Zooming in to connect: Internal communication and employee engagement of remote workers during the Covid-19 pandemic

A qualitative study on how internal communications professionals in The Netherlands engaged remote employees with strategies based on organizational culture and technology

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic changed the way organizations approached the concept of remote work. Employees who used to share the same physical workplace were now working in virtual workplaces. Yet, the need to keep them engaged did not change as employee engagement is one of the key determinants of an employee's productivity and thereby, the organization's financial health. The responsibility of ensuring employee engagement has always been a part of internal communications. However, with employees now working remotely, internal communications professionals had to change their traditional engagement strategies to adapt to a virtual environment during an unprecedented global crisis. This study aims to answer the research question: How did internal communications professionals in The Netherlands engage remote employees during the Covid-19 pandemic? The study is significant as organizations are now moving to a hybrid working environment as a result of the changes brought about by the pandemic. Employees are now urging their organizations to allow a hybrid working environment as working remotely during the pandemic inadvertently resulted in them having a better work-life balance. Hence, internal communications professionals will now once again have to adapt to engaging employees in a hybrid workplace while blending their traditional strategies and the new strategies they devised during the pandemic. This study takes a qualitative approach to the research question. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with 11 internal communications professionals in The Netherlands and a thematic analysis was conducted on the transcripts of these interviews. The interviewees worked at organizations across industries such as manufacturing, healthcare, and consumer goods, and even academia. The study found that organizational culture, technological tools available and the role of leadership were significant in determining the engagement strategies deployed by the internal communications professionals. It also found that internal communications professionals believe that human connections with colleagues have a significant role to play in employee engagement and their strategies were aimed at fostering these offline connections in an online environment. The study also found that the use of technology made the organizations less hierarchical and more inclusive.
KEYWORDS: Employee engagement, internal communication, covid 19, pandemic, remote work, organizational culture, technology, electronic communication

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1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the structure of the workplace and what it means to be at work. Employees are no longer constrained by a physical office space in order to be productive, and there has been a rise in the number of employees working remotely (Lund et al., 2021). Even after the pandemic comes to an end, remote working is expected to continue on a large scale across various countries, with about 20-25% of employees working remotely for three to five days per week without loss of productivity (Lund et al., 2021).

With people's homes turning into offices and employees being scattered across various locations, organizations are now facing the new challenge of communicating effectively with employees without falling back on conventional strategies that depended on employees sharing the same physical space. As Mishra et al. (2014) explain, the role of internal communication in building employee engagement is crucial as it builds a culture of transparency in the organization and engages employees to participate in the organization's goals. Neill & Bowen (2021) argue that internal communication, and especially organizational listening, is key to making employees feel more engaged with their organization. Employees' relationships with their colleagues, built by sharing small talk while working in the same physical space, are crucial for employee engagement. Engaged employees, are in turn, significantly important for an organization's productivity and capability to innovate (Grates, 2020). Before the pandemic, internal communication professionals could foster employees' sense of connection with each other and the organization through in-person events and team-building exercises. However, this was no longer possible as the Covid-19 pandemic forced organizations to allow employees to work remotely with almost no time to adjust to the change. Work-life boundaries blurred while employees gained new flexibility in their working hours. However, this brought up new challenges for internal communications professionals as they tried to keep employees engaged. As Rice-Bailey (2014) pointed out before the pandemic, the nature of remote work is such that employees can feel isolated from their colleagues without the daily in-person interactions that are the default in an office setting and this means that internal communication professionals have to find new ways in which they can foster trust and engagement among employees.

The Covid-19 pandemic forced internal communications professionals to quickly adapt to the challenge and find new ways of communication using technology. Ruck and Men (2021) state that the Covid-19 pandemic redefined the traditional concept of a workplace. With the future of work being hybrid and organizations in The Netherlands already moving towards it as they prepare for a post-pandemic reality (Jannink et al., 2021), internal communication professionals have to devise creative ways to engage remote employees through technology.

Thus, the changes brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic make it imperative to understand how internal communications professionals adapted their employee engagement strategies during the pandemic and the factors that influenced their decisions. This paper aims to answer the research

question: How did internal communication professionals in The Netherlands engage employees working from home during the Covid-19 pandemic?

The following sub-questions will streamline the research:

(i) What role did technology play in the strategies?

(ii) What role did organizational culture have on the decisions taken regarding engagement strategies?

The study is significant for both academics and practitioners in the field of communication for two main reasons. Firstly, this study is situated in The Netherlands with all participants working at organizations in The Netherlands. While previous studies have looked at the changes in internal communications in Germany (Ecklebe & Löffler, 2021), Austria (Einwiller et al., 2021), and the United States of America (Neill & Bowen, 2021), this one specifically focuses on strategies employed by companies in The Netherlands. While the Covid-19 pandemic wrought many of the same changes in many countries, the effects on organizations varied due to the severity of the pandemic in that country. Even within The Netherlands, organizational culture also had an impact on the strategies that were implemented. Thus, results from studies in other countries cannot be generalized for The Netherlands and vice-versa.

Secondly, the Covid-19 pandemic has wrought changes that will have a long-lasting impact on the concept of the workplace. Even as the restrictions around the pandemic ease and employees are permitted to re-enter the physical office space, studies have found that a significant part of the workforce who had to move to remote work during the pandemic, no longer want to return to the office. A study conducted in The Netherlands found that one in three employees would quit their jobs if their organizations did not allow for a hybrid working environment (KPN Hybrid Working Monitor, 2022). The findings that internal communications professionals made about engaging remote employees during the pandemic will now be useful for practitioners who are dealing with the challenge of engaging remote employees and employees in the office at the same time.

This paper will follow a specific structure described below in order to answer the research question and the sub-questions. The first chapter titled Theoretical Framework shall enumerate the development of the concepts mentioned in the research question — namely, employee engagement, internal communication, organizational culture, technological tools, and remote work — and how theories about these concepts lay the foundation for this study. In the second chapter titled Methodology, the rationale for selecting a qualitative research method of semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis in order to conduct this study is explained. Additionally, the processes of data collection and analysis are outlined. The third chapter, titled Results, will focus on the findings of the study. Finally, the Conclusion, highlights the societal and theoretical implications of the research, and enumerates on the limitations of the research and pathways for possible future studies.

2. Theoretical Framework

The following chapter will enumerate the key concepts covered in this research and provide supporting academic research that relates to the topic. The concepts are drawn from studies conducted in the fields of management, psychology, communication, and technology. First, this chapter will discuss the concept of employee engagement. Second, it will discuss the definition of internal communication and how it differs from organizational communication. Third, the chapter will discuss the concept of culture, especially organizational culture, as related to this paper. Fourth, the chapter will analyse the importance of technology and its advantages and disadvantages in official/business communication. Next, the chapter will look at recent research conducted during the pandemic about the benefits and drawbacks of remote work. Finally, the chapter will tie the concepts together in order to answer the research question.

2.1 Employee engagement

The term "employee engagement" first entered popular discourse with the book *First, Break All The Rules* (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999). The book was the first to prove that there is a link between employee opinions and their productivity, and thereby, the company's profit.

However, the concept that employees can want to invest their emotional selves in the job was first put forth by Kahn (1990). He observed the relationship between employees' personal selves and work roles, and coined the terms "personal engagement" and "personal disengagement" to refer to how employees related to their work. He defined engagement as when employees "employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances" (Kahn, 1990, p. 694.). When people withdraw themselves, then he called it "personal disengagement".

Since then, the concept of an engaged employee has taken root in management discourse, especially since other studies (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008) have found that engaged employees are more productive workers and therefore, have a positive effect on an organisation's financial health.

What is significant to note is that while the term "employee engagement" is now entrenched in management discourse, the term itself doesn't have one common definition upon which experts agree (MacLeod & Clarke, 2009). Since disciplines as diverse as management studies, business, and psychology explore this concept, everyone has their own definition (Shuck & Wollard, 2010). According to Macey and Schneider (2008), the many definitions of engagement posited by researchers have one thing in common, and that is the idea that employee engagement has a role to play in the purpose of an organization, and that it is something that is desired by an organization and "connotes involvement, commitment, passion, enthusiasm, focused effort, and energy, so it has both attitudinal and behavioural components" (p. 4). Employee engagement is important to an organization as these attitudes and behaviours have an impact on the effectiveness of an organization (*The 21st century workplace*, 2005, p. 9).

The differences in actual definitions and the methods of operationalisations, however, are because of the perspectives from which different researchers perceive employee engagement. While some researchers look at it from the perspective of employees (Kahn, 1990), others (Truss et al., 2014) study it from the perspective of the employers. Those who study from the employee perspective try to understand what motivates employees to bring their real selves (Kahn, 1990) to work, while researchers who study the concept from the perspective of the employer try to answer the question as to how employees can be motivated to bring their real selves to work. Employee engagement would thus refer to the strategies and approaches taken by organizations to ensure that their workforce experience a particular psychological state which is beneficial to the organization while performing their work (Truss n.d.). Saks (2006) calls it behavioural engagement. Behavioural engagement refers to how practices forged by management — what Alfes et al (2013) called perceived organizational support — can make employees feel engaged with their work. On the other hand, work engagement is a state of mind related to work which is positive, fulfilling, vigorous, dedicated and absorbed (Schaufeli et al., 2006). Purcell (2014) points out that it is important to differentiate between work engagement and behavioural engagement. Truss et al. (2012) explain the difference between the two as the difference between the process of ensuring engagement and actually being engaged.

Twenty years after his seminal work sparked a conversation about employees being engaged at work, Kahn (2010) argued that there is still no common understanding of what it actually means to say that an employee is engaged at work, even though researchers "intuitively understand" (p. 20) what it means. According to Kahn (2010), research into employee engagement focuses on what the employee does instead of focusing on why and what makes an employee choose to bring parts of their selves to the organization and participate in the happenings of the organization. MacLeod & Clarke (2009) reviewed literature for their study and found that there existed more than 50 definitions for the term. For their study, they chose to look at engagement as "a workplace approach designed to ensure that employees are committed to their organization's goals and values, motivated to contribute to organizational success, and are able at the same time to enhance their own sense of well-being" (p. 9). However, they argued that employee engagement is a term that cannot be completely defined if researchers look at only one perspective. According to MacLeod and Clarke (2009), the process of employee engagement is a two-way process in which "organizations must work to engage the employee, who in turn has a choice about the level of engagement to offer the employer. Each reinforces the other" (p. 9).

Researchers may not agree on the definition of employee engagement but they (MacLeod & Clarke, 2009; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2003; Truss, n.d.) do concur that engagement is measurable. Schaufeli and Bakker (2003) developed what is known as the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES). Soane et al. (2012) developed the Intellectual-Social Affective Engagement Scale (ISA). However, all of them are based on different ideas of what employee engagement means. While employee engagement is indeed measurable, researchers are yet to agree upon how to measure and

what to measure. The arguments can be traced back to whether the scales are being developed by researchers from the fields of management or from psychology as both fields perceive the term differently.

For the purposes of this paper, employee engagement is explored from the perspective of management studies, i.e., behavioural engagement and the strategies employed by communication professionals in an organisation to induce work engagement. The study of work engagement and whether the practices mentioned in this paper actually succeeded in inducing work engagement are beyond the scope of this paper.

2.2 Internal Communication

Employees are one of the most important strategic constituencies of any organization (Kim & Rhee, 2011). When employees are satisfied with their relationship with the organization, they are invested in protecting the organization's reputation (Berger, 2008).

To ensure that employees have a satisfactory relationship with their organization, communication is very important. Companies use various communication strategies such as storytelling, informal communication, and coaching (Pounsford, 2007) and face-to-face dialogue (Chong, 2007) to keep their employees engaged (Osborne & Hammoud, 2017). The study of these strategies falls in the field of internal communication, which lies at the intersection of management research and communication research.

Vercic et al. (2012) define internal communication as "the aspiration (starting from the vision and proceeding to policy and mission statement and eventually to strategy) of achieving a systematic analysis and distribution of information at all strata simultaneously coordinated in the most efficient way possible" (p. 225). Internal communication is not the same as organizational communication (Welch & Jackson, 2007). Frank and Brownell (1989) defined organizational communication as "the communications transactions between individuals and/or groups at various levels and in different areas of specialization that are intended to design and redesign organizations, to implement designs, and to co-ordinate day-to-day activities" (pp 5-6). Researchers such as Dolphin (2005) and Smidts et al. (2001) use this definition to define internal communication. However, Welch and Jackson (2007) argue that organizational communication and internal communication are not the same because internal communication, like external communication, is only one part of organizational communication.

What is important to note is that communications to employees need to be customised because organizations have various types of employees: from full-time workers and part-time workers to contractors and franchisee workers (Whitworth, 2011). Communication professionals should keep this mind when planning their internal communication strategies. They should also align their internal communication strategies with the company's external communication strategies so that there is consistency in messaging. The role of a communication professional is not to monitor every team

meeting or every email, but rather to ensure that all employees get the critical information they need to be a productive employee (Whitworth, 2011).

Similar to MacLeod and Clarke's (2009) argument that engagement is a two-way process, is the Newcomb Model of Communication (1953), which is based on the assumption that the communication is complete only when it has been received by the intended recipient. The Newcomb Model of Communication (1953) states that when communication is between two people (A and B) about a topic (X), both A and B are the senders and receivers of information about X. This communication happens within an existing system, but this communication will bring about change in the existing system. The purpose of all communication, according to Newcomb (1953), is the development and maintenance of social relationships. Since the purpose of all internal communications is to engage employees, and employees who have good relationships with their colleagues are more likely to be engaged employees (Heide & Simonsson, 2021), it can be argued that Newcomb's psychological approach to communications is significant for internal communications professionals in the 21st century. However, the Newcomb Model of Communication has its limitations. Newcomb (1953) focused on the significance of the sender (A) and the receiver (B) and the dynamics of their relationship, but he did not focus on the significance of the message (X) itself. Berlo (1960, as cited by Stead, 1972) not only focused on the sender, receiver, and the message in his model of communication but also included the element of channel. Berlo's SMCR Model of Communication argues that unless both the sender and the receiver are similar, the receiver will not interpret the message in the same way in which the sender intended it to be interpreted and this will result in a failure of communication. Berlo (1960, as cited by Stead, 1972) also argued that the message, and the channel through which it is delivered are both as important as the sender and the receiver in the process of communication. This is especially significant in the context of this study as the Covid-19 pandemic changed both the content and the channels through which internal communications professionals communicated with employees.

Berlo's SMCR Model of Communication takes the context in which both sender and receiver operate into consideration, but it ignores the aspect of feedback from the receiver. This is crucial to this study as only through feedback can internal communications professionals understand engagement levels and take necessary steps to improve engagement (Yohn, 2019).

The Gerbner Model of Communication (Gerbner, 1956) agrees with Berlo's model that communication is affected by the contexts in which the sender and receiver operate, but it also considers communication as being a two-way process and includes feedback as part of the communication process.

2.3 Organizational culture

Organizational culture is a factor which affects symmetrical internal communication (Grunig et al., 2002). Yet, it is difficult to actually define organizational culture since, according to Jahoda

(2012), there is no single definition of culture. Jahoda (2012) explored definitions found in texts published between 2009 and 2011 and found that many of the definitions are "logically incompatible with each other" (p. 299). Jahoda (2012) argues that this is because of the assumption among researchers that culture is a "thing" (p. 300) instead of "a social construct vaguely referring to a vastly complex set of phenomena" (p. 300).

Cowan (2014) claims that the idea that there is one monolithic culture in any organization is an "illusion" since employees come in with their own diverse interests and personalities (p. 32). Louis (1985) argues that the premise that any organization has only one culture is erroneous as is the assumption that all cultural content found in an organization are determined solely by the organization. According to Louis (1985), organizations have several sub-cultures and what is important to study is how pervasive each culture is in an organization. However, Schein and Schein (2017) argue that not only does organizational culture exist, but it is also important when it comes to employee engagement, and thereby employee retention. They also state that every culture lives within a larger culture and that holds true for organizational culture as well. Schein and Schein (2017) believe that culture includes everything from formal rituals and espoused values to shared meanings and symbols, and that is why, they define culture as follows:

> The culture of a group can be defined as the accumulated shared learning of that group as it solves its problems of external adaptation and internal integration; which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, feel, and behave in relation to those problems. This accumulated learning is a pattern or system of beliefs, values, and behavioural norms that come to be taken for granted as basic assumptions and eventually drop out of awareness. (p. 6)

Groysberg et al (2018) agree that culture is something that is shared among members of a group. They also identify three other attributes for culture: pervasiveness, enduring, and implicitness. Groysberg et al (2018) argue that organizational culture is embedded in every level of an organization and is often unseen, yet it can influence the actions of employees for a long time. That is why leaders who focus on strategy, should not fail to take into account the company's culture while drawing a roadmap for the execution of the strategy. As Sawhney (2021) explained, "Culture is an organization's DNA" (para 9).

The Covid-19 pandemic compelled leaders to change the way in which they interacted with employees and the employees to change the way they interacted with each other (Yohn, 2021). It also showed the impact of a flexible culture on a company's bottom line during crises. The advantage of culture being a dynamic aspect of an organization is that it can be changed and managed through a continuous process of learning (Watkins, 2013).

Organizational culture is important as employees prefer to work at an organization whose beliefs, purpose and goals match their own (Baumgartner, 2020), cultivated through both formal and informal means of internal communication. Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo (1982) formulated a

new method of organizational research called the Organizational Culture Approach. Instead of following what was till then the traditional approach of researching organizations for managers to see how they can be run better, Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo's (1982) approach opted "to understand how organizational life is accomplished communicatively" (p. 121). According to them, organizational culture needs to be studied not as a "collection of artifacts" but as a reality that is constructed, spun and displayed by people when they communicate (p. 123). Culture thus does not cause behaviour but does offer context for behaviour (Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1982).

According to Jex and Britt (2014), the study of organizational culture is a recent phenomenon compared to the study of culture itself and the roots of this field can be traced back to Pettigrew (1979). Organizational culture determines why certain policies are successful in some organisations but not in others, and it is also the "force" that binds employees of an organization together for a common goal (Jex & Britt, 2014, p. 488-489). Organizational culture manifests itself in various ways including in the language that is used in the communication that takes place in an organization and in the mode of communication which the employees prefer to use (Jex & Britt, 2014). The mode of communication changed significantly for employees across organizations in The Netherlands during the pandemic and hence, this paper also explores the impact of organizational culture on communication.

According to Peterson and Wilson (2002), organizational culture affects the management systems of an organization and can, in turn, affect employee well-being, and thereby employee satisfaction and engagement.

For the purposes of this paper, the researcher has based their concept of organizational culture on Jex and Britt's (2014) argument that it "represents the basic assumptions and values that form the foundation for much of what goes in an organization" (p. 487). This study will consider a company's stated values as the embodiment of its culture and examine how these values impacted the organizations' communication strategies during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic.

2.4 Technological tools

Ever since the invention of the Internet, technology has had a huge impact on how organizations communicate. The Internet made the company intranet possible. Intranets are an effective way for organizations to quickly and inexpensively communicate the same information to multiple employees internally (Lehmuskallio, 2006). As technology progressed, companies co-opted other computer-mediated channels of communication such as emails, chatrooms, blogs, and social networking platforms. These technological inventions made it possible for employees in large companies to interact with each other even if they were not based at the same geographical location. Interacting through social networking platforms helped build a sense of community and shared emotional connection among employees (Uysal, 2016).

Digital tools are crucial for workforce experiences, because highly-rated workforce experiences can generate up to 22% higher engagement among workers (Zucker et al., 2020a). Physical workplaces also play an important role in employee satisfaction, and thereby increased commitment to work (Zucker et al., 2020b). Physical workplaces make employee events and in-person interactions, which are the backbone for internal communication, easily possible. However, with the Covid-19 pandemic making it almost impossible for employees to actually go to the office to work, the importance of digital tools came to the fore. These digital tools are not only related to internal communication, but also to factors such as remote working. When the physical workplace experience is replaced by the digital workplace, communication professionals too have to use technological tools to maintain and foster the sense of community and connection among the organization's employees.

Communication professionals' adoption of technology is an important field of study but there is little research on how technology impacts internal communication specifically. Ganapathi (2019) found that technology has a positive impact on the knowledge sharing conducted through internal communication. Alshawabkeh et al. (2018) found that enterprise social networking was an effective tool for communication among employees. Over the years, several new tools have made their way into the market and left the market as well. As Holtz (2006) pointed out, communicators need to pick and choose those tools which would engage employees in such a way that they make the organization more competitive.

O'Boyle & Hogan (2019) suggest that organizations should use technology to engage their employees in the same way that they would engage their customers. Communications professionals should leverage technologies such as video calls, emails, and forums to help teams across time zones form connections, to foster a sense of belonging, to portray the authenticity of the leadership and to build deep relationships — all of which can help make employees more engaged and thereby set them and the organisation up for success.

Technology also enables a conversational style of communication instead of a top-down hierarchical approach. Employees expect to participate in the communications process and technology makes it easier for them to do so (Whitworth, 2011), thereby resulting in engaged employees.

2.5 Remote work

Di Martino & Wirth (1990) called remote work as telework and defined it as "work carried out in a location where, remote from central offices or production facilities, the worker has no personal contact with co-workers there, but is able to communicate with them using new technology" (p. 530). Wang et al. (2020) built on this definition to evaluate the effectiveness of remote working during the Covid-19 pandemic. They found that while previous studies had evaluated the challenges of remote working, they were insufficient as those studies were conducted when remote working was not practised as widely as it was during the pandemic. For a decade before the pandemic, around 5%

of employees between the ages of 15 and 64 in Europe worked from home (World Economic Forum, 2021a). The European Union average in 2020 jumped to 12.3%. The Netherlands had 17.8% of its employees in that age group working from home — higher than the EU average. Also, the previous studies were conducted on employees who chose to work remotely whereas during the pandemic, employees had no choice but to work remotely. The pandemic has made remote working the new normal (Wang et al., 2020). In their study, Wang et al. (2020) found that the quality of communication was a key challenge. Remote workers use technology for interpersonal interactions and a poor communication experience hinders their performance. Another study conducted in Hong Kong by Vyas & Butakhieo (2021) also found that poor communication with colleagues was one of the challenges that workers faced while working from home. While organizations suspended in-person meetings and moved quickly to allow working from home, they did not communicate any guidelines or offer guidance on how to do so, leaving workers ill-equipped to work remotely (Vyas & Butakhieo, 2021).

While some scholars (Hickman & Robison, 2020) found that working from home during the pandemic was effective for a certain cross section of the workforce, others (Dongarwar et al., 2020) found that being confined to their homes for a long time due to a pandemic can negatively impact the mental and physical health of employees and reduce productivity for remote workers. Research conducted by Microsoft (Microsoft, 2021) into the pandemic's impact on work practices found that informal and spontaneous interactions suffered when workers worked remotely and this not only affected collaboration and creativity, but also made many workers feel isolated. While remote work provided flexibility to employees, it also blurred work-life boundaries. Remote meetings came with a new set of challenges for employees to navigate, adding to their fatigue. Communicating through electronic devices is changing the way employees engage with work (Tate et al., 2019).

A study in the United Kingdom found that the shift to remote working meant that employees ended up spending longer hours working on their job (World Economic Forum, 2021b). Working longer, however, does not make employees more productive. As organizations look at remote work or hybrid work as the new normal, the challenge for communications professionals lies not only in how they engage their employees but also in how they convince them to disconnect from work and achieve a healthy work-life balance.

2.6 Recent studies

The impact of Covid-19 pandemic on internal communications has attracted the attention of both academicians and professionals interested in the field. Mani and Mishra (2020) argue that organizations had to ensure that employees stayed engaged during the pandemic so that the organization could continue to function. Organizations had to focus on employees as only they could solve the problems that arose due to the crisis (Heide and Simonsson, 2020) and they could do this through internal communication. Ecklebe and Löffler (2021) conducted a study to explore the factors

which are taken into account by employees in German organizations when evaluating the quality of communication. The survey conducted on 934 employees found that transparency of communication, frequency of communication, the substantiveness of the information distributed, and the participative nature of the communication were crucial for the internal communication to be considered as being of high quality. Einwiller et al. (2021) conducted a study in Austria and found that the information that is communicated determines whether employees accept the decisions made by managers during the crisis caused by Covid-19 pandemic or not, but it doesn't affect job engagement as much as the provision of emotional resources does. Both types of information are disseminated by internal communications professionals. McKinsey (Emmett et al., 2020) conducted a survey in the United States of America in the early days of the pandemic and found that while organizations' efforts to fulfil employees' basic needs such as safety and security are appreciated by employees, what really matters for engagement are their experiences related to "trusting relationships, social cohesion, and individual purpose" (para. 7), which are developed through internal communication.

2.7 Conclusion

According to Purcell (2014), most studies of employee engagement lack context and end up offering a "dangerously simplistic view of work relations" (p. 242).

While earlier studies have evaluated the importance of internal communication for employee engagement, this study looks at the relationship specifically in the case of remote employees during the Covid-19 pandemic. This study also explores the roles that technology and organizational culture played in communication planning during the Covid-19 pandemic. This study aims to understand the reasons internal communications professionals at organizations in The Netherlands had for deploying the strategies which they did. The study thus aims to offer a holistic understanding of organizations' internal communication strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic.

3. Methodology

This chapter explains the methods used in the execution of the research into how internal communication strategies in organizations changed during the pandemic and the role technology and organizational culture played in the process. The researcher conducted interviews with 11 professionals who handled communications at their respective organizations before and during the pandemic. The interviews were recorded and transcribed individually. The researcher then performed a thematic analysis on the transcripts and developed themes from the material to answer the main research question: How did internal communication professionals in The Netherlands engage employees working from home during the Covid-19 pandemic? This methodology was based on Kvale's (2007) stages of interview inquiry: thematising, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analysing, verifying, and reporting. The previous chapter delves into the thematising stage — formulating the research question and clarifying why the research is being conducted and what is being researched — in detail. This chapter will expand upon the other sections.

3.1 Research Design

Previous studies (Anitha, 2014; Musgrove et al., 2014) have focused on measuring the connection between internal communication and employee engagement by studying the degree of engagement felt by the employees. The purpose of the studies was to measure the impact of a communication strategy on engagement from the perspective of the employees who are receiving the communication. This paper looks at employee engagement from the perspective of the senders of the communication. It follows McLeod and Clarke's (2009) approach to their study and looks at how organizations do engagement.

The aim of this research was also not simply focused on the professionals' choice of tools and strategies, but also on their reasons behind their choice. A quantitative method such as a survey can be used to gather data on the choice of tools or on the level of engagement that an employee feels with their organization, but it is unsuitable for gathering data on the reasons behind decisions. The interviewees' reasons were based on the professionals' interpretation of the Covid-19 pandemic and their struggles as they adapted to a crisis. The two other topics covered in this research — the role of organizational culture and the role of technology — are again subjective experiences that were hypothesised to have had an impact on the interviewees' decisions. A qualitative research method analyses a social phenomenon and puts "subjective experiences as the focus" (Flick, 2013, p. 6). It makes it possible for a researcher to get rich descriptions of events and gather data on how people interpreted and experienced the event (Schreier, 2013; Sofaer, 1999). Quantitative research methods are appropriate when the researcher needs factual data to answer the question, while qualitative research methods are suitable "to answer questions about experience, meaning and perspective, most often from the standpoint of the participant" (Hammarberg et al., 2016, p. 499). Hence, this researcher chose a qualitative research method to answer the research question.

Interviews are the best way to get deep information and knowledge about a subject and it gives more insights than a survey can (Johnson, 2001). With this research, the author intended to gain insights into the motivations and challenges that were faced by internal communications teams during this pandemic and that's why they chose the interview method. Interviews can usually be either semi-structured or unstructured, in that the questions are more open-ended than closed (Allmark et al., 2009). This researcher conducted semi-structured interviews on a one-on-one basis. There was an interview guide to direct the flow of conversation, but the interviewees were given freedom to elaborate on their answers to the questions whenever they wanted to or to even bring in new perspectives that the researcher had not considered to ask about. A total of 11 interviews were conducted, of which two were conducted in person and nine were conducted over video call. All the interviews were recorded with signed consent from both parties. All interviews were conducted in English as it was the common language for both sides. All interviews were transcribed by the researcher with the help of the web-based software, Otter AI.

3.2 Sampling

3.2.1 Units of analysis:

The units of analysis in this research were communications professionals who handled internal communications at their organizations in The Netherlands in 2020 since they would have first-hand experience of how communication was planned to engage remote employees during the pandemic. All the interviewees exclusively handled only communication at their organizations. All of them worked at organizations that had offices in The Netherlands and were mainly responsible for communications with employees in The Netherlands. The research also sought to understand how they changed communications planning because of the pandemic and hence, the interviewees were chosen on the basis of whether they were in the same field in 2019 as well.

3.2.2 Sampling strategy

For this study, an advertisement was posted on LinkedIn to reach communications professionals who met the sampling criteria. Searches were conducted on LinkedIn of profiles who met the criteria and each one was messaged on the platform on an individual basis and asked if they would wish to participate in the study. The advertisement did not net any responses even though it was shared by participants as well. However, messaging prospective participants on LinkedIn netted six participants. Those who agreed to participate were also requested to recommend colleagues who would be willing to be interviewed. This sampling method, where participants refer other individuals who possess the characteristics necessary for the research study, is called snowball sampling (Frey, 2018). The snowball method netted five participants. The 11 interviewees comprised 10 women and one man. Ten of the interviewees are still handling communications at the time the interviews were conducted while one is not in the same field anymore. The sample is described in Appendix B. They

provided valuable insight into internal communication, employee engagement, the advantages and disadvantages of technology, and the importance of organizational culture (or the lack thereof) when it comes to fostering engagement. The participants worked in industries (manufacturing, travel), non-profit organizations, and in a university. The focus of the study was to study practices in The Netherlands and hence the interviewees were chosen on the basis of their location and whether or not the organization in which they worked operated in The Netherlands. The industry in which the interviewees' organizations conducted their business or operations was not a factor in the selection of the participants for this study. The study, however, does not intend to suggest that the results can be generalized as being representative of the population.

3.2.3. Data collection

As mentioned previously, two interviews were conducted in person while nine interviews were conducted on video call. The applications used for the video call varied depending on which platform the interviewee felt most comfortable with. Zoom was used for four interviews, Microsoft Teams was used for three interviews, and Webex and LinkedIn were used for one interview each. The in-person interviews were recorded using the Voice Notes application on an iPhone. One of the Teams interviews too was recorded using the same application due to a technical issue even though the interview was conducted on video over Teams. One interview that was scheduled to be in person was switched to a video interview at the last minute as the interviewee had come in contact with a person who tested positive for Covid-19 and had to quarantine. The researcher does not consider the use of video call for interviewing as a disadvantage as the research question also deals with technology and the ways in which communication planners used it for employee engagement during the pandemic. Conducting the interviews over video call made it possible for the interviewees to explain the advantages and disadvantages of using this technology during the pandemic much more comprehensively. The analysis of the data began after nine interviews were conducted. The researcher did not take down any notes during the interviews as they did not want to make the interviewees uncomfortable by doing anything that the interviewee could possibly interpret as being a sign of a lack of interest on the researcher's part.

3.3 Operationalisation

As explained in the theoretical framework, the main concepts of the research question are internal communication, employee engagement, remote working, technology, and organizational culture. The interview guide attached (Appendix C) includes the questions that were covered in the interview process.

The interviewees were first asked to explain what employee engagement meant to them. This was a way to get an understanding of how they view the concept for which they are responsible. This

was especially necessary since there is no single fixed definition for the term, employee engagement (Shuck & Wollard, 2010).

The interview questions followed four themes. The first one was a set of general questions that eased them into the conversation. The questions jogged their memory and took them back to that time two years ago when the pandemic was first announced. The second section discussed their personal experiences as an employee working from home during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the third section, the interviewees were asked questions about the role technology played in their communication planning and engagement strategies. In the last section, the questions were about organizational culture and how the values of their organization informed their strategies and planning. In the course of these four sections, the interviewees naturally spoke about how they planned their communication before the pandemic was declared and compared it with the changes they made during the first year of the pandemic in order to better explain their choices. Even though this question was not included officially in the interview guide, the rest of the questions made it possible for the interviewees to offer insight into this aspect as well. Lastly, the researcher asked the interviewees if they wanted to share any of their views related to the research question and which had not been covered in the interview. Except for one interviewee, the others took this opportunity to share their deeper understanding of the role communication plays in engagement and how it is difficult to quantify and measure the impact. They also offered their views on how the situation is at the moment and how the hybrid working environment is posing a new challenge for them. Thus, the semi-structured guide was a reliable measure to collect the data necessary to answer the research question.

3.4 Data analysis

Qualitative data is meaningful but they are not based on numerical figures; instead they contain experiences and meanings that are more personal for the interviewee (Gibbs, 2012). The interviews conducted for this research also contained such information. According to Gibbs (2012), even if the data is collected using audio or video recordings, they are most often transcribed into text to facilitate the process of analysis. In the analytical process, the amount of qualitative data collected is sorted and reduced to arrive at an insightful conclusion. Following this process, the researcher conducted the interviews and then transcribed them into text using the web-based software, Otter AI. The researcher then checked the transcriptions against the recording to correct and verify, as necessary, the accuracy of the transcription. Once this was complete for nine of the interviews, the researcher began their analysis. The researcher conducted a thematic analysis on the transcriptions in order to understand the patterns that came up in the answers of the interviewees across various industries. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a thematic analysis is the best method to recognise patterns in texts. It is also a useful method to sort and describe the data into patterns, making it possible for the researcher to collate, sort, reduce, analyse and interpret the data in a comprehensive manner.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), there are two approaches which a researcher can take to conduct a thematic analysis. One approach is an inductive approach that is based on the research question which the researcher wants answered. The other approach is a deductive approach where the researcher derives the themes from the data instead of coming in with a definite question. For this paper, this researcher mainly chose to use an inductive approach in order to answer questions related to the topics of the use of technology and the influence of organizational culture on communication planning since they were the main focus of the research question. However, certain other important themes came up during the analysis of the data, especially from the answers to the question, "Anything else that you wish to add which I have not asked but you think I should know?" In such cases, a deductive approach was applied as the data was too significant to be ignored but did not necessarily fall into the concepts in the research question. Schreier (2013) states that the coding frame in qualitative analysis will at least partly be driven by data in order for it to "fit" with the material (p. 5). Thus, the analysis included both approaches even though the main approach was an inductive one.

The process of thematic analysis was based on the six-phase guide put forth by Braun and Clarke (2006) and enumerated by Maguire and Delahunt (2017). The six phases are, in the correct order: familiarizing oneself with the data, generating a set of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing the themes, defining the themes, and then writing the results of the analysis.

In accordance with these steps, the researcher first transcribed the interviews and then read them multiple times to get familiar with the data. However, while the researcher made a few notes when they noticed important points, they did not begin the actual analysis till nine of the interviews were transcribed. A few of these notes helped the researcher create codes during the analysis.

The researcher used an open coding method in the analysis, i.e., they did not enter into the process with a pre-decided set of codes, but rather allowed the data to determine the codes (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). However, the researcher did not code every line of text; they only chose those aspects from the transcriptions that were relevant to the concepts mentioned in the research question (internal communication, remote working, employee engagement, technology, organisational culture) or added meaningful depth to the analysis (leadership). The coding process did not include the use of any analytical software. The researcher closely read the transcripts multiple times and manually created the codes.

The remaining two interviews were conducted after the initial analysis process had begun. While the coding process had generated several interesting codes, it was ensured that the insights gained from the process did not affect the questions asked during the remaining interviews, in order to maintain uniformity and reduce bias in data collection. While analysing the transcripts of the remaining two interviews, the researcher kept the codes in mind but was also open to the possibility of new codes being generated from material in these texts.

Once all the codes were identified, a search was conducted for common themes among them. The 25 codes were then divided into four different groups according to the themes to which they

related (Appendix A). The researcher verified that all codes had been included before moving on to the next step in Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: reviewing the themes.

In this step, the data for each theme was checked to ensure that the themes were distinct from each other (that they did not overlap) and the themes were valid for the entire data set (all the 11 transcripts) and not just for one transcript. The researcher also rechecked the data to ensure that no relevant theme had been missed.

The researcher then moved to the next step of defining the themes. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), this step is about "identify(ing) the 'essence' of what each theme is about" (p. 92). Each code was assigned a definition as were each sub-theme and each theme. Each theme was analysed to check whether the meaning of each theme is clear and whether the themes relate to each other in a manner that gives a comprehensive view of the entire dataset as it relates to the research question. The codes, sub-themes and themes were checked once again to ensure that they did not overlap.

Finally, the researcher wrote down the results of the analysis. These will be discussed in the next chapter.

4. Results

This section includes the results of the thematic analysis conducted on the interviews of 11 professionals from the field of internal communications in The Netherlands. The analysis resulted in a list of codes that gave a comprehensive overview of the main themes and concerns of the interviewees. The codes that were produced during the analysis also help in understanding the ways in which professionals working in the field of internal communications in The Netherlands adapted their employee engagement strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic. The codes also give an overview of how the strategies were influenced by company culture and the use of technology. The codes were combined into sub-themes and then further combined into themes that were relevant to the research question. The themes are as follows:

1. Employee engagement, with the sub-themes *engagement strategies*, *building bonds*, and *measuring engagement.*
2. Organizational culture, with the sub-themes *explicit values*, and *implicit practices of explicit values*.
3. Use of technology, with the sub-themes *inclusivity*, and *learning curve*.
4. Redefining leadership, with the sub-themes *leadership at managerial level*, and *leadership at the C-suite level.*

Interestingly, the theme of redefining leadership was not part of the research question. However, the data from the interviews revealed this to be a crucial aspect of internal communications. Since the interviewees emphasised its importance and the aspect was threaded throughout the interviewees' responses, the researcher decided to include it as a main theme.

In the course of the interviews, it also emerged that in order to understand the reasons for the engagement strategies deployed by the interviewees and their impact, it is important to understand who their target audience was. According to the International Labour Organisation, an employee is "a person aged 15 years or older who have worked (for pay or profit for at least one hour during a given week or having a job from which being absent under conditions on the reason of absence (holidays, sick leave, maternity leave, etc.) or duration" (Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques, 2021).

According to Whitworth (2011), the concept of who is an employee has significantly changed over the years and it is getting more difficult to define who is the audience of an organization's internal communication. They can range from full-time employees and temporary employees to contract workers in other countries and even employees of partner organizations. Since everyone needs different information to feel engaged with the company, the internal communications need to be tailored to every demographic in order to be effective. As Klöckner (2015) explains, if communication does not suit the needs of the recipient, it can create a negative response to the message and this negative response can also affect future communication from the same

communicator. That's why it is necessary for internal communications professionals to understand their audience.

Before the first interview was conducted, the assumption underlying the research question was that all the employees in the organization were working remotely in 2020-2021 because of the pandemic. However, it was revealed during the interviews that this assumption did not hold true for all companies in The Netherlands in 2020-21. While one firm specialising in information technology, one educational institution, and one healthcare company had all employees working from home, other companies in the fields of nutrition, consumer goods, and manufacturing had employees who worked from home as well as employees who worked at production plants and research laboratories. These were employees who could not do their jobs from home as they could not access the necessary apparatus remotely. In the case of one travel company, the employees were officially employed but they had no work to do either at home or elsewhere as the company could not conduct its business at all in the initial months of the pandemic. In the case of one not-for-profit foundation, they had to engage not only their own employees but also employees who were officially working for their sister organisation, a for-profit business. One recruitment company not only had full-time employees but also contract workers whom they placed at various other companies for short-term projects. While technically these contract workers were not employed by the recruitment company, the company decided to include them in their communication as they wanted to retain these workers for other short-term projects that had been outsourced to them.

4.1 Employee engagement

Employee engagement was the main concept in the research question and this theme was the most prominent one throughout the interviews. It was also of interest to the researcher to understand how each of the interviewees defined the concept of "employee engagement". All of them practise engagement as something that is "'done to'" employees" (Truss et al., 2012, p. 223), but their explanation of the concept differed from it being a process to it being a result. Four interviewees, including Interviewee No. 2, related it to the process of creating a feeling of connection or sense of belonging:

> I think employee engagement is about ensuring that the people who work for the company feel the connection with the company and feel positively stimulated to do their work every day. (Interviewee No. 2)

However, seven interviewees, including Interviewee No. 4 explained "employee engagement" as the result:

> Being engaged means wanting to know what's going on, to be up-to-date on the company… it's also wanting to do your work and wanting to know what's going on and feel connected to the colleagues around you or the company. (Interviewee No. 4)

The theme of employee engagement has ~~four~~ three sub-themes. The first sub-theme is engagement strategies. This sub-theme is concerned with the strategies that were deployed by the interviewees to achieve the desired result. The second sub-theme is building bonds and is concerned with the aim of the engagement strategies and how they evolved due to employees working from home instead of at one physical office location. The third sub theme is about how the interviewees were able to or unable to measure the effectiveness of their campaigns in achieving their desired result. Each of these sub themes is explained in further detail below:

4.1.1. Engagement strategies

Engagement strategies are the ways in which the interviewees' organizations tried to keep the employees motivated and make them feel valued during the pandemic. The interviewees stated that these strategies were usually a combination of communication aimed at disseminating factual information and communication intended to promote a feeling of well-being and sometimes fun.

The strategies varied from organization to organization. Interviewee No. 4, who worked at a healthcare company, stated that their engagement strategies were more focused on well-being rather than at increasing productivity.

> We noticed that work-related stuff, that worked out. At first <the company> was afraid that the productivity of people would decrease. But it increased. So that was not the problem. The problem was people working too much or feeling disconnected or feeling lonely. Yeah. So it was more about strengthening the mind of the people and having them work better. (Interviewee No. 4).

Interviewee No. 4 stated that their strategies included well-being initiatives such as online yoga, and online magazines that had tips and tricks on how to work from home. They also partnered with another department to ensure that employees working from home had a good chair and desk so they would not hunch over their laptop.

Interviewee No. 5, who worked at a consumer goods company, also stated that their strategy was a mix of disseminating information and a focus on well-being. They also organised fun activities such as pub quizzes and online games. They did not focus on productivity.

> We had people with young children and the schools were closed. So we also had to communicate what we expected from them. And then we said, well, we expect you to take care of your children first and foremost. And then if there's time left, you can pay attention to your job. (Interviewee No. 5)

However, Interviewee No. 6, who worked at the recruitment company, said that their focus from the headquarters continued to be on productivity. They helped employees learn the new tools they had to work with (such as video calls) so they could work better. They organized a global sales competition in order to motivate the employees in the sales team to bring more business to the

organization. While there were quizzes and other fun activities, the interviewee said that these were organized on a more regional basis and the interviewee was not involved.

> We really need to convey vision and stick to the strategy that was outlined for the coming years, of you know, diversifying, seeing opportunity in the market. So yeah, okay, your oil and gas project is not working (stalled due to the pandemic), but the life sciences project is booming… So we made some videos about… how do I find opportunities in my market. (Interviewee No. 6)

The field in which the companies operated influenced the engagement strategies due to the availability of a budget for internal communications. The pandemic saw several companies, such as Interviewee No.6's recruitment company and Interviewee No. 7's travel company, lose a huge amount of expected revenue. On the other hand, Interviewee No. 9's information technology company and Interviewee No. 5's consumer goods company saw financial gains during the pandemic. Interviewee No. 3 said that because they work in academia, they have next to no budget for internal communications.

Interviewee No. 9 said that one of their strategies actually involved partnering with another healthcare company to donate breathing apparatuses to hospitals in India, under the condition that, if necessary, the technology company's employees in their India office and their families will get priority in using it.

> So if any of their (employees) family… was ill of health and they needed to go into hospital and have these apparatus, then they would have first choice at it, because of the partnership. So yes, there was an awful lot of investment done. (Interviewee No. 9)

Meanwhile, Interviewee No. 7 said that it was tough to build engagement when they could not afford the kind of expensive gifts that other financially healthy companies were sending to their employees. This forced them to become more creative and come up with the idea for a video message that was personalised by the board members who addressed each recipient by their name.

One of the engagement strategies that most of the interviewees deployed was to emphasise the importance of disconnecting. The interviewees realised that while productivity had not gone down as much as the companies had expected, employees working from home were working outside normal office hours as they were trying to make up for time they spent with their family (home-schooling children, caring for parents, etc) during the day. The interviewees stated that their communication strategies included messaging that urged employees to not work longer hours, to not work weekends, and to remind them to take their vacation days even if they could not travel abroad.

> Also taking breaks, for instance, I know people worked day and night from one team meeting to another… So we also trained how to do breaks and how to feel okay, if you take breaks because in the beginning, everyone also had the feeling that they need to be online 24/7. Because everyone could see on Teams if you're online or not. There was also something that we need to get used to, because that's a different way of working than when you are also in

> the office. So we also trained them on how to take breaks, how to recover, how to change your resilience. (Interviewee No. 10)

This finding related to the focus on employees' mental health is in sync with the studies by Einwiller et al. (2021) and Emmett et al. (2020). These studies found that the emotional resources provided by organizations via internal communications play a more important role in employee engagement than the information provided.

4.1.2 Building bonds

The overarching theme throughout all the engagement strategies, regardless of the organization's financial health or industry, was the intent to create human connections among employees despite all of them not being at the same physical location. While some employees worked from home, some worked at manufacturing sites, and some had no work to do, all of them still needed to feel that they were connected to each other. The 11 internal communications professionals who participated in this research stated that their main aim was to ensure that the human connections among colleagues and between employees and their managers stayed strong even if not all of them could meet in person.

All the interviewees agreed that it is easier to engage employees if they are at the same location because these kinds of connections among employees form organically when they share the same physical space and happen to meet each other in the hallway or at the watercooler or when they share a cup of coffee at the office cafe.

> We found that engagement levels stayed more consistent at our (manufacturing) plants, where people physically had to come in day to day and could engage with the manager, than people who were stuck in their own home offices for month after month. (Interviewee No. 2)

According to Interviewee No. 6, this contact with colleagues is one of the aspects which makes work fun for employees and hence is "one of the pillars of employee engagement". Their statement ties in with the findings published by Dutton and Heaphy (2003), who stated that when employees connect with others at work, they feel that their work lives matter to them. One of the characteristics of an engaged employee is that their work lives matter to them (Kahn, 2010). When employees feel isolated or lonely at work, their work lives won't matter much to them and this makes them less engaged as employees.

All the interviewees said that one of the main challenges they faced was in replicating this kind of offline connection online.

Interviewee No. 1 stated that one of the ways in which they did this was simply move the strategy they had in real life called "the huddle" to a video call. While the huddle was a weekly meeting in person that lasted for 10 minutes before the pandemic, it became a virtual touch point now as employees worked from home. They also marked King's Day virtually in 2020 by urging

employees to share pictures of their celebrations at home with colleagues whom they could not celebrate with in person.

However, nine of the 11 interviewees agreed that it is not possible to make real connections with people through a screen. Interviewee No. 11 stated that it depends on the connections that already exist among colleagues. An existing connection can be deepened through online interaction but making a new connection, as is the case when a new employee joins the team and everyone is working remotely, is very difficult to do in an online setting. Interviewee No. 9 however stated that it is possible to make connections, and even deepen these connections when working from home in a way that is not possible to do in an office. In fact, during the pandemic, people managers in her team were trained to have authentic conversations with their colleagues and asking them about their well-being instead of talking only about work.

> ...before the pandemic, you would be much more "professional". But I think during the pandemic… I think people get to know each other much better, because they're in their home environment…. So I think because we've had to be vulnerable, I think the relationships actually improved because of it and people have better relationships now because of it too. Strangely. (Interviewee No. 9)

The focus on building human connections was vital for employee engagement strategies as many of these organizations also faced a scenario where employees would move on to other jobs as the pandemic began to decline. Communication strategies laid emphasis on ensuring the employees were ambassadors for the organization and that they would not only stay with the organization but also contribute to bringing in prospective employees by showcasing the organization as being a great place to work at.

4.1.3 Measuring engagement

The end result of internal communications strategies was to ensure that employees have a feeling of engagement. However, the effectiveness of communication depends not only on the sender but also the receiver. In his communication theory, Berlo (1960) argues that communication is effective only when both the sender and the receiver are in sync, as communication is not just about the meaning that the sender intends to send but also the meaning that the receiver has created through their interpretation of the message and the channel.

In order to ensure that the sender and receiver are in sync, it is necessary to receive feedback from the receiver. All the interviewees agreed that it is very important to measure the effectiveness of engagement and all of them (except Interviewee No. 3) did so during the pandemic. They conducted formal surveys across groups of employees and also received informal anecdotal feedback from others. However, they also stated that it is very difficult to measure the exact impact of communications in employee engagement as there are various other organizational factors that play a part as well.

> Yeah, because if people are engaged, then they love to come to work every day. If people are not engaged, they don't like the jobs, or they don't like to the manager, they don't like the food, they don't like the building, there all kinds of things that they could not like. And then they would probably rather not go to work. (Interviewee No. 10)

It is also difficult to engage employees who are stressed out because of a pandemic. As Interviewee No. 3 pointed out, even if the communications were done perfectly, it is very difficult to engage people when they are in a crisis situation. Interviewee No. 4 also stated that the biggest challenge is to get the employees to spend their time on internal communication when they have various other factors in their personal lives (home-schooling children, caring for the elderly, etc) taking precedence on their time. This is in accordance with the communication theories put forth by Dance (1970) and Carey (2008) who studied meaning development as a concept not only between sender and receiver but as one that is also influenced by other societal and cultural factors. In the case of this study, those factors were the pandemic, remote work, organisational culture, use of technology, and the role of leadership.

4.2 Organizational culture

Nine out of 11 interviewees stated that they based their communication strategies on the organization's culture. Interviewee No. 11 worked at an agency and hence, this question was not applicable to them. Interviewee No. 3 said that they did not do that as they are an academic organization and as such, have no fixed organizational culture. Interviewee No. 3's focus was on establishing structures as they were the first and only person in charge of internal communications at their organization. However, the other interviewees already had structures in place and hence, they were able to focus on organizational culture.

Since organizational culture is a concept that is very hard to define and describe, this study focused on the values that had been stated officially by the organization as being their values. These will be referred to as *explicit values*. These explicit values have been used in this study as a guide to measure the role of organizational culture in communication. The study found that in 2019, the year before the pandemic, explicit values were often propagated through implicit practices which then formed the bedrock for organizational culture.

Interviewee Nos 1, 4, 6, and 10 based their communication on both explicit values and implicit practices. Interviewee No. 1 explained that "togetherness" and "caring for people and planet" are two of the values of their organization. The employees used to practice these by adopting the Scandinavian cultural concept of "fika", a social moment when people come together over tea or coffee.

> I remember when I joined <organisation>, coming from a different culture, I realised very quickly how big the fika culture is, you know, 'let's do a fika'... And so you have very quickly all kinds of virtual fikas popping up left, right and centre. (Interviewee No. 1)

Interviewee No. 10 stated that since theirs was a manufacturing company that did not shut its plants during the pandemic, they had two main types of employees: office employees and plant workers. While office employees could work from home, plant workers could not. Hence, in order to show their solidarity with the plant workers, office workers who were working from home came back to work in the office as soon as regulations allowed them to do so.

Interviewee No. 2 said that in the early months of the pandemic, they did not specifically plan the communication to focus on the organization's values. However, they noticed that employees across the organization were taking initiatives and doing things to support their local communities or their colleagues. These initiatives were related to the organization's explicit value of "caring". The interviewee and their team then began to focus their strategies on this component. When they realised that the pandemic was going to last much longer than the six months which they had previously thought, they began designing their communication strategies to be rooted in the organization's cultural values.

Interviewee No. 6, whose recruitment company suffered financial losses during the pandemic, stated that the values of the company were "entrepreneurial, results-driven, excellence, and sustainability". The interviewee stated that they structured their communication around these values and included content such as inspirational entrepreneurial stories by the CEO on their blog. However, this content was also meant to urge the employees to think in a way that aligned with the company's business strategy of diversification, they said.

The interviewees stated that they fostered their respective organizations' values implicitly through engagement strategies such as online team lunches or after-office drinks, and through the tone and content of their communication output. Nine of the 11 communication professionals interviewed for this research study agreed that they changed the tone of their messaging during the pandemic.

> Whenever we announce something, or whatever we communicate, whatever, I always make sure that the communications is a reflection of caring, collaborative and courageous [which were the values of the organisation in 2020]. (Interviewee No. 8)

Interviewee No. 10, however, stated that they had a "nice" tone even before the pandemic and so they did not need to switch their tone. In fact, they said that had they not had a "nice" tone before the pandemic and had changed to one because of the pandemic, then their communication would have come across as being inauthentic.

While their intranet and other messaging were previously "uber businesslike," according to Interviewee 2, they now became much more personal and included content such as how other employees are coping with the pandemic restrictions or working from home. They focused on increasing the number of ways in which people can see each other in order to help maintain employees' well-being. It was thus a combination of pre-pandemic content of in-person events and pandemic era channel of online video conferencing.

> ...every day when you sit in your own home office, you feel like you're the only person in the

> world doing this. And we use the time also to show people you know, how other people were adapting and other best practices we were seeing coming up, which was great. (Interviewee No. 2)

According to Interviewee No. 11, an organization's culture and internal communications are intertwined. If the organization has an open culture, the communication will be multi-directional and not just top down. If the organization's culture is not an open one, then the communication will reflect that as well, they said.

> "But I think that in general, internal communication and culture go hand in hand. Internal communications are a reflection of the culture, they can strengthen it. And they and they simply reflect it. I know of organizations that are very find it very difficult to communicate timely. Because they there are things that are not clear yet, or they are they find it difficult to communicate in a way that will reduce uncertainty or unrest or confusion, because they don't want to get difficult questions, because they don't know how to answer them. Other cultures are much more open and may be used to saying, you know, good question. We don't know, we will get back to you. So yeah, it is a full reflection of culture. (Interviewee No. 11)

4.3 Use of technology

The restrictions around the pandemic in The Netherlands forced employees at various organizations to work remotely as much as possible. This resulted in most internal communications taking place through technological channels rather than in person. All the interviewees stated that before the pandemic hit, the focus was on in-person events such as town halls and roadshows but after the pandemic restrictions came into effect, they had to pivot to strategies that were possible in an online environment.

> We had planned a full year of travel to all kinds of locations, again, from India to Singapore, smaller, bigger sites, production sites, labs, etc. That was not possible anymore. Everybody was stuck at home, including the CEOs. So we just made sure that we linked them to regional leaders. And they would do virtual town halls, we would also do chat sessions." (Interviewee No. 8)

The most common technology used by all the interviewees was video conferencing. However, the organization's partnerships and business strategies determined which video conferencing tool they had access to: whether it was Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or Webex. The tools had their own limitations as well, and this dictated what engagement strategies the interviewees could deploy. Initially, the interviewees opted for video calls for disseminating information and for engaging employees with the leadership. However, they soon realized that the tools came with their own set of limitations such as a limit on the number of people who could participate in a call at one time. This resulted in a new challenge for the communications professionals. They either moved to more advanced features such as live events or got creative by recording the calls and sharing the recorded video with all employees.

The process of moving to using technology due to the pandemic was comparatively smoother for Interviewee Nos. 2 and 6 than it was for the other interviewees. This was because before the pandemic, their organizations had already begun to pivot to a digital, mobile workplace. For other interviewees, the learning curve was steeper and they had to adapt more quickly. Interviewee No. 1 stated that the learning curve would have been steeper for her team if one of their team members was not already well-versed in technology. This was a crucial finding for this study as it proved that internal communication cannot be studied in isolation without also studying the organization's strategy for its business (including whether or not they want to prioritise having diversity in their workforce).

All the interviewees said that by using technology in their engagement strategies, they were able to reach more employees for lesser costs. If an in-person town hall had a capacity of 200 people, a virtual town hall had a capacity for 2,000 participants. All of them could be based at various locations and yet have the same opportunity for participation. Employees were no longer restricted access to information just because they were not based at a particular location. This contributed to building a sense of engagement. Technology was a huge leveller and it helped the internal communications professionals foster an organizational culture that was more inclusive.

Inclusivity meant not just including more number of people but also reducing the hierarchical gap between leadership and employees. Compared to the situation before the pandemic, employees now had more direct access to management. As Interviewee No. 8 pointed out, before the pandemic, if a CEO visited one office in one country, the other offices in that country would not benefit. However, now with such visits being virtual, everybody could connect at the same time and had equal opportunity to ask questions, and had equal visibility to leadership. This "democratises" the organisational structure, according to Interviewee No. 8.

The use of technology also made the communication more interactive. Interviewee No. 7 stated that initially they had a top-down approach to communication but after a couple of weeks, they began to organise special sessions, sometimes over a cup of coffee, during which the employees could ask managers questions about how the crisis affects their role in the organisation and also talk about what they were worried about. This finding is in sync with Ecklebe and Loffler's (2021) findings that employees appreciate it when communication is of a participatory nature.

However, as Interviewee No. 8 found in the course of her work, the interactive nature of virtual communication also had its own disadvantage. Employees who would otherwise have not been critical of the organization or the leadership in an in-person townhall were now posting very critical remarks in the chat section during virtual Q&A sessions and creating a negative atmosphere at virtual meetings. This resulted in a new challenge for internal communications professionals to decide if and how they should moderate conversations in a virtual setting.

The internal communications professionals interviewed for the study noted that their use of technology in their strategies did not stay static during the pandemic; rather, they changed whenever

they realised that employees were beginning to feel disengaged. At the start of the pandemic, they focused on text and video to disseminate information. Next, they moved away from a text-driven format to a visual one as they found that a visual format (such as video conferencing) required more active participation from the employees and thereby, had stronger impact on engagement. Interviewee No. 5 stated that after the first couple of months of pub quizzes and games, they reduced the use of video for non-work-related activities as people began to complain that they were too tired to continue sitting in front of the screen and "be funny". Interviewee No. 7 stated that the team began thinking of new formats in which they could convey factual information in order to ensure maximum impact.

> Let's see, I thought October, yes, October 2020. We stopped with the regular updates in a video message. Because when you use that medium for too long, it loses impact. So now we only use video message, when there are really, really big announcements to make. (Interviewee No. 7)

A crucial finding of this study was that the phase of internal communications that is being studied is almost at its end. The interviewees stated that a new phase in internal communication has already begun. When the work environment changed from a physical one to a remote one, internal communications had to adapt their strategies. Similarly, now the work environment is changing to a hybrid one and now internal communications professionals will have to figure out ways in which they can engage employees when some of them are at the office and others are working remotely.

> So with people both being physically in the, in the venue, that's our office, and, and also broadcasting and also doing a virtual providing a virtual platform. How do you do that, in a way that remains still interesting and exciting to both the physical and the online audience, is, of course something which is, yeah, it's a big challenge. (Interviewee No. 1)

4.4 Redefining leadership

The change in practices of internal communication also had an impact on the organizational structure. The role of internal communications professionals is to engage employees not just with well-being initiatives but also by informing them about the latest developments in the organization. Earlier, they would update managers with this information and rely on them to pass on this information to their team members, according to the interviewees. C-Suite leaders would meet employees but only during select events and their speeches and other communication were carefully scripted by the communication professionals. However, during the pandemic, internal communication professionals also had to engage in crisis communication. At a time of uncertainty for employees, they needed to reassure the employees of their organization's strategy and the way forward through the pandemic. If employees had to stay engaged with the company, they needed to know this important information and they needed to feel that they were connected with the company and its leadership. As Interviewee No. 8 explained, the pandemic drew attention back to an important mindset that leadership needed to have: considering employees as stakeholders.

> ...It's really the mindset of taking your colleagues seriously, consider them as crucial stakeholders, one of the most crucial stakeholders you can have as a company. Because, I mean, you can have beautiful technologies, science, machines, but without people, you're nowhere. (Interviewee No. 8)

Through the use of technology, communication professionals were able to directly connect C-suite leaders with all levels of employees and thereby create a strong connection for the employees with the company. In many ways, this levelled the playing field and flattened the hierarchical structure of these organizations. The interviewees did not state that the leadership had a plan to reduce hierarchy in their organizations. Only Interviewee No. 1 stated that the structure at their non-profit organization has always been a flat one. The reduction in hierarchy happened inadvertently as organizations began to rely on technology more during the pandemic than they had done previously for their communication strategies. In the case of Interviewee No. 8, the organization saw a change in leadership at the CEO level at the same time as the pandemic began. The new CEOs had already decided before the pandemic that they would have a collaborative approach but the ways in which they went about it were affected by the opportunities and limitations of pandemic-era communication.

With C-suite leaders also unable to travel and having to work from home, communication professionals also changed the conventional leadership strategy of crafted speeches and chose to urge these leaders to be more relaxed and informal, according to the interviewees. They found that employees connected with the leadership more strongly when they felt that the barriers of hierarchy had been erased and that the C-suite leaders were in the same situation as them. This resulted in communication strategies focusing on two features: authenticity and personalization.

> So what's really important for management positioning is for them really to be authentic, authentically themselves. So that has been a complete mind shift, and also quite, you know, going out of comfort zones for a lot of management… If they say they don't know something, because they don't know something, you know, they wouldn't have thought about saying that before that, but also giving their personal feelings about what the pandemic has done to them. That was very… a much better way to communicate to employees. And it makes them feel much more engaged. And also believe that you know, that their leaders are being themselves and being open and honest with them, rather than something that's been very heavily scripted. (Interviewee 9)

Interviewee No. 3 stated that even in academia, authenticity was important in communication from leadership, but not all leaders are able to adapt to this new form of communication. They require coaching but with limited resources at the interviewee's disposal and the nature of the crisis, it was not possible to give them the coaching that would have made them more comfortable communicating informally through a screen and made the communications feel "a little more human".

> I think sometimes they felt like everything had to be really well-produced, and they needed a script. And when actually, it would have been better if we had taken a much more informal

> approach, and just let them kind of speak from the heart, even if the video quality wasn't that good or whatever… Yes, I think as internal communications professionals in that kind of situation, you really have to coach your leaders to, to appear authentic on the other side of the screen, and not too scripted. Not too, too stiff. (Interviewee No. 3)

Interviewee No. 9 recalled how the CEO of their organization made his communication personal when he sent a video message to the employees after his father passed away from Covid. The fact that he was being openly vulnerable really impressed his employees, the interviewee said. "It's just those small personal details about you know, how it affects people, it makes people more human," said Interviewee No. 9.

This effort to personalize their communication was not only made by communication professionals for the employees in general but also by them in their capacity as leaders in their own teams. Interviewee No. 8 did "a balancing act" between being honest with their team members when the interviewee was having a bad day and not bringing the mood of the entire team down. Interviewee No. 2 had regular video calls with their team members on how the others are doing emotionally. Interviewee No. 9 chose to be "vulnerable", "authentic" and "more truthful" in their communications with their team, even injecting humour into the conversations. Interviewee No. 7 said that they and their team focused a lot more on the personal aspects of their team members than they did before the pandemic even though the matters discussed are uncomfortable since the company is not yet out of its financial crisis.

As leaders, the interviewees also stated that while their workload increased during the pandemic, they saw the crisis as an opportunity to raise the profile of internal communications and the role their team plays in employee engagement within their organizations. Interviewee No. 1 said they had been looking at ways to invigorate some of their employee engagement programmes before the pandemic, and when the pandemic was declared, they took it as an opportunity to accelerate the plans they had started fleshing out. Interviewee No. 6 saw it as an opportunity to explain to employees in his legacy organization who were not keen on change as to why the organization's new strategy of diversification was important and how it related to the effects of the pandemic. Interviewee No. 7 had employees at various locations before the pandemic and engaging all of them had been difficult, but the pandemic gave everyone a common cause around which they could come together and Interviewee No. 7 took this opportunity to foster engagement. Interviewee No. 2 stated that they and other communication professionals took this opportunity to emphasise to the management the importance of their role in the organization.

> You know, there's a saying that never waste a good crisis. And I think for internal communications, this is a crisis that really accelerated the reputation of the function much more so than in previous years. (Interviewee No. 2)

According to Interviewee No. 11, the one thing that the pandemic has reiterated is that it is not just how the message is conveyed that determines its impact but also who is conveying the message.

> That's [social media tools] not the way to go when it comes to impactful messaging. You need leadership to take that on. There is no change there from the time before Covid…. Because people are all working very hard, feel overloaded and simply want to hear very impactful things that determine their daily work, or that have an impact on their daily work from their manager. (Interviewee No. 11)

Thus, internal communication professionals changed their strategies during the pandemic to keep employees engaged by adapting to the technological tools available to them, basing their communication on their organization's cultural values, and making communication from leadership more authentic and personal.

5. Conclusion

In this chapter, the significance of the findings of this study, as related to its academic and societal implications, will be covered. The limitations of the study and areas for future research will also be detailed in this chapter.

Even though the term “employee engagement” has no universal definition (Sun & Bunchapattanasakda, 2019), it remains a matter of concern for organizations. Ever since Kahn (1990) spoke about “personal engagement”, the term has evolved over the years to draw in experts from disciplines as varied as management, psychology, and more recently, communication (Welch, 2011).

However, Welch (2011) also points out that there is a dearth in corporate communication literature on employee engagement as compared to academic literature from management, business, and psychology perspectives. Kahn (2010) states that one of the characteristics of engagement is that it is not a static state of mind; rather, it is a fluid process that is influenced by external factors such as connection with colleagues, the sense of being heard by leadership, and the feelings that they can express themselves in a trusted space. Communication strategies of the employer are also an external factor that can influence employee engagement (Welch 2011) as these strategies seek to create and shape the factors mentioned by Kahn (2010).

The Covid-19 pandemic changed the dynamics of the situation as it forced organizations to re-evaluate their engagement strategies at a time when their employees were going through a global crisis that was unprecedented in living memory. Even as employees looked towards their organization’s leaders for answers and reassurance, organizations were themselves grappling with a steep learning curve. Heide and Simonsson (2021) argue that traditional practices were not enough to manage the issues related to the pandemic; what was needed was an approach that combined leadership, culture, and communication to highlight the importance of co-workers. As this study found, the role of internal communication in this approach cannot be overstated.

This study drew on the findings of researchers across the fields of psychology, management, business, organisational culture, and communication to formulate questions for interviewees in order to conduct a qualitative study that would answer the research question: How did internal communication professionals in The Netherlands engage employees working from home during the Covid-19 pandemic?

To answer this research question, 11 internal communications professionals working at organizations across The Netherlands were interviewed. A thematic analysis was conducted on the transcripts of the interviews. Four main themes emerged from the data at the end of the analysis. The first theme is employee engagement, which, along with its three sub-themes, encompasses the strategies deployed for engagement, the expected results of these strategies, and the challenges faced by internal communications professionals when they have to measure the results. The second theme is organizational culture and it includes the values and practices that influence an employee’s experience at an organization. The third theme is the use of technology and it is concerned with how internal

communication professionals used an online environment to create offline connections. The fourth theme is redefining leadership and it includes the ways in which engagement strategies during the pandemic had an impact on leaders at various levels in an organization.

The findings from the study answered the objectives of the research. The aim of this study was to understand the reasons behind the internal communications professionals' decisions to deploy certain engagement strategies for employees working remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic in The Netherlands, and whether organizational culture and technology played any role in the decision-making process. The study found that not only both organizational culture and technology but also leadership were factors that influenced the reasons behind the engagement strategies that were chosen by the interviewees. An accessible leadership, availability of a wide variety of technological tools, and an open organizational culture fostered collaborative and interactive engagement strategies. A hierarchical leadership, limited availability to technology, and a more formal organizational culture resulted in communication that was more top-down rather than interactive.

5.1 Theoretical implications

While previous studies have looked at employee engagement through the lens of either psychology, business, management or communication studies, this study combines all the perspectives in a theoretical sense, to offer a more holistic overview of employee engagement. By situating it during the Covid-19 pandemic, this research also gives insight into another under-researched field (Frandsen and Johansen, 2017; Heide and Simonsson, 2014) of internal crisis communication and combines it with change management.

By basing its findings on data gathered by interviewing internal communications professionals who were responsible for making these decisions and analysing their effectiveness, this study offers insight into the various factors (such as organizational culture and access to technological tools) which influenced the decision-making process of internal communications professionals in The Netherlands at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic.

As organizations and nations slowly get a grip on this global crisis, research into how internal communication was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic is still at its nascent stage. Previous studies have focused on organizations in Germany (Ecklebe & Löffler, 2021) and Austria (Einwiller et al., 2021), but not in The Netherlands. These studies were also quantitative studies that focused on the effect of internal communication strategies on employees during the pandemic. The scope of these studies did not include the reasons behind the communication strategies that were deployed. On the other hand, this study is a qualitative study that focuses on how and why internal communications professionals decided on which engagement strategies to deploy during the pandemic.

This study found many datapoints that were specific to the Covid-19 pandemic. Many of the strategies that communications professionals depended on earlier, such as face-to-face interactions and in-person events, to foster employee engagement were not possible as The Netherlands went into

an intelligent lockdown on March 15, 2020 for the first time due to the pandemic (Darroch, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic changed the ways in which organizations functioned and according to Amis & Janz (2020) what is needed now is a people-centred approach to change management. The internal communications professionals interviewed for this study also stated that their focus was explicitly people-centric in a way in which it had not been in 2019.

Previous studies have shown that connections with colleagues is an important pillar of employee engagement and that stronger connections make for more engaged employees (Anitha, 2014; Kahn, 1990; May et al., 2004; Shahidan et al., 2016). These connections are usually fostered when employees work in the same physical space. With employees working online remotely, internal communications professionals had to recreate the effect of co-worker connections online. For many of the interviewees, it was a new experience and they had to experiment with various options to find an effective combination. Their options were determined by organizational budget, organizational culture, technological tools available, and time. This study found that practices that worked in the first six months of the pandemic did not necessarily work in the latter months due to the factor of "Zoom fatigue" or fatigue due to video calls (Fosslein & Duffy, 2020). Hence, the pandemic compelled internal communications professionals to constantly experiment. With the future of work being hybrid (Wevers, n.d.), the findings reported from this study offer internal communications professionals insight into how they can adapt to the new change.

5.2 Societal implications

The Covid-19 pandemic is still ongoing as the World Health Organisation stated in March 2022, two years after it declared Covid-19 as being a pandemic. In fact, the WHO called the current period as "the middle of the pandemic" (Reuters, 2022, para 3).

As mentioned earlier, this study also offers insights into the ways in which the engagement strategies differed from pre-pandemic approaches to pandemic approaches, which is an area that is yet to be explored in its entirety. After The Netherlands went into lockdown due to the pandemic, 44% of workers either started working from home or increased the number of hours they spent working from home, and 30% had more remote meetings (de Haas et al., 2020). Most of the 2500 workers who participated in the survey by de Haas et al. (2020) stated that it was a positive experience. Further research has found that employees no longer want to return to a pre-pandemic office structure where they have to clock in and clock out from their offices, five days (or more) a week (Bailey and Rehman, 2022). The future of work is a hybrid model and organizations in The Netherlands have already begun to move towards it as they prepare for a post-pandemic reality (Jannink et al., 2021).

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) defines hybrid work as "a combination of telework and work on the employer's premises" (World Health Organization and the International Labour Organization, 2021, p. 1). It also defines telework "as the use of information and communications technology (ICT) – such as desktop computers, laptops, tablets and smartphones –

for work that is performed outside the employer's premises. This includes work performed from home, a satellite office or another location (World Health Organization and the International Labour Organization, 2021, p. 1)."

In another study conducted among workers in The Netherlands, one in three employees stated that they would quit their job if their employer required them to work in the office full-time (KPN Hybrid Working Monitor, 2022). Previous studies (Shahidan et al., 2016) have also shown that work environment has an impact on employee engagement. The interviewees who participated in this study stated that working from home brought about new challenges in employee engagement. However, most of the employees were working remotely at the same time and factors such as the pandemic could be included in the communication planning in order to foster a sense of togetherness and engagement. In the new phase, as companies move to a hybrid environment where some team members would be working remotely while others will be in the office environment at the same time, internal communications professionals have to once again adapt their communication strategies to foster engagement in a new type of work environment. The interviewees stated that they will include the lessons they learnt during the pandemic into their communication strategies for engagement of employees working in a hybrid environment. The findings of this study are thus relevant as they offer possible pathways and approaches that practitioners in the field of internal communications, crisis communications and change management can follow to engage employees as organisations move into a hybrid model of work.

5.3 Limitations and future research

This study interviewed 11 professionals who were in the field of internal communications in 2020. The main limitation of this study is that it was conducted two years after the World Health Organization officially declared Covid-19 to be a pandemic. Due to the passage of time, many of the interviewees struggled to recall all the communication planning and strategies they had laid out and implemented when the first lockdowns were imposed in March 2020. While they recalled several of their strategies, this study does not conclude that these were the only strategies that were employed during that time. This study accepts that the list of strategies included in the study is not an exhaustive one.

Interviewing is an accepted method to gather information about how the interviewees interpret their worlds, but as Holstein and Gubrium (2016) argue, an interviewee does not simply provide information in an interview; meaning is created by both the interviewer and the interviewee. Factors outside the interview situation brought in by both the interviewer and the interviewee also determine the meanings constructed during the interview (Philips & Mrowczynski, 2021). Thus, while the findings in this study are reliable, they cannot be generalized for a larger population.

The methodology of this study did not include the industry in which the interviewees' organisations were located as a factor in the sampling process as the study did not intend to look at

industry as a factor in the decision-making process. However, one of the findings of the study was that budgetary constraints impacted the engagement strategies. The budget was influenced by the nature of the industry (as in the case of a university) and whether the industry was impacted positively (as in the case of an information technology company) or negatively (as in the case of a travel company) by the Covid-19 pandemic. Future researchers can consider focusing on engagement strategies in particular industries to analyse the role that the field in which an organization operates plays in employee engagement.

The methodology of this study also did not include the gender of the internal communications professionals being interviewed as a factor in the decision-making process. Previous studies on leadership (Alan et al., 2020; Druskat, 1994; Gipson et al., 2017; Radu et al., 2017) have found that gender can play an important role in leadership. Whether gender plays a role in internal communication is an area that is outside the scope of this study but can be considered for future research.

With organizations moving to a hybrid working environment, internal communications professionals will now face a new set of challenges when it comes to engaging employees and fostering organizational culture by using technology effectively, according to the interviewees. It will be an interesting area of future study to understand how communications professionals are able to solve these challenges.

The scope of this study did not include the responses from employees who were at the receiving end of the communication during the pandemic. This researcher recognizes that, according to the Newcomb Model of Communication (Newcomb, 1953), a study of the effectiveness of communication in a social environment would be more comprehensive if it included data from both the senders and the receivers.

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Appendix A

Main Themes	Sub-themes	Codes	Description	Examples
Employee engagement			The process by which organisations ensure that employees are committed to the organisation's success.	
	Engagement strategies		The various practices carried out by organisations to make employees feel connected.	
		Well-being	Strategies related to mental and physical health such as meditation and yoga classes	"We also started with all sorts of vitality initiatives, online yoga, you could sign up for every Tuesday and Thursday morning… we also made a few online magazines specials about working from home with tips and tricks." (Interviewee 4)
		Disconnect	Strategies urging employees to not work more than the required number of hours and to not work on weekends and other holidays.	"So we said, please be mindful that your working day ends at one point. So don't prolong your working day into deep in the night. Simply because you don't have the time or the energy of the space with taking care of your children to work through the day." (Interviewee 5)
		Fun	Offline and online strategies not related to work such as pub quizzes and Christmas gifts.	"We had games… we sent around Easter packages and Christmas packages and just between presents and stuff like that. And we had games and we had pub quizzes especially in the first couple of months. And that was fun." (Interviewee 5)

		Disseminating information	Sending factual information related to the pandemic and the policies of the organisation.	"We had crisis email… it was a weekly email… we were giving constantly updates on travel restrictions, working from home, how long people were not allowed to travel… the date that we foresee we will be able to go back to office." (Interviewee 9) "We made a huge campaign about explaining what Covid was…we really went to great depths to be able to get factual information on what the virus was, how what was the best way it was being treated, what the vaccinations were and how they worked, and what was the process around it. So that was also a huge campaign we did to try and sort of… find factual information that could be relied upon." (Interviewee 9)
	Building bonds		Making employees feel connected to each other	
		Human connection	Connecting employees to each other on an emotional level.	"People managers were given the task to make sure that they spoke to each of their team members every week. And they had regular check-ins on a one-to-one basis with them to really suss out how people were feeling and how they were coping… we did an awful lot to make sure that people managers were trained properly to understand how to manage sensitive

				conversations with people who were struggling with the work." (Interviewee 9)
		Physical space	The role played by office space or lack thereof in bringing (or not bringing) colleagues together.	"… you can do a lot online, but online cannot replace face to face and the kind of informal touchpoints you have with your colleagues or your manager or whatever… we have a plant in Ukraine that is still providing feed, which amazes me, but I understand from talking to the people locally who run the plant, that actually local people want to come in every day to a place where they can forget all the s*** happening, excuse my French, but focus on tasks and be with other people who are doing the same tasks." (Interviewee No. 2)
		Employees as ambassadors	What employees have to say about the organisation externally.	"I think you've probably heard in the United States, they call it the Great Resignation. But people were stuck to their places in the pandemic… and everyone is changing jobs now, and so easy to get a new job… so you also want to keep people on board. And yeah, I think internal communication plays a big role in that." (Interviewee No. 4)
	Measuring engagement		Ways in which internal communication professionals can understand if their strategies are working.	
		Quantitative measurement	Surveys, Google analytics	"The only measurement that I can think of that we

				really did, I mean, we looked on our intranet on our Google Analytics to see if people were reading certain types of stories more than others." (Interviewee No. 3)
		Qualitative Employee feedback	Verbal and written, formal and informal descriptive feedback from employees	"And then we got, you know, anecdotally, I would hear back, people would say, 'Oh that was really nice. Thank you really nice that you're thinking of us'." (Interviewee No. 3)
Organizational culture			It includes everything from official values to the ways these values are fostered within the organisation.	
	Explicit values		These are values that are stated in the organisations' official list of values	
		Togetherness and solidarity	The value of coming together as a family, united by the crisis, showing support for other employees.	"That's why we also were quite quickly going back to the offices as much as we could given the regulations, because we also wanted to show our solidarity to the people who needed to go to the plants every day. Because we also didn't want to show 'Oh, yeah, we can work from home, we are fine, but you still need to go out there produce our stuff'. So we also really wanted to show that we are there for them." (Interviewee No. 10)

		Caring for colleagues and customers	Showing concern for colleagues whose families are affected by the pandemic, or arranging vaccinations for the general public	"So what we saw is a lot of that the value, particularly the value of caring seem to really come to the fore then, and we made numerous videos, all the amazing things that people are doing either to support communities locally, or to support people in the company." (Interviewee No. 2)
		Innovative and entrepreneurial mindsets	Coming up with new opportunities for the organisation to grow	"Yes, our culture at Brunel was always to be very entrepreneurial, to be results driven, so entrepreneurial means like find opportunities, results driven is chase those those opportunities." (Interviewee No. 6)
	Implicit practices of explicit values		These are ways in which the organisations' values are inculcated among employees before and during the pandemic.	
		Communal practices around food and drink	Coffee breaks, team lunches, after office drinks moved from offline to online	"Fika is a tea or coffee break. But it's more than just a tea and coffee break, it's actually a social moment, it's a moment where you're drinking a cup of coffee, or a cup of tea, you connect with each other… And so you have very quickly all kinds of virtual fikas popping up left, right and centre." (Interviewee No. 1)
		Tone of communication	Internal communication professionals focused on how they imparted their content	"Whenever we announce something, or whatever we communicate, whatever, I always make sure that the communications is a reflection of caring, collaborative and

				courageous.” (Interviewee No. 8)
		Content of communication	Information not directly related to pandemic or policies, but rather related to fostering the explicit values.	“So normally, we choose one of the four values and then have an anecdote or a story about that involved. And thereby, you know, like, like, every, every two weeks, you can get sort of, like, an inspiring story about one of the values but less overt than saying, this is our entrepreneurial story of the week. More like, like work it in there.” (Interviewee No. 6)
Use of technology			The reliance on technology due to the pandemic had an impact on employee engagement strategies	
	Inclusivity		How the use of technology reduced the gap between management and employees	
		Reducing hierarchy within organisation	Employees had more direct access to management compared to pre-pandemic	“It was much more inclusive. I mean, that's funny, but it is more inclusive, because everybody can join. Usually, when CEOs would visit a certain site, I mean, the rest of that country would not benefit from the presence of the CEOs. Now, everybody is equal, virtually, because you can all connect at the very same time, you can all raise your hand, you can all ask a question. You have got equal visibility to an exposure to leadership, for instance. So I think it

				democratises somehow." (Interviewee No. 8)
		Enabling participation of more employees across various locations	With more content moving online, it made it possible for employees in various locations to access it.	"I mean, obviously, you're able to reach a much wider audience. So so for for, for example, we would have like an innovation meeting that was traditionally a face-to-face meeting for maybe 200 employees, or not even maybe just 50 employees from across the world. And because we were doing it online, we were able to open that up to more than a thousand employees. So so in those in that and for little cost as well." (Interviewee No. 9)
		More interactivity in communication	The flow of internal communication was not just top down but rather bottom up as well.	"There's also a downside to it, obviously, because through virtual connections, it's much harder to taste the or to feel the atmosphere in the virtual room. When we have Q&A sessions, there might always be people that post very critical remarks in the chat, for instance, and what we noticed was that one or two of these people who turned the entire atmosphere of a virtual meeting on its head. So we also had conversations on how do we moderate that conversation during a townhall?" (Interviewee No. 8)
	Learning curve		With new technologies being developed very quickly during the pandemic, internal	

			communication professionals had to constantly adapt and choose which tool best served their purpose.	
		Getting familiar with new technology	Learning how to use video conferencing and other tools	“And Teams was not that already evaluated. Sometimes it didn't work. So we got people, there were more than 250 people on the call. So people were kicked out of the virtual meeting. So that was not an option, especially when you when you want to address 2000 people. So we introduced the live events in MS Teams. And that was also a bit tricky, because we had never used that. So we really learned how to use it, and it became better every edition. But that was not, there were some difficulties we need to we needed to overcome.” (Interviewee No. 7)
		Adapting strategies to new channels	Learning which channel is best to convey which content	“Let's see, I thought October, yes, October 2020. We stopped with the regular updates in a video message. Because when you use that medium for too long, it loses impact. So now we only use video message, when there are really, really big announcements to make.” (Interviewee No. 7)
		Hybrid office poses new challenge	Learning how to communicate effectively when some employees are in the	“So with people both being physically in the, in the venue, that's our office, and, and also broadcasting and also doing a virtual

			office and others are online.	providing a virtual platform. How do you do that, in a way that remains still interesting and exciting to both the physical and the online audience, is, of course something which is, yeah, it's a big challenge." (Interviewee No. 1)
Redefining leadership			The pandemic brought about changes in leadership communication	
	Leadership at the managerial level		Internal communications professionals fostered a more humane approach to leadership	
		Opportunity from crisis	Deriving positive practices from the pandemic	"You know, there's a saying that never waste a good crisis. And I think for internal communications, this is a crisis that really accelerated the reputation of the function much more so than in previous years." (Interviewee No. 2)
		Training leaders to be authentic	Showing leaders how to portray their true selves so they can connect with employees.	"Yes, I think as internal communications professionals in that kind of situation, you really have to coach your leaders to, to appear authentic on the other side of the screen, and not too scripted. Not too, too stiff." (Interviewee 3)
	Leadership at the C-Suite level		Leaders chose a collectivist approach to do their job.	
		Employees as Stakeholders	Ensuring employees feel invested in the financial health of the company	"...It's really the mindset of taking your colleagues seriously, consider them as crucial stakeholders, one of the most crucial stakeholders you can have as a company. Because, I

				mean, you can have beautiful technologies, science, machines, but without people, you're nowhere.” (Interviewee No. 8)
		Organizational strategy	Adapting organisation’s goals to the pandemic	“…in June of 2020, our leadership team was working on the strategy on our way out of this crisis. Because when you keep being in that crisis, and you are not able to look beyond the crisis, you’re gonna be too late, when the crisis over, and you’re just gonna be left empty-handed.” (Interviewee No. 7)

Appendix B

Referred as	Interview date	Industry their organisation is in	Gender
Interviewee 1	29 April, 2022	Non-profit	Female
Interviewee 2	2 May, 2022	Nutrition	Female
Interviewee 3	10 May, 2022	Academia	Female
Interviewee 4	11 May, 2022	Healthcare	Female
Interviewee 5	12 May, 2022	Consumer goods	Female
Interviewee 6	17 May, 2022	Recruitment	Male
Interviewee 7	17 May, 2022	Travel	Female
Interviewee 8	24 May, 2022	Manufacturing	Female
Interviewee 9	25 May, 2022	Information Technology	Female
Interviewee 10	30 May, 2022	Manufacturing	Female
Interviewee 11	02 June, 2022	Consulting	Female

Appendix C

Interview guide

1. What does the term 'employee engagement' mean to you? How would you define it?
2. Can you please share a bit about what your role entailed?
3. When and how did you realise the seriousness of the crisis?
4. What were the main challenges you faced as a remote employee? Were they similar to what the employees you had to keep engaged were also facing?
5. Did you take your own challenges (technological, emotional) into consideration when devising methods to engage remote employees? How?
6. Which strategies did you and your team deploy to continue ensuring employee engagement and why?
7. Which technological tools (Zoom, etc) did you use to implement your strategies and why?
8. What were the advantages of the strategies and technologies you used?
9. What were the limitations of the strategies and technologies you used?
10. How did company culture impact your decisions to choose particular strategies and tools?
11. How do you build and maintain company culture when employees are working remotely, and you can no longer depend on common rituals that perpetuated them?
12. How did you balance your own personal worries about the pandemic with those of the employees you had to keep engaged?
13. Is it easier to keep employees engaged when they are in one physical location instead of scattered and working remotely? How and why?
14. Anything else you wish to add that you think I should know but I haven't asked about?