

# **EMPLOYEE PARTICIPATION IN THE PR FUNCTION WITHIN ORGANIZATIONS**

Kyrie McCormick, Roger Williams University  
Kmcormick547@g.rwu.edu

Amiee Shelton, Roger Williams University  
Ashelton@rwu.edu

## **ABSTRACT**

Internal communication efforts follow well-established marketing practices by using push strategies to promote the need to share information with the PR team or pull strategies using tactics to draw employees towards sharing information as a course of action. This study investigated how employees communicate regarding personal, professional, and company accomplishments as a function of employee engagement as well as the factors that affect their decision-making through a 2 x 3 factorial design. The PR Function was manipulated through corporate culture (open/not open) and accolades (personal/ professional/ company). Findings reveal the information shared by employees varied little regarding strategic orientation (push/pull), yet respondents with a non-open corporate communication structure were less likely to share professional accolades without being asked. Furthermore, age was a predictor for likeliness to share, with younger employees more willing. From the findings, authors make suggestions to internal public relations practitioners on how to approach employee communication.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Employees are key stakeholders of any organization as their internal engagement and commitment can positively impact external growth and success (Grunig, 1992). However, organizations have struggled with low employee engagement in recent years. A 2017 Gallup poll revealed that only 33% of U.S. employees and 15% of global employees are engaged at work (Boyle, 2017; Ewing et al., 2019). This can partly be attributed to the traditional emphasis of a top-down communication approach that sees employees as passive recipients of information rather than active communicators (Botan & Hazelton, 2010; Andersson, 2019). However, communication flow and cross dialogue have improved in recent years due to the implementation of a more horizontal organizational structure in some organizations (Botan & Hazelton, 2010). To continue improving organizations' adherence to best practices leading to increased engagement, it is important to understand what affects employee decision-making. Specifically, if push or pull strategies are more effective in increasing employee engagement within the public relations function of an organization.

Organizations should strive to maximize employee engagement with the public relations function using best practices within the internal communication discipline. However, an analysis of internal communication and employee engagement is necessary for best practice standards to be set and adhered to for the benefit of both employees and organizations (Downs & Hazen, 1977; Varona, 1996). Previous research revealed that an important factor of communication climate is the communication relating to personal achievement and work, deemed the personal feedback factor by Downs and Hazen (1977). This present study investigates how employees communicate accomplishments as a function of employee engagement as well as the factors that affect their decision-making.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Excellence Theory, proposed by Grunig (1992), explains the value of public relations to organizations and emphasizes the importance of creating quality relationships with key stakeholders. Stakeholder Theory, as named by Freeman (2010), further suggests that effective organizations must prioritize the needs and goals of stakeholders as well as internal management to be considered “excellent” (Grunig, 1992). One key stakeholder of an organization is its employees. When an employee is engaged and committed to their organization, they are empowered as a brand advocate and a valued stakeholder that can benefit the company both internally and externally. Nurturing positive relationships with employees can also reduce costs of litigation, regulation, legislation, and negative publicity (Grunig, 1992). To create these relationships, organizations engage in symmetrical communication with its stakeholders to satisfy the needs of both parties (Grunig, 1992). This symmetrical system of internal communication leads to higher levels of excellence among organizations (Grunig, 1992). Therefore, employees must be encouraged to voice their opinion and exchange views with the public relations function. This symmetry in communication enables organizations to maintain higher levels of employee satisfaction, commitment, and trust (Grunig & Grunig, 2008). However, this system requires a participative communication culture rather than an authoritarian culture (Grunig & Grunig, 2008).

### **Communication Climate**

Research has defined organizational communication within a variety of frameworks. Goldhaber (1983) identified two major research perspectives, process and perception. “Information flow is the main concern for the process perspective, whereas attitude or perception is the main concern for the perception perspective” (Mount & Back, 1999). Information flows in three directions within an organizational communication structure: horizontally, upwards and downwards. The structure type of the organization determines the direction of the communication flow (Pincus, 1986). Regardless of the direction of the communication flow, best practices state that organization should have a flexible structure that allows communication across various departments and hierarchical levels. One such communication structure that meets this best practice is open structure and communication.

The openness of an organization's communication climate is strongly correlated to communication satisfaction (Downs & Hazen, 1977; Varona, 1996). Downs and Hazen (1977) suggest three important factors regarding communication climate: 1) narrower communication climate - how an organization handles communication-related problems; 2) personal feedback factor - communication relating to personal achievement and work; and 3) communication timing - how well communication meets immediate needs.

Communication climate is associated with employee communication responsibility. Studies show that employees who perceive the communication climate as open are more likely to take communication responsibility (Andersson, 2019). However, there has been minimal research into the information employees are willing to share regarding their achievements, specifically whether they are willing to take responsibility for the personal feedback factor introduced by Downs & Hazen (1977) or whether the information must be sought out by an internal public relations practitioner.

## **Internal Communication**

Several stakeholders are addressed as a part of Stakeholder Theory, a key element within Excellence Theory. Within an organization, employees are valued stakeholders because performance and satisfaction are vital to overall success. Therefore, internal communication has become increasingly important in modern organizations. Historically, internal communication has followed a top-down approach where information was disseminated from management to employees without much cross-dialogue or feedback (Botan & Hazleton, 2010). This communication approach "emphasized control, authority, and downward information flow and placed importance on task-related concerns" (Botan & Hazelton, 2010). This downward information flow can be attributed to the traditional vertical organizational structure and the view that employees are passive recipients of information rather than active communicators (Andersson, 2019).

In recent years, organizations have modernized to become more horizontal in structure and value "transparency, democracy, openness, flexibility, social concerns, ethics, change, and environmental responsibility" (Botan & Hazelton, 2010). The flow of internal communication is no longer limited to executives. Organizations have begun to recognize that strong internal communication between managers and employees has the power to create more engaged employees, strengthening both internal functionality and outside perception of the company (Quirke, 2016). Knight and Haslam (2010) suggest strong internal communication requires active employee communicators with an informed employee voice. The use of employee voice is closely tied to employee engagement as strong internal communication requires employees to be active communicators. Several factors affect employee engagement 1) having opportunities to feed views upwards, 2) feeling well informed about what is happening in the organization, and 3) believing your manager is committed to your organization (Ruck & Welch, 2012; Constantin & Baias, 2015). Employees are more likely to use their voice if they are satisfied at work and perceive their organization's internal communication climate as open (Andersson, 2019).

As organizations strive towards Grunig's standard of "excellence," internal communication and the use of employee voice on behalf of an organization are being associated with employee responsibility. Andersson (2019) suggests that as an agent of an organization, employees need to be trained as aware and competent communicators. Employees need to voluntarily share information that is pertinent to the organization regardless of the presence of a manager. However, this relies upon the assumption that employees are engaged within their organization and feel compelled to share.

In the age of technology, public relations practitioners are changing their internal communications strategies in an attempt to increase engagement (Ewing et al., 2019). Social media is being used to engage employees in addition to traditional communication channels such as print media, electronic media, and face-to-face communication (Gillis, 2006; Men & Bowen, 2017). Ewing et al. (2019) suggest that social media might be necessary for engaging with employees who have grown up in the digital era. Millennials (born between 1981-1996) are the first generation that grew up in the age of the internet in which there was a fast evolution of how people communicated and interacted, especially due to the rise of social media (Dimock, 2019). Generation X (born between 1965-1980) and baby boomers (born between 1950-1965) had to adapt to this new technology as it was released due to a lack of immersion (Dimock, 2019).

While research into the association between social media and employee engagement is limited, Ewing et al.'s (2019) findings show that internal social media has the power to strengthen employee voice and engagement as employees feel empowered and involved with the internal culture. Haddud et al. (2016) found that those employees who self-reported high usage of internal social media channels also self-reported higher levels of engagement. This indicates that because younger, technology-savvy generations, such as millennials, are more likely to use social media, they will be more engaged in internal communication and culture. However, certain demographics may not engage with internal social media as millennials do. For example, baby boomers and Gen X are less likely to use digital mediums to engage in internal communication (Ewing et al., 2019; Men & Bowen, 2017). Ewing et al. (2019) also found that blue-collar workers are less likely to engage with digital mediums due to a lack of internet access. Despite this difference in usage, several researchers argue social media will allow employees to become active communicators rather than simply informed recipients (Madsen, 2016; Men & Bowen, 2017).

## **Communication Satisfaction**

Another perspective found within organizational communication research regards employee perception of communication. Employee's perceptions of the media quality play an important role in the overall satisfaction with organizational communication. Media quality refers to the extent that meetings are well-organized, and written directives are clear. This is one component of organizational communication satisfaction which is defined as satisfaction with communication that is linked with the employee's position in the organization. Communication satisfaction within an organization is affected by various factors such as the amount of information received, the organization's communication climate, the receptivity of upward communication, and the frequency of employee interaction (Hargie et al., 2002; Hecht, 1978; Mohr & Sohi, 1995). The

factors affecting communication satisfaction are like those affecting employee engagement, specifically upward communication, and communication climate. This suggests there is an association between an employee's satisfaction with their organization's communication activities and if/how an employee engages with their organization's public relations function.

Communication satisfaction is closely linked to job satisfaction, commitment, and work motivation among employees meanwhile reducing stress, staff turnover, and absenteeism (Zwijze-Koning & de Jong, 2007). To measure communication satisfaction Downs and Hazen (1977) designed the Communication Satisfaction Questionnaire. This scale tests seven factors within an organization.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS & HYPOTHESES**

**RQ1:** How do employees share information with the public relations function within their organization?

**Hypothesis 1:** Employees with an open communication climate will more likely send information directly to their organization's public relations function.

Andersson (2019) argues that employees are more likely to engage if they are satisfied at work and perceive their organization's internal communication climate as open. Therefore, we hypothesize that employees who report having an open communication climate will be more likely to send information without being asked than employees who report a closed communication climate. Open communication climates encourage two-way communication and free-flowing information while a closed climate prioritizes downward communication.

**RQ2:** What type of information will employees share with the public relations function within their organization?

**RQ2:** What factors effect employee decision-making regarding engagement in public relation activities.

**Hypothesis 2:** If an employee reports high communication satisfaction, then they will be more likely to send information directly to their organization's public relations function.

Studies show that the factors affecting communication satisfaction are similar to those affecting employee engagement (Hargie et al., 2002; Hecht, 1978; Mohr & Sohi, 1995). We hypothesize that the Communication Satisfaction Questionnaire can be used to predict the likelihood of unprompted employee engagement. The higher an employee's communications satisfaction, the more likely they will be to send information directly to their organization's public relations function.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The first part of this research utilized Downs and Hazen's Communication Satisfaction Questionnaire (1977) as a baseline to gauge opinions about recurring communication activities within each respondent's organization. The Questionnaire (CSQ) was modified to measure six factors: organizational integration, organizational perspective, communication climate, media quality, horizontal and informal communication, and personal feedback. Each of the six factors contains five seven-point Likert scale questions ranging from (1) completely dissatisfied to (7) completely satisfied. To supplement the Questionnaire, each respondent was asked to rate the level of influence nine factors had on their job performance using a seven-point Likert scale (1 = no effect to 7 = major effect). These factors include 1) feeling of personal achievement, 2) job satisfaction, 3) job security, 4) pay, 5) family, 6) immediate supervisor, 7) opportunities for advancement, 8) co-workers, and 9) economic conditions.

The second part of this research utilized a 2 x 3 factorial design to analyze how/if employees share accomplishments with their organization's public relations function. Each participant was randomly given a scenario describing communication climate (open or not open) and one of three accolades (personal, professional, or company). Communication climate can be operationalized as how employees communicate within an organization as a result of the environment. An open climate encourages two-way communication, expression, and information to flow freely. A not open climate relies on one-way communication, prioritizing downward communication of information rather than free expression. For the purposes of this study, accomplishments are categorized as personal, professional, or company. A personal accomplishment is one that an employee completes out of work but is still appropriate to share with coworkers. A professional accomplishment is one that either occurs at an employee's organization or an outside recognition of an employee's professional achievement. A company accomplishment is one that an employee achieves on behalf of their current organization.

The participants were then asked what action they would take based on the scenarios (communication climate and accolade type): send the information regarding the accolade directly to their public relations department, provide the information only if asked, or not share the information. Respondents were also asked the role of several factors included in the scenario descriptions on their decision-making process. The importance of these factors was determined through a five-point Likert scale ranging from (1) not important at all to (5) very important.

### **Participants**

The data were collected in a voluntary digital survey in February 2020. Individuals participated through Amazon Turk (Mturk), a crowdsourcing site used by researcher's to collect data from a diverse sample. Participation was anonymous as the only identifying information was the participant's Worker Identification number. Of the 200 respondents, 198 finished the survey to completion resulting in a 99% response rate. The study oversampled by 60% to overcome sampling error that is commonly cited as an issue with Mechanical Turk (Hauser et al., 2019). The following

table displays the demographic characteristics of the respondents including gender, age, education, and length of time worked for the current organization.

**TABLE 1. DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS**

Participants Demographics	Open Culture						Not Open Culture						Full Sample	
	Personal		Professional		Corporate		Personal		Professional		Corporate			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Gender</b>														
Female	15	53	11	33	12	38	10	71	14	42	9	27	71	36
Male	17	47	21	66	20	62	25	29	19	58	24	73	126	64
<b>Age</b>														
20-29	21	64	21	66	19	60	19	54	17	52	22	67	119	60
30-39	11	33	8	25	12	38	13	37	11	33	9	27	64	32
40+	1	3	3	9	1	2	3	9	5	15	2	6	15	8
<b>Education</b>														
No College	1	3	2	6	4	13	--	--	4	12	1	3	12	6
Some College	6	18	--	--	5	16	5	14	10	30	5	15	31	16
Bachelors	8	24	12	38	9	29	7	20	6	18	7	21	49	25
Graduate	18	55	18	56	13	41	23	66	13	39	20	60	105	53
<b>Employment</b>														
0-1 Years	1	3	1	3	2	6	--	--	3	9	1	3	8	4
1-4 Years	24	75	23	72	26	81	17	48	20	60	17	52	127	64
5-8 Years	5	16	22	22	3	9	17	48	7	21	11	33	50	25
Nine + Years	2	6	1	3	1	3	1	2	3	9	4	12	12	6

## FINDINGS

Using the Downs and Hazen's Communication Satisfaction Questionnaire (1977), respondents provided a baseline of their communication satisfaction. A cumulative overall "satisfaction" score was created to measure the sum of the six factor categories. This score ranged from low communication satisfaction to high satisfaction and reported a Cronbach's Alpha score of 0.97, indicating a high level of reliability. Fifty-seven percent of respondents indicated they were "somewhat" to "mostly" satisfied with their organization; with 18% reporting they were "completely" satisfied. A one-way between groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore the impact of corporate communication satisfaction on how they would share information. Respondents respond in one of three ways regarding what they would do with the information: send the information directly, if asked provide information or not share. There was a statistically significant difference at the  $p < .05$  level in the CSQ scores in the three responses:  $F(2, 176) = 3.5$ ,  $p = .03$ . Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for overall satisfaction for those sending information directly ( $M = 126$ ,  $SD = 30.70$ ) was statistically significantly different from those who choose not to send the information ( $M = 104$ ,  $SD = 44.40$ ). The means regarding overall satisfaction also differed for those respondents that would provide the information when asked to those who choose not to share the information ( $M = 123$ ,  $SD = 22.93$ ).

A one-way between groups analysis of variance was run to determine which concept of the CSQ had the largest effect on what participants choose to do with the information. A statistically

significant difference at the  $p < .05$  level on the “Organizational Integration” scale and “Media Quality” scale for the three behavior choices  $F = (2, 184) = 4.3, p = .014$ ;  $F = (2, 183) = 4.25, p = .016$ . Regarding organizational integration, those that responded they would send the information directly to the communications department reported higher levels of satisfaction ( $M = 26.6, SD = 6.1$ ) than those who reported they would not send information ( $M = 21, SD = 8.7$ ). Those respondents that responded they would send information directly to the communications department and those that if asked would provide the information had a higher level of satisfaction with an organization’s media quality ( $M = 25, SD = 6.4$ ;  $M = 25, SD = 4.8$ ) than those who would not share information ( $M = 19, SD = 9.01$ ).

**TABLE 2. MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND ONE-WAY ANOVAS**

Variable	Overall Satisfaction		Organizational Integration		Media Quality		ANOVA		
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F	df	P
Share Information	126.7	30.7	26.6	6.14	24.8	6.	3.51	176	.032
Provide If Asked	123.8	22.9	26.06	4.7	24.5	4.8	4.34	184	.016
Do not Send or Provide	104	44.4	21.7	8.7	19.8	9.0	4.23	183	.014

There were no statistically significant findings regarding communication climate and employee engagement in sending or providing information to the public relations department. Data analysis revealed that respondents would generally either send an accomplishment directly to their organization’s public relations function or provide it if asked, regardless of the orientation of their communication climate.

**TABLE 3. EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT BASED ON CORPORATE CLIMATE**

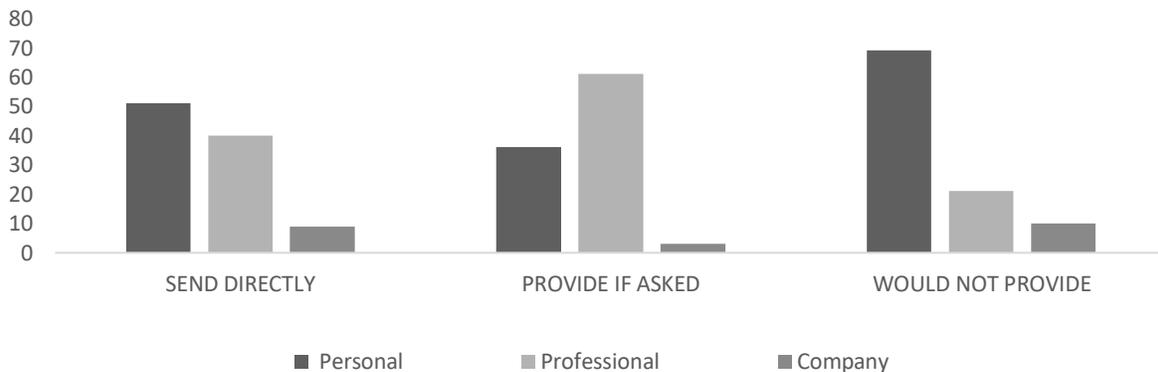
Corporate Communication Climate	Send Directly		Provide if Asked		Would Not Provide	
	%	N	%	N	%	N
Open Culture	49	46	43	41	8	8
Not Open Culture	52	49	41	39	7	7

A cross tabulation reveals that a difference regarding how participants would share information in regard to corporate communication orientations. As shown in Figure 1, participants who were exposed to an open communication culture, reported they would directly share professional accomplishments the most (56%), while personal accomplishments were directly shared the least (41%).



**FIGURE 1. ENGAGEMENT WITHIN OPEN COMMUNICATION STRUCTURE**

Within a closed culture, company accomplishments were directly shared more than personal accomplishments by approximately 20% (Figure 2). Similarly, employees in the closed culture were 50% more likely to provide a company accomplishment directly with their public relations function than only providing if asked. However, employees in the closed culture were almost 25% more likely to share professional accomplishments if asked by public relations personnel rather than directly.



**FIGURE 2. ENGAGEMENT WITHIN CLOSED COMMUNICATION STRUCTURE**

Age is a significant factor in decision-making (Table 4). Respondents between the ages of 20-29 were the most likely to send all three accomplishments directly to their public relations function. Respondents between the ages of 30-39 were more likely to send both personal and professional if asked. Similarly, respondents ages 40 and above were significantly more likely to send both personal and professional accomplishments if asked. Respondents ages 40 and above did have the highest percentage of respondents reporting that they would send accomplishments directly to their public relations team. The orientation of communication culture (open or closed) and its impact on decision-making among different age groups was not significant. Respondents generally would send information directly or share if asked regardless of corporate culture.

**TABLE 4. ENGAGEMENT BY ACCOMPLISHMENT WITHIN AGE GROUPS**

Age	Accomplishment Type	Send Directly		Provide if Asked		Would Not Provide	
		%	N	%	N	%	N
20-29	Personal	58	23	35	14	8	3
	Professional	53	19	44	16	3	1
	Corporate	65	24	30	11	5	2
30-39	Personal	30	7	57	13	13	3
	Professional	37	7	53	10	11	2
	Corporate	45	9	35	7	20	4
40+	Personal	25	1	75	3	0	0
	Professional	38	3	63	5	0	0
	Corporate	67	2	33	1	0	0

An analysis of gender revealed that males were split between sending personal accolades directly (45%) and providing if asked (45%) by their organization's public relations function. Fifty-three percent of males would share professional accolades if asked as opposed to the 45% who would send professional accolades directly. However, 67% of males were willing to send company accolades directly with only 23% choosing to provide if asked. Men were 20% more likely to send company accolades directly than females with only 43% willing to send this type of accolade directly. Females were 5% more likely to provide company accolades if asked rather than send directly. Females were slightly more likely (~3%) to directly send both personal and professional accolades than men.

**TABLE 5. ENGAGEMENT BY ACCOMPLISHMENT AS A FUNCTION OF GENDER**

Information Type	Males		Females	
	%	N	%	N
<b>Send</b>				
Personal	45	19	48	12
Professional	45	17	48	12
Company	67	26	43	9
<b>Provide</b>				
Personal	45	19	44	11
Professional	52	20	44	11
Company	23	9	47	10
<b>Not Share/Provide</b>				
Personal	9	4	8	2
Professional	2	1	8	2
Company	10	4	9	2

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore how employees engage with their organization's public relations function through the sharing of accolades. By using the 2 x 3 factorial design, it was possible to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that affect employee decision-making regarding engagement.

Knight and Haslam's (2010) idea of "employee voice" plays an interesting role in this study. Despite previous research (Andersson, 2019), our findings show that communication climate did not have a significant impact on general employee engagement as most respondents were willing to share information regarding accomplishments. Respondents generally would send information regarding accolades directly or provide if asked by their public relations practitioner with a low percentage of respondents choosing not to provide information at all. This indicates that the majority of employees are adhering to best practice internal communication standards that suggest employees need to take responsibility and be active communicators (Andersson, 2019). The orientation of the communication climate (open/not open) did not significantly affect decision-making, disproving our RQ1 hypothesis in the context of this study. Employees were willing to participate regardless of the culture's orientation, demonstrating that current organizations are promoting a symmetrical system of internal communication as is suggested best practice by Grunig (1992). Employees are being encouraged to use their voice and exchange information but through different strategies depending on the organization.

Respondents responded in one of three ways regarding what they would do with the information: send the information directly, if asked provide information, or not share. The statistically significant differences found at the  $p < .05$  level in the CSQ scores in the three responses support our hypothesis that overall satisfaction with the organizations internal communication directly relates to what employees share and how they share it. Those with mid to high levels of satisfaction were more likely to share and provide information than not, and statistically were shown to provide and send information over those with low satisfaction scores.

Participants responded that they would send information directly to the communications department and if asked would provide the information had a higher level of satisfaction specifically with an organizations' media quality than those who would not send or provide the information. In this study, media quality refers to the extent to which meetings are well organized and written directives are short and clear, as well as the how often communication occurs within an organization. Employees spend tremendous amounts of time collecting and disseminating information concerning such critical matters as company policy, placement, promotion, performance feedback, and so forth. Therefore, for a public relations practitioner, saliency of the messages are paramount to good internal communication. Following Grunig's Excellence theory, effective organizations should base internal communication and relationship building on a two-way symmetrical model, creating mutual understanding between management and non-management personnel.

Participants who also responded that they would send information directly to the communications department and if asked would provide the information had a higher level of satisfaction

specifically with an organizations' integration, then those who would not send or provide the information. In this present study, organizational Integration was defined as the degree to which employees receive information about the immediate work environment. Items include the degree of satisfaction with information about departmental plans, the requirements of their jobs, and some personnel news.

Our second hypothesis, that employees with an open communication climate will more likely send information directly to their organization's public relations function, was supported by the data. However, participants exposed to both the open and closed communication structure were both more likely to send information directly to the communications department. Only the type of information they would send directly changed. Those with an open communication structure were more likely to provide professional information directly, whereas those exposed to a closed structure would send personal information directly. This in part supports Andersson (2019)'s argument that employees are more likely to engage if they perceive their organization's internal communication climate as open. It is known that open communication climates encourage two-way communication and free-flowing information while a closed climate prioritizes downward communication. Thus, more research is suggested to flesh out why respondents were willing to share personal accolades in a closed communication system.

Our findings suggest that regardless of the use of push or pull strategies from an organization's public relations function, people will generally participate in information sharing. However, the difference is in whether employees are simply participating or being proactive within their organization's internal communication climate. As decision-making regarding sharing accolades is split (sending directly or sharing if asked), organizations must decide which action is most useful to their public relations function and its goals. If organizations want employees to be proactive communicators and use their voice, then public relations personnel must prioritize push strategies to increase the likelihood employees will send information directly. Push strategies can include encouraging accolade sharing through social media or other recognition-based platforms or new-employee training that sets workplace standards for engaging with their public relations function. These are employee-centric strategies that place the responsibility on the individual rather than the public relations function.

A previous study by Andersson (2019) found that employees are more likely to use their voice if they are satisfied at work and perceive their organization's internal communication climate as open; however, the findings of this study were not conclusive in supporting this. Andersson (2019) suggests that to achieve optimal internal engagement, employees need to be trained as aware and competent communicators regardless of the presence of a manager or public relations practitioner. This suggests that employees should be trained using push strategies to ensure proactiveness is an expectation and accolades should be sent directly without having to be asked or motivated to do so. For example, new hires should receive training from their organization's public relations function on best-practice internal communication to ensure independent engagement. This includes what platforms or mediums the organization uses for internal communication and the expectations for usage, specifically content and frequency of submission.

Regarding culture, employees in an open communication culture were more likely to directly share professional accolades than personal accolades. Within a closed culture, company accolades were

shared directly by employees 20% more than personal accolades were. This indicates that regardless of the orientation of the communication climate, personal accolades are perceived as less important to share directly. Both types of culture prioritize professional or company accolades indicating organizations are valuing the company benefits of sharing these accolades over the personal benefits of recognition. Personal accolades, such as buying a house or running a marathon, are often seen as less important to share in a company setting due to their lack of perceived association with work. However, organizations' promotion of personal accolades can promote a healthy work-life balance and improve employees' job satisfaction. The benefits suggest that recognition beyond accomplishments that occur during work hours should play a role in the professional environment and public relations function.

The differences in employee engagement by age show that respondents under the age of 30 were the most likely to send accolades directly to their public relations function. Respondents over 30 were more likely to send both personal and professional accomplishments if asked, indicating they are less proactive than the younger age group. Respondents under 30 are significantly more likely to send accolades directly, regardless of its type. The actions of respondents under 30 in this study show they are proactive communicators and are willing to engage without being prompted. However, respondents 40 and older had the highest percentage of sending company accolades directly to a public relations practitioner. An overall trend showed that as the age group increased, the likelihood of directly sending personal accomplishments decreased. In a study by Haddud et al. (2016), it is found that employees who self-reported higher usage of internal social media channels also self-reported higher levels of engagement.

Further analysis of decision-making within gender revealed that males were more than 20% likely to directly share company accolades than females. Females were slightly more likely to directly share both personal and professional accolades. This indicates a difference in perceived importance within gender. Females are more split between sending company accolades directly and providing if asked while men are overwhelmingly willing to send directly.

Of the factors that were presented to the respondents, few were statistically significant in their decision-making regarding communicating accomplishments. Salary, ability to be promoted, corporate culture, communication climate, supervisor, frequency of recognition, receptiveness, and type of accomplishment were not significant and did not play a direct role in the respondent's communication decision-making. While the Wilks' Lambda did not meet the significant criterion of  $< 0.05$ , we argue that there may be an association, but the study was underpowered to detect it. We find this nearly significant, and it warrants future consideration.

While Downs and Hazen's (1977) Communication Satisfaction Questionnaire was utilized in this research, communication satisfaction was not statistically significant in decision-making, disproving our RQ2 hypothesis. This might have been a result of a discrepancy between a respondent's satisfaction with their current organization versus the decision-making required for this study with set communication culture conditions. Future studies are encouraged to examine if a link is present between decision-making and communication satisfaction. However, this study did provide insight into the personal feedback factor within the communication climate proposed by Downs and Hazen (1977). How employee achievements are communicated is affected by a series of factors including the type of accomplishment, age, and gender.

## CONCLUSION

The Excellence Theory argues that to encourage employees to participate in the communication function, organizations engage in symmetrical communication. According to Grunig and Grunig (2008), this requires a participative communication culture rather than an authoritarian. However, this study found that communication climate did not have a significant impact on general employee participation. Respondents were willing to share information regarding accomplishments regardless of personal, professional, or organizational content. This may indicate that organizations are adhering to best-practice internal communication standards by engaging in the symmetrical model regarding internal communication. This conclusion is further supported by the data showing respondents reporting they are “mostly” to “completely” satisfied with internal communication efforts from their organization.

The overall satisfaction with the organizations internal communication efforts relates to what accolades employees share and whether they are affected by a push or pull communication strategy. Higher levels of internal communication satisfaction led to a higher likelihood that a respondent would share information on their own (push), as well as provide information when asked (pull) over those with lower satisfaction scores. Overall, the scores from the CSQ measures suggest that organizations are aware of the necessity of internal communication and are following accepted best-practices. Furthermore, taking a macro look at the CSQ scores, we were able to conclude media quality and organizational integration were two key areas of focus regarding employee participation in the public relation function.

It is recommended that organizations define and promote the importance of personal accolades to employees. If employee recognition is promoted as best-practice, employee satisfaction will increase and in turn, the public relations function will have more content to promote, establishing their organization as one that prioritizes a work-life balance. This first requires employees to recognize these achievements as newsworthy and engage with their public relations function.

Salient messages pushed out to employees regarding desired behaviors, provide a level of control regarding timing, content, and frequency of messages. These messages are most often disseminated through internal media. As this study found that higher levels of satisfaction regarding internal media quality led to stronger accolade sharing, using these media channels is prudent. However, using pull strategies such as social media channels is also advised. Disseminating salient messages through owned social media channels can influence employees towards the desired behavior in a more organic process.

Lastly, we conclude that an effort to empower older employees and women to recognize the importance of their achievements. Salient messages targeted to females may be prudent, as women can be more reserved about promoting their accomplishments within their organization. Furthermore, respondents under 30 are used to sharing personal information and accomplishments on their social media as they grew up in a digital era and supports our conclusion to engage employees through social media using push strategies. Older generations might be conditioned to prioritize company accomplishments as they are not as frequently sharing personal information online with others, thus supporting our conclusion of using pull strategies. Thus, our

recommendations to public relations departments would be to adopt a mix of both push and pull strategies.

## **LIMITATIONS**

Certain limitations should be acknowledged and addressed in future research. This study is limited in scope due to the demographic skew of respondents. Online participation in the study was voluntary, causing all four demographic categories to over-represent a specific population. Hauser et al. (2019) find that self-selection in Mechanical Turk studies can impact the validity of findings. This is common in studies that use an experimental design that assign different conditions (Hauser et al., 2019). The majority of respondents in our study were male, between the ages of 20-29, have a professional degree, and have worked at their current organization for 1-4 years. The high volume of respondents fitting this description should be noted for researchers citing this study as it limits the ability to make generalizations about other populations represented. Self-selection makes replicating a study or specific sampling conditions difficult. To this end, when using Mechanical Turk, more demographic questions should be included to further understand the impact of race, ethnicity, employment type (part-time, full-time, etc.), geographic location, and income on employee engagement and decision-making.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study offers preliminary insights that should be explored in future research. Ewing et al. (2019) and Men and Bowen (2017) suggest there could be a difference between how office-based industry employees share information to the public relations function versus field employees, primarily due to access and training. The hypothesis made in previous studies is linked to social media sharing and would be interesting to explore regarding decision-making, accomplishments, and communication climate. According to Andersson (2019), employees need to be trained as competent and aware communicators. Future studies should explore if training affects the decision-making of employees and their ability to recognize accolades as valuable information to the public relations function.

As our study found no statistically significant differences between those who were exposed to open or closed organization communication structure to their perceptions of an organization's media quality, further study clarifying how mutual understanding is achieved in closed communication structures as compared to an open structure may be prudent. On face value, our findings may suggest there is no difference in the feedback loop, necessary to achieve mutual understanding among management and non-management, in closed vs open communication structure. Determining if this is indeed the case, and if so, how it is achieved would allow for a more nuanced look into The Excellence Theory regarding employee satisfaction.

Our findings regarding type of information directly sent to the public relations /communication department should be fleshed out through a more nuanced study into why employees in a closed

communication structure are more likely to share personal accolades over professional ones. Understanding the role of personal relationships within an open s closed structure may provide the rationale behind our findings.

## REFERENCES

- Andersson, R. (2019) Employee communication responsibility: Its antecedents and implications for strategic communication management. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 13(1), 60-75.
- Berelson, B., & Steiner, G. (1964). *Human behavior*. Harcourt, Brace and World.
- Botan, C. H., & Hazleton, V. (2010). *Public relations theory II*. Routledge.
- Boyle, E. (2017, December 13). How HR leaders can win a seat at the table. *Gallup blog*. [https://www.gallup.com/workplace/231644/leaders-win-seat-table.aspx?g\\_source=EMPLOYEE\\_ENGAGEMENT&g\\_medium=topic&g\\_campaign=tiles](https://www.gallup.com/workplace/231644/leaders-win-seat-table.aspx?g_source=EMPLOYEE_ENGAGEMENT&g_medium=topic&g_campaign=tiles)
- Coleman, D. F., Irving, G. P., & Cooper, C. L. (1999). Another look at the locus of control -- organizational commitment relationship: It depends on the form of commitment. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 20, 995-1001.
- Constantin, E. C., & Baias, C. C. (2015). Employee voice –key factor in internal communication. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 191, 975–978.
- Dimock, M. (2019, January 17). Defining generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins. *Pew Research*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>
- Downs, C. W., & Hazen, M. D. (1977). A factor analytic study of communication satisfaction. *International Journal of Business Communication*, 14(3), 63–73.
- Ewing, M., Men, L. R., & O'Neil, J. (2019). Using social media to engage employees: insights from internal communication managers. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 13(2), 110–132. doi: 10.1080/1553118x.2019.1575830
- Freeman, R. E., Harrison, J. S., Wicks, A. C., Parmar, B. L., & Colle, S. D. (2010). *Stakeholder theory: The state of the art*. Cambridge University Press.
- Furnham, A., Brewin, C. R., & O'Kelly, H. (1994). Cognitive style and attitudes to work. *Human Relations*, 47, 1509-1521.
- Gillis, T. (2006). Internal communication media. In T. Gillis (Ed.), *The IABC handbook of organizational communication* (pp. 257–267). Jossey-Bass.
- Grunig, J. E. (Ed.). (1992) *Excellence in public relations and communication management*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Grunig, J. & Grunig, L. (2008). Excellence theory in public relations: Past, present, and future. In A. Zerfaß, B. van Ruler, & K. Sriramesh (Eds.), *Public Relations Research: European and International Perspectives and Innovations* (pp. 327-347). Springer.
- Haddud, A., Dugger, J., & Gill, P. (2016). Exploring the impact of internal social media usage on employee engagement. *Journal of Social Media for Organizations*, 3(1), 1–23.
- Hargie, O., Tourish, D., & Wilson, N. (2002). Communication audits and the effects of increased information: A follow-up study. *Journal of Business Communication*, 39, 414-436.

- Hauser, D., Paolacci, G., & Chandler, J. (2019). Common concerns with MTurk as a participant PoolVersion. In F. R. Kardes, P. M. Herr, & N. Schwarz (Eds.), *Handbook of Research Methods in Consumer Psychology*. doi: 9781351137713
- Hecht, M. L. (1978). Measures of communication satisfaction. *Human Communication Research*, 4, 350-368.
- Karanges, E., Johnston, K., Beatson, A., & Lings, I. (2014). The influence of internal communication on employee engagement: A pilot study. *Public Relations Review*, 41, 129–131.
- Kinicki, A. J., & Vecchio, R. P. (1994). Influences on the quality of supervisor-subordinate relations: The role of time-pressure, organizational commitment, and locus of control. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 15, 75-82
- Knight, C. & Haslam, S. (2010). Your Place or mine? Organizational identification and comfort as mediators of relationships between the managerial control of workspace and employees' satisfaction and well-being. *British Journal of Management*, 21, 717-735
- Luthans, F., Baack, D., & Taylor, L. (1987). Organizational commitment: Analysis of antecedents. *Human Relations*, 40, 219-236
- Madsen, V. T. (2016). Constructing organizational identity on internal social media. *International Journal of Business Communication*, 53(2), 200–223. doi:10.1177/2329488415627272
- Men, L. R., & Bowen, S. A. (2017). *Excellence in internal communication management*. Business Expert Press.
- Mohr, J. J., & Sohi, R. S. (1995). Communication flows in distribution channels: Impact on assessments of communication quality and satisfaction. *Journal of Retailing*, 71, 393-416.
- Mount, D. & Back, K. (1999). A Factor analytic study of communication satisfaction in the lodging industry. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research*. 23(4), 401-418.
- Onabajo, O. (2006). Proactive corporate management and the dynamics of public relations. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 12(2), 119-124.
- Pincus, J. D. (1986). Communication satisfaction, job satisfaction, and job performance. *Human Communication Research*, 12(3), 395-419.
- Quirke, B. (2016). *Making the Connections: Using internal communication to turn strategy into action* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Rotter, J. (1966). Generalized expectancies for internal versus external control of reinforcement. *Psychological Monographs*, 80(1), Whole No. 609.
- Ruck, K., & Welch, M. (2012). Valuing internal communication; management and employee perspectives. *Public Relations Review*, 38(2), 294-302.
- Spurgeon, & Wondimu, B. (2018). Perception and practice of public relations among municipality employees in Ethiopia. *Journal of Communication: Media Watch*, 9(3), 437-446.
- Varona, F. (1996). Relationship between communication satisfaction and organizational commitment in three Guatemalan organizations. *International Journal of Business Communication*, 33(2), 111–140.
- Zwijze-Koning, K., & de Jong, M. (2007). Evaluating the communication satisfaction questionnaire as a communication audit tool. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 20(3), 261–282.



**Published By:**

University of Tennessee at Martin and the International Academy of Business Disciplines  
All rights reserved