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# AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF ONLINE INTERNAL COMMUNICATION WITHIN AN EMPLOYEE RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT APPROACH: A KENYAN CASE STUDY

## ABSTRACT

*The aim of this study was to explore the adoption of online communication tools (OCTs) by employees and managers of a public sector organisation in Kenya in a bid to build relationships in the workplace. Online internal communication (OIC) is gaining more prominence in public sector organisations in Kenya owing to the recognition of its positive effects on sound employee relationships. Strong employee relationships are essential to enhance not only the competitive advantage, but also the productivity of organisations. It is for this reason that public sector organisations in Kenya have increasingly adopted various OCTs and channels to enhance employees' interactions and engagement. Consequently, a qualitative research approach was adopted. Primary data was collected through focus group discussions and in-depth interviews and analysed in accordance with a well-known qualitative data analysis approach. The key findings in this study identified the lack of training, open communication, involvement, motivation and trust as some of the factors affecting employee relationship management (ERM) in an online setting. The findings provide deeper insight into the degree to which employees are using OCTs for relationship building in a public sector organisation, which could be used as a heuristic for similar organisations.*

**Keywords:** employee relationship management, employee relationship building, internal communication, online communication tools, online internal communication, public sector organisation, social exchange theory

## INTRODUCTION

Evidence shows that employees are a key component in running an organisation and enhancing its survival

(Chmielecki 2015; Rahman & Taniya 2017). Stevanović and Gmitrović (2016) and Mishra et al. (2019) echo this view, indicating that, internally, employees function as an engine that propels the organisation and as ambassadors when interacting with the external stakeholders. There has been renewed interest in the dynamic and interactive characteristics of internal communication, which provides a forum for employees and other stakeholders in an organisation to interact both vertically and horizontally (Stevanović & Gmitrović 2016; Ali *et al.* 2018). Scholars in the fields of organisational communication, corporate communication and public relations (see, for example, Martinez & Hurtado 2018; Sibanyoni *et al.* 2018) underscore the significance of effective internal communication as a vital recipe in the success of any organisation, stressing the importance of maintaining functional internal communication processes to avoid misunderstandings among employees, or between them and management. Hence, the need to support and promote their communication endeavours within the organisation constantly.

Recently, researchers have also shown an increased interest in the issue of building relationships with employees using online communication tools (OCTs) (Waititu 2015; Cascio & Montealegre 2016; Ganapathi 2016; Mishra *et al.* 2019). Currently, OCTs are used by employees primarily for customer relations management in public sector organisations in Kenya (Mang'unyi *et al.* 2017; Githuku & Kinyuru 2018). However, when it comes to employees' relationship building, the use of OCTs is not prominent, which needs further exploration in the context of Kenya.

The goal of this study was to assess perceptions of OCTs within the context of relationship building from both a managerial and employee perspective in one public sector organisation in Kenya. In this regard, the study sought to provide more insight into what extent the public sector employees, who are important for the implementation of online internal communication (OIC), have embraced the use of existing OCTs in building relationships with other employees in the online environment.

This study was exploratory and thus interpretative in nature and used qualitative methods to collect and analyse data to answer the following research question: To what degree are OCTs being used to enhance the building of relationships among employees in a public sector organisation in Kenya?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Theoretical point of departure

This study is anchored on the insights drawn from the social exchange theory, which determines the establishment of social relationships and mutual gratification among employees (Gouldner 1960; Cooper-Thomas & Morrison 2018; Fei & Aun 2018). A recent study (see, for example, Cropanzano *et al.* 2017) identifies reciprocity as a critical concept of the social exchange theory that allows employees to transact their social goods such as trust and support arising from social relationships. The theory focuses on analysing the costs and benefits ensuing from the relationships experienced during the social exchange interactions. As for this study, the emphasis

is on workplace relationships, which are determined by employees' perceived benefits and related costs of using OCTs. In this regard, the costs and benefits are to be looked at in respect of relations among individual employees when engaging each other through OCTs. The theory is adopted to provide new insights into the current use of OIC and the extent to which OCTs could enhance the building of relationships among employees in a Kenyan public sector organisation.

## Online internal communication in the organisation

Over the years, the role of internal communication has experienced significant changes, which, according to Saáry (2014), included entertaining employees in the 1940s, providing one-way information in the 1950s, persuasion in the 1960s, and open communication in the 1980s. More recently, Ganapathi (2016), Cascio and Montealegre (2016) and Mishra *et al.* (2019) discussed the current convergence of communication and technology, referred to as the "information or knowledge-based economy"; this situation and developments in the global market environment are causing rapid changes and greatly affecting organisational communication and business dynamics. Both scholars and practitioners concur that there is a need to transform the way employees communicate in a bid to cope with contemporary changes. One example is the ability to create and maintain healthy and long-term employee relationships (Chmielecki 2015; Vora & Patra 2017), specifically in an OIC environment. These changes are also making internal communication more significant than ever before. One such change is that internal communication is now seen as part of the strategic communication function as organisations strive to enhance their competitive advantage (Holá & Pikhart 2014; Saáry 2014; Šárka 2014; Chmielecki 2015; Martinez & Hurtado 2018). However, to prevent resistance to changes, scholars such as Zondi *et al.* (2015), Fei and Aun (2018) and Mishra *et al.* (2019) suggest that organisations need to earn employees' confidence and trust in all their undertakings, as envisaged by the social exchange theory.

Several definitions of internal communication have been proposed by various scholars, including Ali *et al.* (2018: 61), who define it as the "communication between an organisation's strategic managers and its internal stakeholders, designated to promote commitment to the organisation, a sense of belonging to it, awareness of its changing environment and understanding of its evolving aims". Chmielecki (2015: 26) gives another definition, namely, "all formal and informal communications taking place internally at all levels of an organisation". This is also the definition adopted for this study.

As echoed by the social exchange theory, some scholars argue that employees tend to evaluate various communication channels to ascertain whether they meet their expectations and whether they are able to meet their communication needs and self-interest (see, for example, Zondi *et al.* 2015; Ali *et al.* 2018; Rahman & Taniya 2017). Therefore, as maintained by Ganapathi (2016), the scope of success of the organisation will depend mostly on how well it is able to embrace technology and leverage information and knowledge to its advantage in its operations and the entire

organisational communication. However, such transformation is not easy to achieve without effective and robust OIC.

## The status of online internal communication in public sector organisations in Kenya

A study by Waititu (2015) refers to OIC as online interactions between employees and their internal communication endeavours through the various Internet resources to accomplish specific activities. Research by Ganapathi (2016), Cascio and Montealegre (2016), Vora and Patra (2017) and Attaran and Attaran (2019) show that the evolving communication technologies have changed how organisations operate; for example, in terms of speedy decision-making and inclusive interactions. Consequently, in Kenya, as in other parts of the world, public sector organisations have resorted to adopting electronic communication tools in their internal communication (Waititu 2015; Githuku & Kinyuru 2018). Some scholars (see, for example, Waititu 2015; Attaran & Attaran 2019) have identified email, corporate websites, the intranet, mobile messaging and social media tools as some of the commonly used OCTs in public organisations. However, some scholars (Mang'unyi *et al.* 2017; Githuku & Kinyuru 2018) posit that in Kenya, most of those tools are envisioned for external communication and customers' service provision with little regard for internal communication.

Effective OIC depends on how best the organisation can engage and train its employees to adopt the various OCTs. Subsequently, employees need to be made the focus of an organisation's internal communication; hence, they should be fully engaged and well trained before the implementation of any innovation to prevent apathy later on (Ganapathi 2016; Osborne & Hammoud 2017; Vora & Patra 2017; Neto *et al.* 2018; Samwel 2018). Moreover, some studies have shown that the provision of OIC systems might not have any meaningful impact if leadership and adequate training are lacking (Chmielecki 2015; Zondi *et al.* 2015; Osborne & Hammoud 2017). Likewise, an organisation's openness in terms of its vision and mission and the participation and inclusion of employees in the implementation of innovations allows them to make better decisions and to understand the organisation's plans and objectives clearly.

Some recent studies have considered open communication as a key factor in promoting the use of internal online communication tools because of their ability to allow the free flow of information by eliminating communication barriers, such as organisational hierarchy and gatekeeping within the organisation (Madhukar 2015; Chaubey *et al.* 2017; Samwel 2018; Sibanyoni *et al.* 2018). These scholars also propose the use of open communication to facilitate the unrestricted interaction between members of the organisation at all levels. However, they caution that, if abused, online communication tools can pose a threat to the organisation, since it is a challenge to control negative information in an online environment. Moreover, owing to the dynamic nature of using OCTs for relationship building, it is important to update employees on the implementation of innovative tools and platforms so that they can cope with the current technological trends.

## Employee relationship management in public sector organisations

The current changes in the business environment have necessitated the adoption of employee relationship management (ERM) within public sector organisations (Chaubey *et al.* 2017). This is aimed at managing the building of relationships online and enhancing public sector organisations' niche and competitive advantage. There are diverse views on what ERM entails. However, the view of Rahman and Taniya (2017: 91), who define ERM as a "process that companies use to effectively manage all interactions with employees, ultimately to achieve the goals of the organisation", is adopted for the purpose of this study. In their studies, Dewydar (2015), Chaubey *et al.* (2017) and Samwel (2018) contended that ERM entails the use of open communication that is conducive to inclusive interactions, allowing the organisation to maintain healthy relationships with all its internal and external stakeholders. Beside the relationships between management and employees, Madhukar (2015) also credited ERM with promoting other relationships with employees, customers, suppliers and trade unions, among other stakeholders. In fact, these relationships can also be created between employees and managers or among employees at all levels.

Rahman and Taniya (2017) and Samwel (2018) pointed out that ERM offers various advantages to organisations, including an accommodative culture, sound corporate communication and organisational learning. Such an atmosphere provides employees with the positive energy that promotes loyalty, credibility and trust in the organisation's undertakings. It is evident that because of changing technology, most organisations currently focus on OCTs to improve employees' relationships by improving their online communication. Rahman and Taniya (2017) and Chaubey *et al.* (2017) contend that the role of ERM is to promote employees' interactions – in this instance, using OCTs – to build relationships and involve them in various organisational activities. Such activities may include training and development, conflict management, employee consultation, collective bargaining, negotiations and team building. Hence, it is important for the management in public sector organisations to understand the relevance of OCTs in promoting training and involvement, and in using these tools for building employees' relationships to enhance their competitive advantage (Martinez & Hurtado 2018; Mohammad *et al.* 2018; Mishra *et al.* 2019). OCTs are therefore a strong component in internal communication that can be used in ERM to create and maintain healthy long-lasting relationships, which are necessary in binding together employees and other stakeholders of the organisation.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design and an interpretivist worldview to allow for a deeper understanding of the topic at hand. Interviews and focus groups were the research methods used for this study to answer the research question.

## Sample

First one public sector organisation in Kenya, which requires anonymity, was purposively selected to study the phenomenon of OIC within the context of ERM. One regional office of a state-owned public enterprise with eight sub-regional offices was then purposively selected as the research site because all the offices were interconnected using fibre-optic cable and wireless online communication. A total of 40 non-managerial employees and managers were then purposively selected from an accessible population of 115 employees to participate in the study. Of these, 30 employees were selected for three focus group discussions, while ten managers participated in the in-depth interviews. The sample size was appropriate as the intention of the study was not to replicate the findings across different cases, but rather to gain a deeper understanding of OIC within the context of ERM in a Kenyan public sector organisation.

## Data collection and analysis

A moderator's guide and an interview schedule were used to collect data while the interviews and focus groups were recorded with permission from the participants. All ethical considerations when involving humans in a study were adhered to, such as confidentiality, anonymity and causing no harm to the participants. The literature review and the study's research question guided the questions to assess participants' perceptions of the phenomenon. The main questions focused on the employees' and managers' perceptions and experiences of using OCTs in relationship building, the importance of using those tools for relationship building, and to what degree employees in their internal interactions within the organisation use the OCTs. The qualitative data was analysed by coding responses into various themes in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) qualitative data analysis framework. The trustworthiness of the results was advanced in accordance with guidelines as put forward by Korstjens and Moserby (2018). To enhance credibility prior to implementation, the questions for the interviews and focus groups were pre-tested in a pilot study. In addition, the study was concerned with discovering and representing lived human experiences. Transferability (generalisation of the findings) was not the intention of the study but rather an in-depth and rich description of the case, which could be used in similar cases. Dependability (consistency of the results) was addressed by documenting the entire research process (Korstjens & Moserby 2018).

## FINDINGS

The findings indicate that the most commonly used OCTs in the public sector organisation are email, intranet, organisational instant messaging services, Facebook and Twitter. Based on the coded responses, distinct themes were constructed based on the data. These themes are discussed below, first from managers' perceptions, followed by employees' perceptions.

## Managers' perceptions

Three prominent themes were constructed, namely open communication, motivation for using OCTs, and the challenges of OIC.

### *Open communication*

This theme encompasses the idea that open communication is a key factor in promoting the use of the multimedia online platforms for ERM. The majority of the managers interviewed observed that despite the availability of OCTs and the ensuing online communication, these tools were not utilised for building relationships among employees as expected, a factor that may be hindering ERM:

*Indeed, OIC has opened communication and has now allowed the free flow of information in the organisation. However, there is a big number of employees who still shy away from engaging them for internal communication.*

*Despite using online tools for external transactions, their use for online interactions among employees is still low.*

*Most online tools in our organisation are intended for customer service; hence, they are not popular among employees for their internal online engagements*

Earlier studies (Chaubey *et al.* 2017; Samwel 2018) identified open communication as crucial in facilitating and enhancing unlimited online interactions among employees. However, enhanced employees' online relationships are not guaranteed unless the barriers of OIC are identified and adequately addressed.

### *Motivation for using online communication tools*

This theme extends the idea that motivation is crucial in enhancing the use of OCTs for ERM. The majority of the managers observed that they were unable to identify any form of motivation for enhancing the adoption of OCTs for employee relationship building in the organisation. Comments supporting the above include:

*I am involved in online communications, but I have not considered it for relationship building for employees, as is commonly done in face-to-face interaction.*

*... employees need to be motivated for them to appreciate the use of open and interactive tools, for online relationships ...*

*Currently, there are no mechanisms to inspire employees to use the online system within the organisation to create relationships among themselves.*

Likewise, six managers felt that since employees were cognisant on the benefits of adopting OCTs, what was needed was to motivate them to use those tools for relationships building in the organisation. Generally, the managers supposed that employees need to be motivated and assured that OCTs are safe for relationship building. Their views are consistent with earlier findings (Mishra *et al.* 2019), namely that

employees' online communication behaviour can be motivated by the organisational culture that supports unrestricted online interactions.

## Employees' perceptions

The most noticeable themes constructed from the data were the expected use of OCTs, trust in OCTs, and the main challenges of OIC.

### *Use of OCTs*

This theme conveys that although the benefits of adopting OCTs for ERM are well recognised, some participants had a negative perception of their use for ERM. A noteworthy revelation was that the OCTs in the organisation were envisaged for external communication. In this regard, some of the participants stated:

*It is true that only a few employees are seriously using online communication tools for internal communication.*

*The use of OCTs for employees to interact is not common here, as most of us do not use the available tools unless it is very necessary.*

*I wish all employees would be willing and able to use the available online tools for interactions. Phones and face-to-face interactions are still the most preferred methods...*

These findings are similar to those of earlier studies by Mang'unyi *et al.* (2017) and Githuku and Kinyuru (2018), which recognised that OCTs are envisaged for customer relations in most organisations but are rarely used by employees for relationship building.

### *Trust in OCTs*

This theme embraces the idea that employees must have trust in the OCTs to adopt them for enhancing relationship building in the organisation. Most of the participants mentioned that they trusted OCTs and could extend their use to ERM. Although not everyone agreed, some of the participants noted that while they appreciated and trusted OCTs, they were not using these currently to enhance relationships in the organisation. For example, three participants stated:

*...of course, yes, as for trust I do agree. I would say the system is good and trusted, but we hardly used it for relationship building.*

*Despite considering the online tools as being secure, I don't use them in for online interactions with other employees.*

*In fact, most employees do not have adequate information on how to use online tools for relationships. However, they still trust and use them for other purposes.*

Generally, the findings show that most participants had trust in existing OCTs and felt that they could extend the same for ERM. However, it seems that their opinions were based on how well OCTs were being used in external communication to build



relationships with customers. These findings are in line with those of Zondi *et al.* (2015) and Ali *et al.* (2018) who suggested that employees who identify with the existing systems and technologies would not have a problem with trusting new ones if these are perceived to be able to meet their communication needs.

### *Challenges of OIC*

This theme embodies the main challenges perceived by the participants to be causing employees' low adoption of OCTs; thus, affecting the enhancement of relationship building. Most of the participants attributed the low use of OCTs for building relationships to a lack of appropriate training and skills. One participant echoed these sentiments as follows:

*It is my take that training is important. We need some skills on how OCTs can enhance relationships among employees.*

Other participants also mentioned the lack of employees' involvement in OIC implementation as another possible challenge in the use of OCTs for enhancing relationship building. Two participants had the following to say:

*There is no employees' involvement plan at the moment, and we are not consulted in promoting the online relations issues. Personally, I feel this issue should be considered and addressed appropriately.*

*Employees who are not involved during the implementation of a new technology will have a problem embracing it fully...*

The findings show that the identified challenges were hindering the use of OCTs in enhancing relationship building among employees and that urgent intervention was needed for the initiative to succeed. The findings support those of Ganapathi (2016) and Neto *et al.* (2018), who posited that organisations need to identify and address the emerging issues in order to adjust their structures continually and build their employees' capacity in line with technological advances.

## DISCUSSION

The study provides several insights into how OCTs are used within the context of ERM within a public sector organisation in Kenya. The findings identify a lack of training, motivation, open communication, and trust as significant issues that affected the degree to which OCTs are used by employees for building relationships. In this regard, the findings support earlier studies by Zondi *et al.* (2015) and Stevanović and Gmitrović (2016) who observed that when employees feel that their proficiency, opinions, contributions or involvement (as the end-users) are ignored during the implementation of innovations in an organisation, their perceptions may be negatively influenced; thus, hindering their willingness to embrace OCTs beyond the prescribed uses. The findings also support the social exchange theory's role of reciprocity and its influence on the degree to which employees can readily adopt OCTs to enhance online relationships (Cropanzano *et al.* 2017). In this regard, employees' past experiences may affect

their perceived benefits of using OCTs. On the other hand, managers advocate for employees to be motivated to use OCTs for relationships building in the organisation.

To answer the research question, overall the findings indicate that OCTs constitute an important consideration when targeting external communication. However, OCTs have not been embraced for ERM in this public sector organisation. Thus, OCTs are used mostly to enhance relationships with customers while disregarding employees. The findings also confirm previous studies by Zondi *et al.* (2015), Ali *et al.* (2018) and Rahman and Taniya (2017), which revealed that employees mostly identify with and utilise systems as assigned by the organisation and would be hesitant to extend their use if they are not required to do so.

The study has both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the study adds another perspective of OCTs within an African context as well as an understanding that OIC is also important in public sector organisations, not only external communication. In addition, the idea that OCTs can be used to build relationships online was put forward, which could open more opportunities for scholarly debate. Practically, public sector organisations could be guided by the study's findings about how to deal with the planning and implementation of new technologies, not only to ensure greater acceptance among employees but also to be used as tools for relationship building with employees.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the findings of this study cannot be generalised beyond the public sector organisation, owing to the small sample, they nevertheless provide insight into the need for enhancing the use of new technologies to enhance ERM in public sector organisations. Additionally, the study focused only on online internal communication, making this predisposition unique to Kenya, where OCTs in organisations are used mainly to manage customer relationships and to offer other support services for external stakeholders. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the management to address all aspects hindering online ERM so that the organisation can reap the benefits of OIC. However, more work is needed to determine the influence of building relationships with employees by using OCTs on an organisation's success. For example, future studies could include a larger sample by selecting more organisations in different sectors and countries to compare the findings, and adopt a quantitative research approach.

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