

# EMPLOYEES' COMMUNICATION DURING COVID-19

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**Abstract:** *The context of the COVID-19 pandemic presents communication challenges for companies as they adjust to a new operating, business and public policy environment. This unprecedented public health crisis affects all stakeholders. The COVID-19 pandemic underlined the importance of strategic internal communication, as many companies had to introduce new working practices and hire or fire staff extremely quickly. An explorative qualitative and qualitative research approach was applied to determine the use of digital communication channels and communication channels during the COVID-19 pandemic by Slovenian employees. The opportunities and challenges that arose during COVID-19 the outbreak of the pandemic are presented. Finally, proposals for organizational communication strategies in times of the pandemic are provided.*

**Keywords:** *Internal communication, COVID-19 pandemic, Digital media.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Following the outbreak of coronavirus in China at the end of December 2019, the first cases of infection occurred in Europe after 24th January and the first major outbreak happened in northern Italy (Spiteri, Fieldong, Diercke, Campese, Enouf, Gaymars, 2020). As a neighbouring country of Italy with high population mobility, the infection spread relatively quickly to Slovenia. The first case of infection in Slovenia was reported on 4 March. On 13 March, when this study began, the epidemic was declared by the Slovenian government. With a prevalence of 67.8 cases per million population, Slovenia was in 11th place on that day (Coronavirus cases, 2020). On 14 March the first death of coronavirus in the country was reported and the government adopted containment measures that basically shut down public life, as only those workers who provided essential services could go to work.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the way people around the world live and work. Companies responded to the pandemic with the expected measures - reorganisation, adaptation of work at the company's location and introduction of home-based work or teleworking defined as "a work arrangement in which employees perform their regular work at a site other than the ordinary workplace, supported by technological connections" (Fitzer, 1997, p. 65).

In Slovenia, the number of workers working from home was relatively low during the first pandemic phase. According to Eurofound, in April 2020 29% of Slovenian, 27% of Croatian, 42% of Austrian and almost 60% of workers in Northern European countries and Luxembourg in Belgium were teleworking (Eurofound, 2020). The reason for these differences in Europe was a combination of factors such as a country's affinity with technology, the availability and quality of its technological infrastructure, the management culture and the drive for higher productivity within companies; and the need for workers to be flexible in time and place to

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balance work requirements with family responsibilities and other personal commitments (Eurofound, 2020).

The Slovenian study (Work organization during and after the epidemic, 2020) among employers and employees showed that the experience of working from home was different in Slovenia, but half of the companies estimate that it was better than expected. The main advantages of working from home were the lower risk of transmitting infectious diseases among employees, that there is no loss of time due to transport to work and that meetings are shorter. The main disadvantages were that there was no real separation between work and private life, dependence on the Internet connection, disturbances in the home environment, loneliness, poorer control over the work of employees, poorer knowledge transfer, difficult cooperation and communication. Amcham's study conducted in May 2020 showed that 90% of Slovenian companies reported that no or little work from home presented challenges, suggesting that work from home could be maintained even after the restrictions (COVID-19 flash study, 2020).

In a study on homeworking during the pandemic COVID-19 in The UK, Australia and New Zealand, Waizenegger, Mckenna, Cai and Bendz (2020) found that the benefits of working from home as found in existing e-working literature may not be applicable to the context COVID-19. Their findings show that workers are often forced to work in a home environment, which can jeopardize the original benefits, such as reduced distractions or increased productivity, and negatively affect team collaboration. On the other hand, a typical challenge that existed before COVID-19, such as occupational isolation, has been reduced as all formal and social communication is now through digital channels, enabling the social and occupational integration of workers from the period before COVID-19.

Lithuanian study on the evaluation of telework during the pandemic COVID-19 defines a portrait of the most satisfied teleworker: She is a millennial woman with a university degree and 4-10 years of work experience, working two days a week from home in management and administration. The person most dissatisfied with teleworking seems to be a man of the baby boomer generation, who has a university degree, 20 years or more of work experience and only started teleworking during quarantine. More satisfied with telework are younger employees and middle-aged employees who can combine telework with office work and who themselves have many years of professional and telework experience (telework before quarantine). Meanwhile, the older generations, who worked practically three or more days a week before quarantine, were less satisfied with teleworking (Raišiene et al., 2020)

Teleworking at a distance during the pandemic COVID-19 presents communication challenges. Working from home during the pandemics COVID -19 has dramatically changed financial opportunities and created a new communication pattern in terms of channel, frequency, length and style (Waizenegger et al., 2020). In addition to the need for functional communication during the lockdown in order to perceive and update various adjustments in technological capabilities, communication styles must adapt due to the limitations of technological capabilities (Strong et al., 2014). Since communication channels and meeting forms are the keys to successful teleworking, it is important to know which communication channels are used by employees and with which they are most satisfied.

Communication satisfaction within the organization is defined as “an individual's satisfaction with various aspects of communication in his organization” (Crino and White, 1981, pp. 831-832). The communication channels available to teleworkers are different from those available

in a traditional office environment. For example, full-time teleworkers have little or no personal communication with other employees who fly instead of e-mail, instant messaging, telephone or video communication (Sias et al., 2012). A study conducted by Smith, Patmos and Pitts (2018) on teleworker satisfaction with the communication channels e-mail, instant messaging, telephone and video found that job satisfaction is strongly correlated with satisfaction with the job. Teleworkers who are satisfied with the use of e-mail, instant messaging / chat, telephone and video communication channels thus experience higher job satisfaction. Due to the increased use of new technologies in the workplace, it is important to investigate not only the advantages and disadvantages of certain channels, but also how satisfaction with the communication channel can mitigate the relationship between personality type and job satisfaction. We, therefore, propose the following: There will be a significant relationship between job satisfaction and communication satisfaction with the following communication channels: (a) e-mail, (b) instant messaging/chat, (c) telephone and (d) video conference.

It is important to study satisfaction with communication in telework and to collect sound evidence to identify specific changes in employees' attitudes to communication in telework that may be important for addressing the challenges in human resource management and organizational communication. This raises the question of how teleworkers were satisfied with communication during the pandemic COVID-19. The aim of this study was therefore to determine the use of communication channels, satisfaction with communication channels and to evaluate the communication disadvantages of telework. The study was conducted in Slovenia, a country with a lower proportion of teleworkers in the EU, which suddenly had to switch to telework to a large extent.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Participants

In order to investigate how employees use communication channels and how satisfied they are with communication within their telework, Slovenian remote workers were approached to participate in the study. The data collection took place from 13 March to 15 April 2020. The data was collected via a web-based survey, which lasted on average about 10 minutes. A total of 312 full-time teleworkers (at least 3 days per week) took part in the study. The sample comprised 32.7% (N = 102) of men and 67.3% (N = 210) of women (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Socio-demographic characteristic of sample

Variable		N	%
Gender	Female	102	32.7
	Male	210	77.3
Age	<25	70	22.4
	26–35	65	20.8
	36–45	105	33.6
	46–55	43	13.7
	56–65	25	8.0
	>66	4	0.2
Education	Secondary	16	5.1
	Bachelor's degree	208	66.6
	Master's degree	70	22.4
	Doctor's degree	18	5.3
Field of activity	Services and intellectual outputs	109	34.9
	Production and trade	23	7.4

	Management and administration	43	13.8
	Health	13	4.1
	Education and social services	118	37.8
	Other	6	2.0
Total		312	100

**Source:** Own calculation

### **Instruments**

Job satisfaction was measured with an adapted version of Pond and Geyer's (1991) global job satisfaction scale. The five questions were answered using a 5-point scale ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5). This is a reliable scale ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ).

To assess satisfaction with the communication channels, respondents evaluated that was adopted from Hecht's (1978) scale of satisfaction with interpersonal communication. Four channels were measured: e-mail, chat or instant messaging, telephone, and video conferences (e.g. zoom, teams, Webex). Five questions were asked for each channel and answered using a 5-point scale ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5), making a total of 20 questions. The satisfaction scale of the communication channels is reliable ( $\alpha = 0.78$ ).

In order to evaluate the communication disadvantages of telework communication elements from the scale for evaluating factors that have a negative impact on the efficiency of teleworking, the study consisted of 12 items (Raghuram et al., 2019). The scale aimed to measure the disadvantages of teleworking using a Likert type 5-point scale ranging “not important at all” (1) to “absolutely necessary” (5). The satisfaction scale for communication channels is reliable ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ).

The variables of frequency of use of communication channels and forms of the meeting were also included. The frequency had the following dimensions: never, insignificant working time, several times a week, daily up to 10 min, daily 10-30 min, daily 30-60 min, daily 1-2 hours, daily more than 2 hours; forms of meetings: face-to-face meeting, team or small group meeting (3-6 persons), meeting (6-10 persons), conference (more than 10 persons).

### **Data Analysis**

In addition to simple descriptive statistics, a Pearson and Spearman correlation was performed to access the association between variables. IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, version 25.0 was used for all analyses. P values 0.05 were considered statistically significant.

## **RESULTS**

### **Use of communication channels**

Most teleworkers (43.4%) use telephone calls most frequently across all communication channels, between 1 and 2 hours a day. No less than 25.4% of respondents use the phone for more than 2 hours. Most (38.2%) of the respondents (38.2%) use e-mail daily for 30 to 60 minutes, but also 28.5% use it for one or two hours. Video conferencing is used several times a week by most respondents (35.5%), but 27.3% also stated that they use video conference for more than 2 hours a day. Chat or instant messaging for work is the majority of respondents (42.5%) insignificant working time, and 28.6% of respondents also use it from 10 to 30 minutes.

**Table 2.** Frequency of using communication channels (N = 312)

	Never	Insignificant work time	Several times a week	Daily up to 10 min	Daily 10-30 min	Daily 30-60 min	Daily 1-2 hours	Daily more than 2 hours
Phone calls	0.0	0.0	1.5% (5)	2.5% (8)	5.5 (17)	21.7 (68)	<b>43.4% (135)</b>	25.4% (79)
Emails	0.0	2.1% (7)	2.1% (7)	3.7% (12)	22.7% (71)	<b>38.2% (119)</b>	28.5% (89)	2.1% (7)
Video conferences	0.0	6.8% (21)	<b>35.5% (111)</b>	3.3 (10)	3.7% (12)	4.5% (14)	18.8% (59)	27.3% (85)
Chats or instant messaging	15.1% (47)	<b>42.5% (133)</b>	3.3 (10)	3.7% (12)	28.6% (89)	3.6 (11)	3.3 (10)	0.0

Source: Own calculation

Although certain channels of communication are only intended for specific meetings, teleworkers use them for different types of meetings. Telephone calls predominate for personal communication (95.2%), but a few (4.8%) also use them for dark or small group discussions. E-mail is mainly used for personal communication (85.7%), some (9.9%) for thematic or small group meetings or regular meetings (3.3%). Videoconferencing is mostly used for team or small group meetings (63.1%) or meetings (28.6%) and some (4.5%) even for personal communication. They all use chats for personal communication.

**Table 3.** Common forms of meeting with use of communication channels (N = 312)

	Face-to-face meeting	Team or small group meeting	Meeting	Conference
Phone calls	95.2% (297)	4.8% (15)	0	0
Emails	85.7% (271)	9.9% (31)	3.3% (10)	0
Video conferences	4.5% (14)	63.1% 197	28.6% (89)	3.7% (12)
Chats or instant messaging	100 312	0	0	0

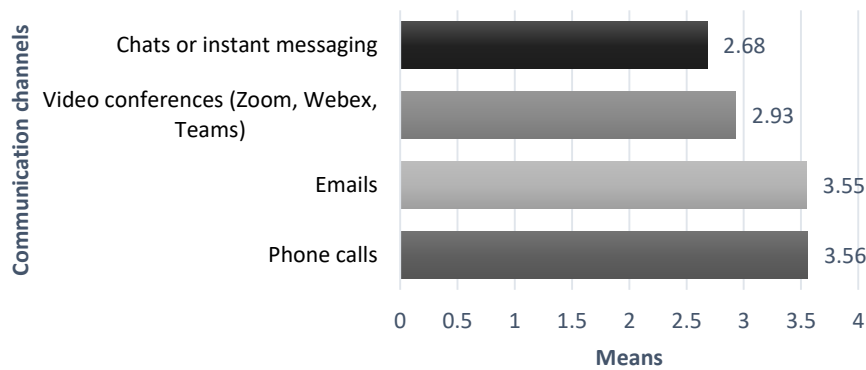
Source: Own calculation

### Satisfaction with communication channels and satisfaction with job

Figure 1 shows that respondents are most satisfied when use phone calls ( $M = 3.56$ ,  $SD = 0.61$ ), followed by emails ( $M = 3.55$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ), then video conferences ( $M = 2.93$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ) and chats ( $M = 2.93$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ).

A bivariate correlation was conducted to examine if there is a relationship between communication channel satisfaction and job satisfaction. It was predicted that there would be a significant relationship between e-mail, instant message/chat, phone, and video communication channel satisfaction and job satisfaction. Results indicated job satisfaction to be strongly correlated with communication channel satisfaction for e-mail ( $r = 0.51$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), instant messaging ( $r = 0.48$ ), phone call ( $r = 0.45$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), and video conference ( $r = 0.46$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). As such, teleworkers satisfied with using e-mail, instant message/chat, phone, and video communication channels experience greater levels of job satisfaction.

**Figure 1.** Satisfaction with communication channels (N = 312)



**Source:** Own calculation

**Table 4.** Correlation between satisfaction with job and satisfaction with communication channels (N = 312)

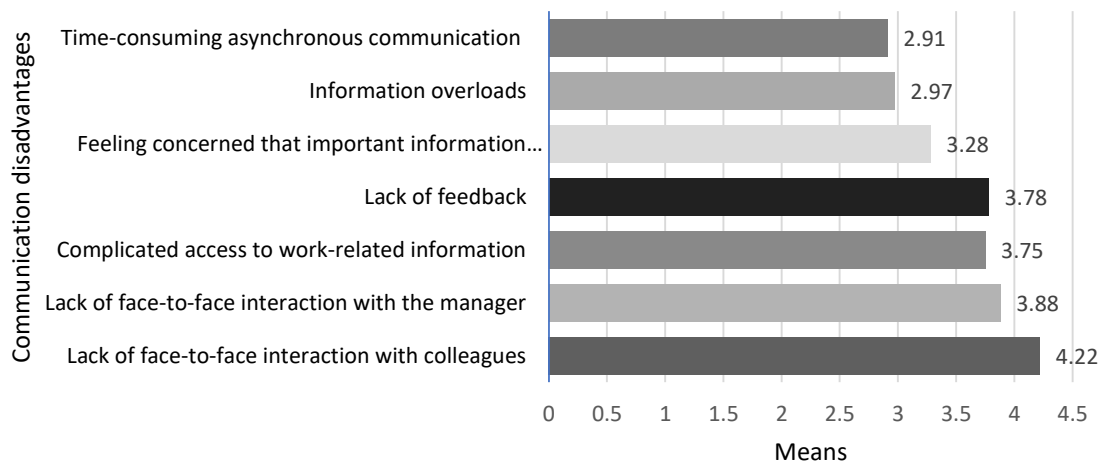
	Pearson's r	p-values
Phone calls	0.45	0.001
Emails	0.55	0.001
Video conferences (Zoom, Webex, Teams)	0.46	0.001
Chats or instant messaging	0.48	0.001

**Source:** Own calculation

### Communication disadvantages

Regarding the factors that negatively affecting communication efficiency of teleworking, Figure 2 shows that respondents expressed a relatively high negative attitude, namely the most negative attitude toward lack of face-to-face interaction with colleagues (M = 4.22, SD = 0.81), followed by the lack of face-to-face interaction with manager (M = 3.88, SD = 0.93), then complicated access to work-related information (M = 3.75, SD = 0.81) and lack of feedback (M = 3.78, SD = 0.87), the feeling concerned that important information evades me, that I miss something (M = 3.28, SD = 0.97), information overloads (M = 2.97, SD = 1.07) and time-consuming asynchronous communication (M = 2.91, SD = 0.91).

**Figure 2.** Means of communication disadvantages (N = 312)



**Source:** Own calculation

At least the association between gender, age and education of respondents and communication disadvantages was examined (Table 5). The Spearman correlation showed that the assessment of communication disadvantages in teleworking differed between men and women in only one case. It was found that women expressed a more negative attitude towards lack of face interaction with colleagues ( $r = -0.22$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ). The test also showed that older people over 56 years of age felt the lack of face-to-face interaction with colleagues ( $r = -0.31$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ) and information overload ( $r = -0.21$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ) more strongly than younger people. The Spearman's correlation also shows that a higher level of education is associated with an increased lack of face-to-face interaction with the manager ( $r = 0.29$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ) and concern about the lack of important information ( $r = 0.13$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ).

**Table 5.** Evaluation of telework communication disadvantages from remote workers by groups (N = 312)

Disadvantages	Spearman's r		
	Gender	Age	Education
Lack of face-to-face interaction with colleagues	-0.22**	-0.31**	0.11
Lack of face-to-face interaction with the manager	0.13	-0.01	0.29*
Complicated access to work-related information	-0.17	-0.14	0.31
Lack of feedback	0.09	-0.32	0.29
Feeling concerned that important information evades me, that I miss something	0.29	-0.31	0.31**
Information overloads	0.08	-0.21**	0.17
Time-consuming asynchronous communication	0.29	-0.29	0.27

$p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

Source: Own calculation

## FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Since communication disadvantages could be related to the use of communication channels and other variables whose relationship we could not investigate due to lack of space, future research should find out how communication disadvantages are related to the use of communication channels and satisfaction with communication channels and job satisfaction. Organisational communication during the COVID-19 pandemic provides an opportunity for new analyses of theory and practice from cross-disciplinary and multi-cultural perspectives. Conceptual and evidence-based reviews that are associated with employee engagement and wellbeing will be of particular interest.

## CONCLUSION

Respondents were most satisfied when they used telephone calls, followed by e-mail, then video conferencing and chats. The results confirm the hypothesis: significant results were found between satisfaction with the communication channels e-mail, video technologies, instant messaging and telephone communication and job satisfaction. Overall, these results indicate that organizations can provide and promote a variety of communication channels for

communication. This would maximize the likelihood that individuals, based on their personality traits, would have access to the optimal communication channels to meet their needs and thereby increase job satisfaction.

Respondents expressed a relatively high level of negative attitudes, namely the most negative attitude towards the lack of face-to-face interaction with colleagues. Therefore, the organization must also provide for less formal communication between employees, which is very important for the employees.

Men rated working from home more negatively than women regarding the lack of personal interaction with colleagues. Older people over 56 felt the lack of face-to-face interaction with colleagues and the information overload more than younger people, and respondents with higher education levels miss more face-to-face interaction with the manager and are more concerned about the lack of important information than respondents with lower education.

Based on the study, management should review the pace and communication patterns of telework during the pandemic COVID -19, and the well-being of employees and the home situation should be taken into account when assigning team tasks and planning team communication.

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