder, 2018, 2019; Schröder-Kunz, 2019; Slupinska et al., 2018), generations are perceived by managers as complex, and differences among generations can be identified on multiple levels. For example, age is associated with attitudes towards life and work, innovation and change, and common personality traits such as mindset, level of knowledge, culture, values and language. In addition, generations allow a broad insight into the different expectations, needs and actual behaviour towards communication channels, speed, tonality and content (Klaffke, 2014; Mangelsdorf, 2015).

The theory states that generations are a diffuse and dynamic construct (Klaffke, 2014), and the use of generations to determine business communication poses numerous challenges. First, although all communication managers agree on the importance of generations, there are only a few cases of emerging attempts to define groups such as trainees or pensioners.

Second, initially identified with age (Klaffke, 2014), generations as a segmentation criterion can present a legal problem, since many countries have laws prohibiting discrimination based on age. Missing data for a more specific operationalization of the segments and the necessity to adapt the construct to different countries and cultures make its practical implementation difficult.

Third, as CAT and the CPA model demonstrate, people have the ability to adjust, modify or regulate their language and change their behaviour or communication style when talking to older or younger people (Mehra and Nickerson, 2019; Zhang and Giles, 2017). In our study, this is evident through the implicit bias in the description of the needs and behaviours of the different age groups (Table 3), which leads to the use of different communication channels for ‘younger’ and ‘older’ generations (Table 4). Furthermore, any categorization leads to stereotypes, discrimination and misunderstandings, as mentioned in the interviews.

Fourth, the theory concerning different generations lacks solid empirical evidence, and the relationship between generations and work-related outcomes is small to moderate (Costanza et al., 2012). Both strategic and operational managers confirm that generational differences can never be the sole explanation for employee behaviour.

Fifth, this study offers new insights regarding further implementation challenges such as resource-intensiveness in setting up target group-specific internal communication practices, slowing down the information distribution, and difficulty in keeping an overview of different messages resulting in information overload, information dilution and loss of credibility.

The multi-dimensional nature of generations also has benefits. As acknowledged in the intercultural and international communication theories, different communication styles lead to misunderstandings and conflict. Internal communication management can address these differences by adapting the communication elements (Hill, 2014; Ravazzani, 2016). Mangelsdorf (2015) cited differences among generations in tone, style and communication channels. This study not only confirms the existing body of literature but also expands the list of elements that must be adapted to account for generational differences by adding dimensions such as messaging, coordination and direction-setting. Applying a generational-sensitive segmentation allows for greater flexibility and customization, resulting in more inclusivity, better understanding and satisfaction among the target audience. Furthermore, generational understanding creates awareness of the differences that can cause conflicts and promotes collaboration between the parties.

The intercultural communication theory offers an integrated approach for standardization and customization that bridges intercultural and intergenerational differences (Grünig, 1992; Ravazzani, 2016; Schwarz, 2010). Systematically structured communication is seen as a tool for synchronizing different values and needs. Internal communication management creates a platform where a common understanding and solutions can be found, and standardization and customization can be balanced. In line with the theory (Hill, 2014), the study findings confirm the importance of standardizing the communication of corporate goals, values, culture and strategy. A novel insight is its expressed need for unified communication standards and principles for all generations, while adaptation occurs on the implementation level and encompasses all key elements of the communication programme. The importance of a generation-sensitive approach in specific situations – such as in a change project – is highlighted, thereby attesting to the existing literature.

CONCLUSIONS

This research study contributes to the existing literature by offering explorative insights into emerging practices of strategic internal communication in workplaces employing people of all ages. The qualitative methods aim to gain an understanding of the internal communication managers' perspectives on operational and strategic levels regarding the segmentation of the internal stakeholders, the role and use of generations as a segmentation criterion, and implications for internal communication management.

To summarize, the study shows how the demographic shift and longer working lives are changing workplaces. Communication managers, both on a strategic and operational level, need to be aware of the challenges that mixed generation teams pose for communication management. 'Generations' is a multi-dimensional and complex construct that has been challenging to implement because of its unclear operationalization and the resources needed. At the same time, generations combine multiple existing segmentation criteria that have not been used in internal communication but could improve internal stakeholder understanding. The growing recognition of the importance of generations also shows that internal communication practice needs to embrace innovative approaches away from top-down and one-dimensional segmentation towards more precise targeting, flexibility, and inclusivity. Neglecting generational differences can intensify conflicts and misunderstandings – especially in challenging situations featuring change – resulting in disengagement and reduced performance.

When faced with these challenges, communication managers must be sensitive to intergenerational differences and adapt their practices for different generations without stereotyping, as these can solidify into prejudices and entrenched opinions and, in the ultimate scenario, can lead to discrimination. Creating various channels to convey company goals and strategy can establish a platform for exchange and free choice, fostering a solid and inclusive organizational culture. Managing strategic internal communication means finding a balance between standardization (i.e., promoting the unifying company values, strategy, and culture) and adaptation in terms of messaging, tonality, channels, coordination, and direction-setting. Especially during and after the Covid-19 pandemic the search for relevance and sense-making can be supported by increased sensitivity and awareness of intergenerational differences. This indicates a strong focus on the human element as a key principle in communication. Employees will support the purpose and the change initiatives if they are addressed with empathy and understanding for their different needs and requirements regarding the internal communication.

LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This research study has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, only one perspective, namely communication managers, was considered. Their opinions might differ from those of other employees (especially in case of a work conflict or change project) who might misunderstand the directives and refuse to cooperate. For this reason, future research might also investigate employee perceptions and preferences regarding internal communication.

Second, the results cannot be generalized since they present the views and opinions of a finite number of companies. The sample was chosen to gain diverse insights from communication managers actively engaged in internal communication but without further analyzing the respective company's size, sector and leadership (Ruck and Welch, 2012). Such criteria exercise significant influence on internal communication management. A future study could look for patterns, for example, in SMEs vs. multinational enterprises (size), manufacturing vs. services (industry) and traditional vs. transformational leadership. These patterns should then be quantitatively assessed with a more significant sample.

Third, generational conflict has mainly been associated with change projects. Future research might investigate other situations where engagement and dialogue among internal stakeholders are paramount. This would include moments of crisis as well as recognizing the challenges posed by generational differences on communication in the different phases of an ongoing project.

Finally, despite the importance of intergenerational communication, the lack of practical application indicates cultural, structural and technological difficulties. The process of segmenting internal stakeholders, in-depth analysis of their needs and preferences, and the consequent adaptation of the communication style must be embedded not only on an operational but also on a strategic level, to be able to influence the organizational culture. Such an implementation can be supported and even accelerated by the constantly evolving communication technology. Further research is still needed to solve these practical challenges and help internal communication practice build diverse and inclusive workplaces.

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