The role of internal communications function in supporting a remote workforce across the Canadian public service: Lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Since March 2020, many employers have required a significant portion of their workforce to work remotely in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This has included Canadian public service organizations, which have traditionally had very few employees working remotely. This experience will likely lead to changes in how public service workplaces operate in the future with more flexible options for remote working. How then do communication practitioners who are responsible for internal communications provide value to the organization when a larger proportion of employees are not working in the office and have less opportunity for valuable face-to-face communication with colleagues, managers and senior leaders? Based on the results of interviews with senior communications practitioners (n=10) from public service agencies across Canada and the responses to a survey of Canadian public servants (n=1,586) this research demonstrates that the experience of the pandemic has reinforced the fundamental best practices of effective internal communications and makes a case that these practices will be even more important as more employees adopt full-time or part-time remote working arrangements.

Keywords: *Internal communications, leadership communications, employee engagement, manager communication, remote working*

Introduction

Many of the modern management practices, including internal communication and supporting employee engagement have evolved in the context of a workforce that is geographically and temporally co-located. This has gradually been changing since the rise of the computer and communication technology. While many public service organizations in Canada have had remote work policies in place for many years, their usage has been somewhat limited for a variety of reasons.

In early 2020, the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic necessitated the rapid move to remote working so that individuals could physically distance themselves and limit the spread of infection. Organizations, including public service organizations, that had very limited remote working arrangements in place, suddenly had a large proportion of their employees working from home within days. While the remote working situation during the COVID-19 pandemic may not be representative of remote working in “normal times”, the change that this experience has created in workplaces may result in a longer-term shift toward remote working and an increased expectation that this arrangement will be provided, if not actively embraced, in some form by most employers where it is operationally possible to do so.

According to Sriramesh, Rhee and Sung (2013), organizations that have effective symmetrical communication with external publics are more likely to have strong internal communications and are likely to treat employees as one of their most important stakeholders. Goldhaber, Dennis, Richetto and Wiio (1984) hold that internal communication is foundational to everything else that an organization does and without it there can be "no motivation, leadership, no productivity, and no organization" (as cited in Grunig, 1992, p. 548). For these reasons, internal communication should be considered an essential strategic management

function of an organization and therefore, as Cowan (2014) notes, communication practitioners should actively prioritize the flow of communication across organizational and geographic boundaries.

What then, does the communications practitioner need to consider when the situation requires that internal communication be primarily mediated through digital platforms? Or when some of the workforce is in in the office and some are working remotely? According to Sarker et al. (2011), there is an inseparable relationship between trust and communication when teams are geographically distributed, since it is their communication behaviours through technology that form the primary basis for relationship development. While electronic channels for information sharing, such as email and intranets, are common for corporate communication to employees, especially asymmetrical communication, they are less common as the primary channel for direct manager-employee communication. As managers are largely responsible for creating, maintaining, or changing the culture of the organization through internal communication (Gregory, Invernizzi & Romenti, 2013) it is essential that they be able to do so regardless of distance between them and their teams.

Research problem

Research has demonstrated the strong connection between effective symmetrical internal communication of managers, leaders and employees and the positive outcomes for employee engagement (Kang & Sung, 2017). Similarly, research has shown how effective managerial and leadership communication is important for developing relationships, clarifying roles and goals, and managing performance of remote teams (Horwitz et al., 2006). Communications practitioners operating as a strategic management function of the organization have a role to play in ensuring that the communication with employees is such that it leads to positive organizational

outcomes (Cardwell, Williams, & Pyle, 2017). With the increasing number of employees working remotely, and the expectation that employers provide flexible work options including the ability to work from home, the requirement for leaders and managers to know how to successfully manage remote teams is likely to increase. With these considerations in mind, it is now more relevant than ever to consider the role of the communications practitioner with regard to providing strategic and tactical advice to the dominant coalition on how best to approach employee communication at all levels: individual; work unit; and corporate.

2.1 Research questions

As research has indicated, the internal communications function of an organization serves an important strategic management purpose and has been recognized as an essential ingredient in helping an organization achieve its objectives (Sriramesh, Rhee & Sung, 2013). As organizations increasingly embrace remote working arrangements, communications practitioners in their role as valued counsellors to the dominant coalition will need to understand what effective employee communication looks like when a significant number of employees are not based in the office for all or part of the working week. To better understand the role that communications practitioners can play in this context, the researcher will explore the following question:

RQ1. How and to what extent does the internal communications function of a Canadian public service organization support effective communication with remote employees?

Since the early days of computing there has been research to understand how technology can be used to communicate for the purposes of exchanging information to achieve a goal and how that technology affects natural patterns of communication (Chapanis, A & Overbey, C. M., 1974). The use of technology to communicate within an organization is now ubiquitous with

most medium to large organizations using email, an intranet, and other digital tools to meet, collaborate and stay connected. While many people have used videoconferencing tools to some extent to meet with colleagues, partners, and clients remotely, this channel of communication has now become prevalent in the working lives of many people due to the COVID-19 pandemic. To better understand how technology, and in particular videoconferencing affects internal communication and employee engagement, this research will also explore this question:

RQ2. How and to what extent do communications practitioners need to develop and support processes and behaviours in a virtual work environment that lead to positive outcomes for employees in Canadian public service organizations?

Literature review

While the focus of this research is on the role that internal communications plays in supporting a remote workforce, this paper will explore the literature to establish a basic understanding of some of the key concepts related to internal communications and organizational behaviour and examine how these concepts may apply to communicating with remote workers.

The role of internal communications

There is an extensive body of research on the role of internal communications and its relationship with organizational effectiveness (Ehling et al., 1992; Ruck and Welch, 2012; Kang & Sung, 2017, p.86), organizational commitment (Carrière & Bourque, 2009), employee-manager relationships (Mishra, Boynton & Mishra, 2014), job satisfaction (Carrière & Bourque, 2009; Grunig, 1992; Verčič & Špoljarić, 2020), and productivity (Clampitt & Downs, 1993). Some researchers consider it to be such a fundamental variable they argue that other essential variables for organizational success such as motivation, leadership, and productivity do not exist without it (Goldhaber, Dennis, Richetto, and Wiio, 1984, p. 335, cited in Grunig, 1996). This idea of the fundamental nature of organizational communication is further supported if one considers the idea that any organization is socially constructed and maintained through the continual relationships and discourse of its members (Gergen, Gergen, & Barrett, 2004; Meissner, 2005).

The relationships and communication behaviours of employees are valuable "intangible resources" (Mazzei, 2010, p.221), which allow organizations to create and share knowledge derived from the competencies and abilities of its members (Mazzei, 2010). This outcome may not be fully realized if the internal communications function is primarily top-down, asymmetrical, and one-way (Welch & Jackson, 2007); a practice inconsistent with excellence in

the communications function as outlined by Grunig (1992). Instead, internal communications should identify the necessary communication behaviours, identify the active or passive internal publics, and support managers to implement the appropriate communication behaviours for the key groups (Mazzei, 2010). Based on this consideration, internal communications as a strategic function, should be closely connected to human resources (Mazzei, 2010; Verčič, Verčič & Sriramesh, 2012), management and senior leadership (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002; Carramenha, 2019; Mansi, 2019).

If the effectiveness of the organization is largely based on the relationships of its members and their ability to exchange information and collectively create meaning (Gergen, 2009), then in a work environment where some employees are remote, what can the internal communications function do to support knowledge sharing and co-creation?

While it is important to be strategic when using redundant communication channels and not simply megaphoning the same message via different channels (Kang & Sung, 2017), research suggests that "more is better when it comes to internal communication" (Yammarino and Naughton, 1988 as cited in Carriere & Christopher, 2008)

Situation theory of publics and internal communications

A situational analysis can be used by communications practitioners to understand their stakeholders (Grunig, 2013), and by measuring the "level of involvement, problem recognition, and constraint recognition" (Men & Bowen, 2017, Location No. 652) the practitioner can gain "insight into what stakeholders and publics exist in an organization and who is likely to become active if their needs are not met" (Men & Bowen, 2017, Location No. 680). While this approach is typically applied to external stakeholders, there is some history to its use for internal stakeholders, such as James Grunig's segmentation of employee publics within two

telecommunication companies in 1975 (Grunig, 1975), and there is growing interest in applying situational analysis internally as the recognition of the importance of internal stakeholders develops (Welch and Jackson, 2007). Employees can have a significant impact on the organization's relationship with external stakeholders (Sriramesh, Rhee, & Sung, 2013) and according to Kennan and Hazelton (2006) should be regarded as a key stakeholder worthy of focused communication efforts. Employee populations can be diverse and complex and should not be treated as a homogenous group (L'Etang, 2005).

Welch and Jackson (2007) propose an internal communication matrix that can be used to plan, analyze, and evaluate the internal communications function of an organization (2007; see Table 1). Their matrix helps to understand the integrated nature of organizational and interpersonal communication.

Table 1

Internal communication matrix

Dimension	Level	Direction	Participants	Content
1. Internal line management communication	Line managers/ supervisors	Predominantly two-way	Line managers-employees	Employees' roles Personal impact, e.g., appraisal discussions, team briefings
2. Internal team peer communication	Team colleagues	Two-way	Employee-employee	Team information, e.g., team task discussions
3. Internal project peer communication	Project group colleagues	Two-way	Employee-employee	Project information, e.g., project issues
4. Internal corporate communication	Strategic managers/top management	Predominantly one-way	Strategic managers-all employees	Organizational/ corporate issues, e.g., goals, objectives, new

				developments, activities, and achievements

Distinguishing employees as a distinct stakeholder group can be challenging in that the line between internal and external environments for an organization is often fuzzy (Cheney & Christensen, 2001, cited in Welch & Jackson, 2007). In many organizations individuals often have dual roles, as both employees and as customers, and for public service organizations individuals inevitably have dual roles as public servants and citizens who are also users of government programs and services.

Supporting managers and senior leaders

While it has become much easier to transmit high volumes of information to employees through emails or intranets, it is not a substitute for the richness and nuance of face-to-face communication (Quirke, 2008), and most employees favour face-to-face communication with their managers and leaders and generally want more of it (Braun, Hernandez Bark, Kirchner, Stegmann, & van Dick, 2019; Quirke, 2008; FitzPatrick & Valskov, 2014; Gerardi, 2019). When communication from leaders and managers is "timely, accurate, and relevant" (Mishra, Boynton & Mishra, 2014, p.185) it develops trust and improves employee engagement (Mishra, Boynton & Mishra, 2014) and can lead to improved client service (Lowenstein, 2006).

Beyond their role as managers of predominantly one-way internal corporate communications, internal communications practitioners can help to improve communications between employees and their managers and leaders. According to Dahlman and Heide (2021), communication professionals can create value by "training managers and coworkers to communicate better, or by facilitating meetings and communication between different departments or offices" (p. 91). Similarly, Cowan (2014) says that a priority of the internal

communications function should be to open the lines of communication throughout the organization. Cowan argues that “everyone is a communicator and networker, and communications has to be both a leadership function and a job for everyone" (2014, p.17). This holistic approach to communications that encompasses the four dimensions outlined in Welch and Jackson’s (2017) internal communications matrix, requires joint efforts from communications, human resources, and managers to build a cross-enterprise communication system (Men & Stacks, 2014). Informal communication, which is interpersonal and horizontal, is also considered by employees to be more authentic (Burton, 2008). In a remote work setting there is a risk that communication, primarily mediated through digital channels, could be too formal and supervisors and employees could lose the more informal and authentic symmetrical communication that is easier to maintain when they are face to face. In this regard, supervisors and employees may need to be more intentional in finding opportunities for more informal communication. To counter the potential impact on co-worker relationships from extensive remote work arrangements, managers may want to regularly intervene to bring people together for face-to-face meetings or social activities (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007), or be less formal in online team meetings.

Employees use both formal and informal communication networks to make sense of their organizations (Berger, 2008). This informal communication network allows for two-way symmetrical communication between employees and managers (Mishra, Boynton & Mishra, 2014), which is as a key ingredient in “excellent programs of employee communications” (Grunig, 1996, p. 536). The effective interplay between the formal and informal communication networks can happen when managers translate and contextualize the corporate messages for their teams and share employee feedback with the organization’s strategic decision makers (Men &

Bowen, 2017). To help managers understand the organization's goals, expectations, and policies, so they can confidently explain it for frontline employees, they can be provided with materials, such as briefing kits or newsletters (Men & Bowen, 2017). While managers play a role in conveying and contextualizing information about the organization's strategy, the symbolic role of senior leaders and their unique understanding and perspective of strategy means that they still have an important role to play when it comes to communicating strategy to employees (Galenic & Herrick, 2012).

As it pertains to communication from senior leaders, communication based on a "transformational leadership" style (Bass, 1998), which supports symmetrical communication and boosts employee satisfaction (Men, 2014) is most effective when delivered face-to-face rather than through email or other computer mediated channel (Men, 2014). Internal communicators should look for regular opportunities for senior leaders to engage directly with employees to communicate about strategy and this should ideally be done in a relaxed environment and allow for informal two-way communication (Ruck, 2015). This direct symmetrical engagement between senior leaders and employees should also allow for bottom-up input into decision making and strategy development (Dahlman & Heide, 2020).

Communicating with a remote workforce

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the public health requirement for physical distancing, changed remote working from a relatively underused option to a necessity for many organizations (Knoesen & Seymour, 2020). This includes public service organizations across Canada, which went from 2% of employees working remotely pre-pandemic to 68% of employees working remotely in July 2020 (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2020). While most public service organizations have had remote work or flexible work policies and programs in place for

many years, the actual uptake of remote work had been very limited due to the lack of internal infrastructure (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2020) and a deficit of management skills and motivation (Bentley, et al. 2013).

Many Canadians have indicated an interest in remote working post-pandemic, and according to a Statistics Canada survey, 41 percent favoured a hybrid approach to remote working (Mehdi & Morissette, 2021). However, we are yet to see how many will actually take advantage of their organization's remote work policies. Previous research has found a significant gap between those who indicated an interest in remote working and those who did it (Mokhtarian & Salomon, 1996). There are benefits for the individual when it comes to remote working, such as more flexibility and less interruptions (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2016), but there are negative impacts such as the intrusion of work into an employee's personal life (Golden, 2009), increased stress and family conflict (Golden, 2012), and isolation from colleagues (Bailey & Kurland, 2002). It is also important to note that remote working arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic may not provide an accurate representation of remote working for all employees. People had to quickly create ad-hoc home offices and deal with technology and processes that were not ready for a high volume of remote workers. The closure of schools and day cares also meant that working parents had to manage their own workloads as well as the demands of family life, which has contributed to employee burnout during the pandemic (Eagle Hill Consulting, 2020). Whether or not everyone who indicates an interest in remote working will carry through after the pandemic, it appears likely that there will be an increase in remote working arrangements and managers will need to be acutely aware of the negative impacts on individuals and the risks for the organization and be prepared to mitigate those (Thomason, 2021).

For public service organizations, where there has traditionally been very limited use of remote working policies, there will likely be a noticeable increase in remote working. While the drivers for remote working have traditionally been different for public and private sectors, the public sector may need to keep pace with any trends toward increased remote working if it is to participate and stay competitive in the knowledge-based economy (Rein, 2020).

The fear of losing managerial control has traditionally been one of the biggest barriers to remote working (Staples, 2001), and the need for some managers to excessively monitor the performance of their remote employees, and thereby undermine their sense of autonomy, can limit the effectiveness of any remote work arrangement (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). As managers become more supportive and develop the skills to manage remote employees, the adoption of remote working is likely to increase (van der Merwe and Smith 2014). The pandemic has required many employees and managers to contend with remote working arrangements which has increased awareness of the positive and negative traits and may have accelerated the development of skills required to effectively work remotely and manage a remote team.

As workplaces adjust following the pandemic, and if employers support a preference for a hybrid approach to remote working (Mehdi & Morissette, 2021), such as 3 days in office and 2 days remote, managers will need to become adept at managing teams of remote and non-remote employees. In an article for Fast Company, Rebecca Corliss writes that organizations and company leaders will need to be continually mindful of their remote employees, and the default for every formulation of work should include accommodations for employees who are not in the office (Corliss, 2019). In their communication with employees, managers and leaders will need to accommodate remote workers to provide everyone with the opportunity to contribute (Corliss, 2019) and will need to overcome their “proximity bias” (Corliss, 2019) which leads them to

favour informal and serendipitous interactions with employees physically situated in the same location over employees working remotely. An advantage of the hybrid approach is the opportunity to mitigate the potential negative impacts of remote working, such as social/professional isolation and potential declines in employee engagement, by creating regular opportunities for in-person interaction (Bentley, McLeod, Bosua, Gloet, Teo, Rasmussen & Tan, 2013).

Although advances in technology and improvements to systems and infrastructure are making it much easier for remote workers and teams to communicate, the richness of in person face-to-face communication is still optimal (Alexander, Smet & Mysore, 2020). According to Alexander et al. (2020), face-to-face communication creates "significantly more opportunities for rich, informal interactions, emotional connection, and emergent 'creative collision' that can be the lifeblood of trust, collaboration, innovation, and culture". When people are physically co-located, they are more likely to develop a bond that can in turn establish a positive working relationship that increases information sharing (Tourish, & Hargie, 2004). Face-to-face communication is generally considered by researchers to be the most valuable channel because of the non-verbal information conveyed, such as body language and facial expressions, that lends the message credibility (Mishra, Boynton & Mishra, 2014).

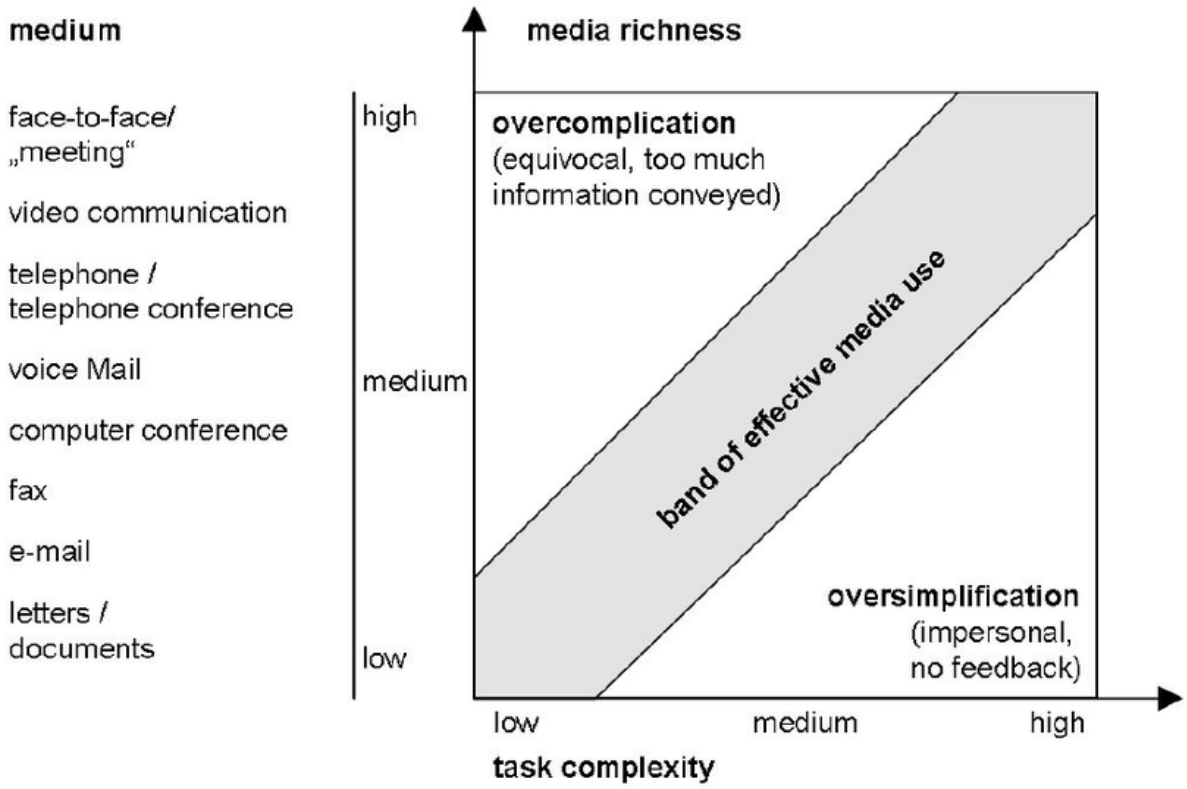
Media richness model

When managing and communicating with remote employees and teams there may be greater need or greater awareness of the importance of choosing the right communication channel to achieve the desired outcome. When deciding how to communicate with employees and what is the best tool and method for conveying information, media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1983) provides a model based on the ability of the medium to communicate different

levels of complexity. In Daft and Lengel's (1983) model, face-to-face communication provides the greatest level of information richness and is most effective for communicating about complex issues because it allows for immediate feedback whereby "understanding can be checked and interpretations corrected" (Daft & Lengel, 1983, p.7) and written documents or posters sit at the other end of the continuum. According to Tkalac Verčič & Špoljarić (2020), digital tools such as email and videoconferencing are in the middle of this richness continuum. Video can be a useful medium as it can provide a consistent message and communicate emotional issues (Wright & Robertson, 2009). The media richness model provides useful guidance when communicating with remote employees as it may help the internal communicator and the line manager identify the most appropriate medium based on the message and the communications objective. Good managers know the importance of choosing a medium that is appropriate for the intended communication (Daft, Lengel, & Trevino, 1987) and most conducive to positive and productive relations (Meissner, 2005). Where the internal communications function provides value is in their awareness of the capabilities of the different modes of communication and ability to apply it based on the complexity-level of the message being delivered (Alexander, Smet & Mysore, 2020; Reichwald, Möslein, Sachenbacher & Englberger, 1998, as cited in Meissner, 2005, see Figure 2). Internal communicators and managers should also consider the communication preferences of employees, including both the choose of channel and the frequency (Tkalac Verčič & Špoljarić, 2020; Ruck, 2015). While the idea that a manager should use the communication channel best suited for conveying a particular message may seem rather obvious and intuitive, by default many managers use the channel that they are most comfortable with (Graber, 2015).

Figure 1

The media richness model can help to identify the most appropriate medium based on the complexity of the task. For example, a highly complex task or issue can be oversimplified if it is communicated using a low media richness medium such as email, which can in turn adversely impact relationships and trust (Meissner, 2005).



Methodology

The intent of this research is to understand how public service organizations in Canada are supporting remote employees. It will explore the processes that different organizations have adopted and the extent to which they have been effective and aligned with best practices that have emerged from an extensive body of research on employee engagement, internal communication, and remote workers. To do this, the researcher conducted a series of in-depth interviews with public servants responsible for internal communications and managing or supporting remote employees in public service organizations across the country. This provided

an opportunity to explore the different approaches and considerations that organizations across Canada have adopted to support remote employees. The researcher also collaborated on a survey of public servants across the country to understand what their remote work experience over the previous 12 months.

Data collection

The data collected for this research is based on 10 in-depth interviews with managers responsible for the internal communications function in their respective organization. Interviewees were contacted by email to initiate discussion and agreement on the timing and other logistical details for the interview. All interviews were conducted using Zoom or over the phone and were recorded using the Quickvoice Pro app on an iPhone. No interviews were recorded using Zoom or saved to the cloud. The audio of each interview was transcribed using Trint.

In addition to the in-depth interviews, the researcher collaborated with the Institute of Public Administration Canada (IPAC), to field a survey about the remote working experience during the COVID-19. IPAC is a well-recognized and trusted non-governmental organization with a mandate to "build excellence in public administration in Canada" (Institute of Public Administration of Canada, 2017). IPAC distributed and promoted the survey to their members across Canada in March and April 2021.

The researcher also conducted a review of the academic literature relevant to understanding the needs of remote employees and the most promising practices to ensure they are engaged. Other sources were also included such as reports, blog posts and articles by industry experts and professional organizations, media articles and online videos.

Participants

The interviewees were identified based on their high level of responsibility for managing or supporting internal communications to the employees of their public service organizations. Using the researchers existing networks in federal, provincial, and territorial public service organizations, 10 individuals were interviewed from March to July 2021.

All individuals participated in this study confidentially, and their names, job titles, organizations and jurisdictions will not be included in this paper. To ensure confidentiality the language will be gender neutral when referring to them. As per the approved McMaster Research Ethics Board (MREB) application, all participants were provided with a detailed letter of information outlining the focus of the research, the process for data collection and the efforts made to guarantee their confidentiality and privacy.

The IPAC survey had 1,586 respondents. The following tables provide a breakdown of the demographic profile of the respondents.

Table 1

IPAC survey respondents by level of government.

Level of government	Percentage	Responses
Federal public service	23%	371
Provincial/territorial public service	58%	916
Municipal public service	11%	179
Indigenous band government	0%	4
Broader public service (e.g., post-secondary or health care sector)	4%	69
Do not work for the public service	3%	45
	Answered	1584
	Skipped	2

Table 2

IPAC survey respondents by province and territory

Province/territory	**Percentage**	**Responses**
Ontario	43%	683

Alberta	15%	240
British Columbia	11%	173
Manitoba	8%	131
Nova Scotia	6%	95
Saskatchewan	5%	75
Quebec	3%	55
Prince Edward Island	2%	36
Northwest Territories	2%	28
New Brunswick	2%	27
Newfoundland and Labrador	1%	22
Yukon	1%	8
Nunavut	0%	1
	Answered	1574
	Skipped	12

Table 3

IPAC survey respondents based on gender identity

Answer choices	**Percentage**	**Responses**
Male	28%	441
Female	68%	1071
Prefer not to say	4%	57
Other (please specify)	0.3%	5
	Answered	1574
	Skipped	12

Table 4

IPAC survey respondents by age group

Answer Choices	**Percentage**	**Responses**
18-24	0%	7
25-34	12%	193
35-44	27%	420
45-54	31%	484
55-64	23%	358
65+	4%	67
Prefer not to say	3%	53
	Answered	1582
	Skipped	4

Table 5

IPAC survey respondents by manager vs non-manager

Answer Choices	Percentage	Responses
Manager	49%	778
Non-manager	51%	802
	Answered	1580
	Skipped	6

Results

In a series of 10 in-depth interviews, 10 participants from federal, provincial, and territorial governments shared their experiences and insights on the role of the internal communications function when supporting remote employees. The results are also informed by the survey of 1,586 public servants across Canada.

Interviewee and survey responses were primarily reflections on the experience of supporting remote employees since March 2020, which is when many public servants moved to remote working arrangements in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As one interviewee described the experience of managing internal communications when rapidly moving to remote work at the outset of the pandemic:

> "On a Sunday night at 10 p.m., the chief human resources officer tweeted that public servants should not come into work the next day. That was all the warning we had. So, people didn't have anything. They didn't have laptops, computers, they didn't have a VPN access. And we needed to make sure that they could get information."

This response to the public health crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a significant proportion of public servants suddenly working from home and requiring information about the situation and how they can continue to work away from the office. The same interviewee also described the uncertainty that people were experiencing and the need for

information and support for employees dealing with "uncertain, scary, stressful and anxious times." Given this situation, how then does the internal communications function of a Canadian public service organization support effective communication with remote employees (RQ1)?

Resources and structure of internal communications teams

There is a wide variation of resources dedicated to internal communications in the public service organizations represented by the research participants. Some larger organizations have a senior manager and a team dedicated to internal communications, whereas others have a small communications team with one individual responsible for internal communication in addition to other responsibilities for external communication. Nine out of 10 interviewees said that they are members of the executive teams in their respective government departments and report directly to the chief executive of their organization (e.g., deputy minister, public service commissioner).

According to one interviewee, the experience of the pandemic has forced a reevaluation of the importance of internal communication, which will likely lead to a growth in capacity for the internal communications function. All interviewees noted the significant increase in communication to employees in the early days of the pandemic. As noted by another interviewee, messaging from the central internal communications team or senior leadership to all employees had escalated significantly so that it was now happening almost on a daily basis in response to the evolving public health advice from the provincial health authorities. As noted by two interviewees, early in the pandemic their teams were working seven days a week and often 16 to 18 hour days. Another interviewee recalled taking walks on the weekend with her laptop and working on the tops of garbage cans to quickly respond to the latest development.

For one interviewee, the pandemic "put a laser focus on those areas where we're not doing quite so well." In particular, they noted challenges with their intranet and IT infrastructure,

which was inhibiting usability and accessibility for employees trying to access the information they needed to do their work. Another interviewee noted that the experience of the pandemic has also helped to increase understanding within senior leadership as to how complicated the internal communications environment can be. An interviewee noted that they think this new awareness about the importance and complexity of internal communications will help to increase support for some of the initiatives they've been wanting to implement.

Two interviewees mentioned committees that had previously been established within their organizations to provide advice and guidance with respect to internal communication. These committees included representation of all departments within the government. One of the interviewees found this approach useful when preparing to launch their government's new flexible working program as it provided an opportunity to identify "something from a specific department's perspective where they say that's not going to fly in my department because of X, Y and Z." This feedback has allowed them to modify the approach before it gets rolled out across the organization and make it more applicable to the operations and the culture of different departments. Another two interviewees mentioned a similar approach of using their communications network across the government to share messaging a day or two in advance of any corporate announcement. One of the interviewees said that she uses a "community of practice with all the executive directors of communications in government…to then get information out within their ministries."

Supporting managers and senior leaders

Some interviewees talked about their work to prepare materials for managers so they can be prepared to share information with their employees. For some this was an existing practice

and the value of it was proven during the pandemic. For others it was a newer practice that was implemented during the pandemic.

As one interviewee noted, before the pandemic they should have been doing a better job of equipping managers to make sure they are prepared to handle the questions that employees may ask, but the pandemic made this need to support managers much more apparent.

In recent months, one interviewee's team started a "manager's memo," which provides content to middle managers across government so they can "have conversations with their staff because [they] know that they are a better messenger than just an email from a nebulous wherever." The interviewee rationalized that every employee regardless of whether they were office-based or in a highway camp "will have a manager who has to check their email regularly." Another interviewee mentioned their work to develop "resources specifically for managers to help support the staff."

When considering both the communication channels and the messenger, one interviewee put it succinctly, when they said: "the many vehicles that you have at your disposal and the different ways that you are that you offer us options is really important. I think that the message and who's delivering it is important."

Empathy and authenticity in leadership communications

In various ways, the majority of interviewees talked about the importance of empathic and authentic communication from senior leaders. One interviewee, who had even written an internal blog post on the topic, articulated this well when they said:

> I think injecting greater humanity and empathy into executive communications will be really important. And I think that sort of ties into remote work in that it just helps people feel a little more connected wherever they are working. And it

> doesn't start to feel like, well, I'm at home and I've got my kids in the background, but clearly the senior executives are all in their corner office and are taking things very seriously again.

According to another interviewee, one of the first they realized early in the pandemic was that "given the uncertainty and anxiety levels that people were feeling, they needed to hear from the leadership at the top." This meant communicating even when they didn't know all the answers. Given the rapid changes in the public health situation and the need for organizations to implement workplace changes much faster than normal, a number of the interviewees noted the change in comfort level when it comes to communicating uncertainty. According to one interviewee it was really important for senior leaders to acknowledge to employees when they "don't know all of the answers" and may even "be struggling." She also noted an improvement in their recent employee engagement survey results as it related to communication from senior leadership. "It is always at the low end of the scale, and when we did a pandemic survey recently, that number grew." Her team had further conversations with senior leadership and employees about the improved results and found that it was the "intentional regular engagement from senior leadership, checking in, having virtual check ins that were 15 to 20 minutes, sending out e-mails to say how's it going, sharing information repeatedly, even if they didn't know the full meal deal." According to one interviewee, when her organization conducted a pulse survey during the pandemic, there was an improvement in scores for "information flow from senior leadership to staff", and she said you could tell the ministries that had done anything, had pretty good results in that area." For her, the evidence gathered during this experience was going to be useful to demonstrate how "critically important internal communication is." With regards to communication from leaders, for one interviewee "being flexible, being open, just sharing,

sharing information, whether you have information or don't" is "really important." She said that earlier in the pandemic the lack of sharing from the CEO presented a challenge as the feedback from staff was that the CEO "knew something and just weren't sharing."

Managing communications in hybrid remote work environment

The IPAC survey results show that 48 percent (n=767) of respondents are interested in a hybrid approach to remote working where they are sometimes in their regular worksite and sometimes working from home, 40 percent (n=634) are interested in primarily working from home, and 10 percent (n=161) are interested in primarily working in their regular worksite. As two interviewees noted the hybrid approach could present challenges when trying to communicate with employees when some are in the office, and some are working remotely. According to one of the two interviewees:

> "When everybody is working remotely full time, it is a very different dynamic than when part of the team is doing it or it's on a few different days because you start to see different dynamics within teams. I think there's a piece there for us to figure out how we help facilitate that sense of connection. If it's not communication that we do directly, we can provide advice, guidance, and resources for supervisors, particularly on the how to sustain that."

The other interviewee felt that the transition to a hybrid remote work model is "going to be the hardest part" of managing the internal communication with teams. He speculated that a situation where 25 percent of the team are working at home and the rest are together in the office could mean that everyone attends "meetings from [their] own offices, even though [they're] in the same space."

Tools and technology

In response to the statement, “the tools and technology allowed me to work effectively while working from home,” 55 percent (n=867) of IPAC survey respondents agreed and 32 percent (n=498) somewhat agreed.

As one interviewee (AP) noted, the level of the IT infrastructure in the organization and the tools available to communicators significantly determines the communication tactics. This interviewee is a communications practitioner in a more remote location with limited internet access, and therefore fax machines still play a large role in their communications to employees.

When asked how effective the intranet has been as a communication channel since the beginning of the pandemic, only 11 percent (n=163) of respondents to the IPAC survey rated their intranet as “excellent” and 39 percent (n=535) rated it as “very good.” Although most communications teams used their intranets as primary channels of information for employees during the pandemic some also used their public facing websites for employee information. One interviewee noted that they decided early in the pandemic to make all of their pandemic related information for employees available on their public website. This approach removed any potential barriers that employees working remotely may have such as the need for VPNs to access an intranet.

Three interviewees mentioned the need to establish a comprehensive database of questions and answers on their intranets to address the continuously evolving situation. This information was for employees, managers and human resources and needed to be updated on a regular basis. According to another interviewee, they established their intranet as “the place where you go to get the single source of truth”, and they saw a 300 percent increase in readership compared to the year before.

Some interviewees mentioned that their organizations are adopting or piloting new tools to assist with their internal communications. One interviewee mentioned that their jurisdiction is trialing GatherVoices, which will make it easier for senior leaders to quickly record short video messages to staff. Another is starting to use Sparrow, a mobile app intended to make it easier for remote staff (e.g., highways and maintenance crews) to access the type of employee information that traditionally sits on the intranet and is more accessible to office-based employees. Another started a regular 20-minute podcast series and crowdsourced the topics from staff.

Some interviewees talked about using more video for internal communication. This included both pre-recorded video (e.g., using GatherVoices) or organizing regular live video events such as town halls with the deputy minister and other senior leaders. One interviewee said that their jurisdiction has been "piloting a lot of video-based communication for deputy ministers in their departments" to help "build more personal connections with their staff and have a sense of personality and identity in their communications." In at least one of the interviewees' teams there was a dedicated video production unit, however for two other interviewees with less resources their approach to video has involved simplifying the production process to make it less labour intensive for staff and lower the barrier for access for senior leaders and others wanting to produce short videos. Similarly, another interviewee's team were using more pre-recorded video and have a team member with strong video production skills ho is also learning to "lower his standards" when it comes to production value. Not all interviewees were interested in increasing the use of pre-recorded video. According to an interviewee (AB) who works in a smaller government agency, there wasn't a lot of interest from staff in video as a medium for internal communications, and another interviewee from a larger provincial government team wasn't

using pre-recorded video as much because of a perception that employees were fatigued by video due to the excessive use of video-conferencing platforms such as Zoom.

With regards to live video, three interviewees, all mentioned the increased use of online town halls open to all staff in the department or their entire organization. Some would field questions ahead of time for a live Q&A session with the CEO, and one interviewee mentioned that their team is using an online tool called Slido for live Q&A sessions.

The intranet and other tools such as Microsoft Teams, Slack, Yammer, or social media groups have also been used as channels for employees to connect and share stories. According to one interviewee , their health and safety team and communications team collaborated to invite employees to share their perspectives and ideas for how they work remotely and take care of their well-being, in particular their mental health.

Maintaining connections

Some interviewees noted that it was the communications teams who took on the role of keeping people connected. As outlined by one interviewee:

> Remote work makes us disconnected in a sense, right? Because we can't see each other, and we can't talk to each other at the kitchen sink when we're washing our morning breakfast dishes or whatever else it is. So, a big part of our role has been to help find ways to keep the entire department, not just my team, but the entire department connected.

Another interviewee said that they identified the need to “take some steps to better engage employees culturally and socially,” and so they encouraged “leadership to host more informal, less work-wise and more relationship-wise gatherings.” Their team also organized bi-weekly “virtual coffee” for employees to “get together for an hour and talk about whatever is on

their mind to replicate some of that in-person dynamic they wouldn't have had otherwise." Similarly, an interviewee in another organization started organizing a team meeting at the end of each week which was less formal and allowed for personal sharing. A third interviewee said that they and their team "did a lot to try to really reinforce the importance of connection and team" when people were working remotely and were reminding people to use the digital channels available to connect with their colleagues. They said that they were actively encouraging people to have "one-on-one conversations and group huddles, and it's okay to have casual conversation."

Frequent and regular communication

In response to a question on the lessons learned about internal communication to your remote employees, one of the interviewees said, "I don't think you can overcommunicate". In the IPAC survey, respondents were asked, "What recommendations would you make regarding the communications to employees working remotely?" Using MAXQDA to do a text analysis of the 652 open ended responses, the most common responses (49.5 percent, n=323) were related to frequency and consistency of communication. These responses included terms such as "timely" (n=13), "regularly" (n=23), "frequent" (n=46), consistent (n=28), "regular" (n=72), and "check in" (n=27).

Figure 2

Word cloud illustrating the most popular terms when survey respondents were asked, "What recommendations would you make regarding the communications to employees working remotely?"

Discussion and analysis

What was interesting when talking to all of the interviewees was the commonality of their experience and many of their responses and solutions. Internal communications is a field that is probably less likely to have opportunities for sharing because of the simple fact that it is internal to the organization and it's often harder for practitioners to look at what their peers in other organizations are doing to address similar issues. For example, unless one asks for a preview, it is very difficult to see another organization's intranet or staff newsletter and see how they have designed the interface and content or understand the underlying strategy of their approach.

A (likely) permanent change to the future of work

It is likely that there will be an increase in remote working arrangements in the future compared to pre-pandemic levels. In anticipation of this shift, interjurisdictional working groups representing the Public Service Commissions, or equivalents, of all provincial, territorial, and federal Canadian governments have been focusing on remote work, and most jurisdictions

participating in these working groups have indicated that they are working on updating their remote work policies. The IPAC survey results show that 48% (n=767) of respondents are interested in a remote working arrangement and 68% of respondents to the PricewaterhouseCoopers *Canadian workforce of the future survey* (2020), indicated a preference for some mix of workplace and remote working arrangements. It is therefore likely that this will be an expectation of employees and job candidates. As one interviewee noted, to continue to be competitive in the labour market, employers will need to be more flexible in providing remote working arrangements. The potential increase in the untethering of work from geographic location may also increase competition in local labour markets as employees may now have other employment options if they can stay in their home province or territory but work for an organization based elsewhere in the country or the world. Therefore, organizations will need to need to grapple with the implications for internal communications and employee engagement. As the research shows, face-to-face communication is the richest channel for two-way communication and communicating complex issues (Daft & Lengel, 1983), and therefore, communications teams will need to find ways to ensure that opportunities continue to exist that allow for this type of exchange. It also requires a thoughtful approach to the choice of medium based on the task that needs to be communicated. Incorporating Daft and Lengel's (1983) media richness model along with Welch and Jackson's (2007) internal communication matrix, which breaks down internal stakeholders, would provide a useful framework for internal communications practitioners when planning their communications strategy and advising managers and leaders on the best approach to communicating with their staff.

This change in policy and culture that allows for more remote work and flexible work arrangements may result in overall improvements in internal communications practice.

According to one interviewee the experience of remote working over the past 12 months has opened the eyes of many in the organization to the possibilities for communicating and connecting with employees who are traditionally in remote situations. She has noticed that people based in central offices located in the major centres have "been forced to make things more accessible so that people around the province can participate," and they also feel more connected than ever to employees based in rural communities. As many have become more comfortable with using technology to connect remotely, there is a realization that people can connect online rather than travelling for several hours for an in-person meeting. Although there is a risk that this could become unequal if people in remote communities have less chances of connecting in-person. To minimize this risk, a common practice could be to periodically arrange in-person meeting for rural employees, or, as one interviewee suggested, make it a common practice that if one or more people have to be online, then everyone should be online.

Creating opportunities for genuine connection

Some internal communications teams took on the role of creating opportunities and channels for people to connect on a more personal level in a way that substituted the informal interactions that naturally take place throughout the workday. An interviewee noted their team's realization of "how important it was to give people who weren't able to speak to each other the way they normally would to give them avenues to express what they needed to express." The interviewee's team organized opportunities for employees to discuss mental health issues and some of the major social justice issues that were also taking place and impacting workplaces using Twitter chats and virtual town halls. Similarly, another interviewee found that after pausing internal engagement committees at the beginning of the pandemic, they needed to reinstate them after a month to provide channels for people to connect. While the responsibility

for ensuring connection within teams should be the responsibility of managers, as Dahlman and Heide (2021) the practice of effective listening as an important aspect of two-way communication is something that communication practitioners can encourage, coach, and advise their management and leadership teams to do.

Improvements to tools and infrastructure

At the beginning of the pandemic when many employees had to move to a remote work situation almost overnight, many public service organizations included in this study found that their IT infrastructure was not able to support that sudden increase in people needing to use their network. The increase in the use of videoconferencing or accessing systems through VPNs was beyond the capacity for most networks. However, that changed quickly as the IT function responded by increasing capacity to support remote employees. Most of the individuals interviewed noted that their organizations had implemented or were in the process of implementing Office 365 and Microsoft Teams and one organization was using Slack. They all found that this software was valuable for allowing employees to communicate and collaborate remotely. This necessary increase in IT capacity and the adoption and increased familiarity with newer tools for internal communications and collaboration will likely be a lasting legacy of the pandemic that will enable more flexible and remote work situations. As a number or organizations have implemented new tools such as MS Teams and Office 365, internal communicators have been exploring how to effectively use these applications to improve communications to employees. One interviewee sent their staff on training to better understand how to use Office 365 for internal communications so they can develop expertise in this area.

Intranets or external websites were clearly important sources of information for remote employees and most interviewees indicated that they dedicated significant resources to updating

and maintaining them. However, IPAC survey respondents rated their intranet as being less effective than updates from their supervisor, all-staff emails, or updates from their CEO. This research does not examine the effectiveness of intranets and so cannot conclude whether respondents rated it lower because of content quality or site usability, or whether they simply preferred direct communication from their supervisor, deputy minister or an email from the corporate internal communications team. As one interviewee reflected, "before my job here, I spent maybe five hours in the last 20 years on an intranet site, and it's usually for things like putting in my vacation. It's not to gather information." As the literature indicates, employees prefer face-to-face communication, especially when it comes to more complex issues (Braun, et al, 2019; Quirke, 2008; FitzPatrick & Valskov, 2014; Gerardi, 2019), and they are also busy, so may not seek out information about a program or policy and prefer it if they are updated by a supervisor and also have an opportunity to ask questions and provide feedback (Provedel, 2019).

Video, both pre-recorded and live, has been an increasingly popular medium for internal communications according to most interviewees. With regards to pre-recorded video, some interviewees mentioned that they have been working on making the production process easier, which has also included lowering expectations for production standards. New tools are also making it easier to quickly produce and publish video using a smartphone.

While technology is an important enabler for communications, as Dahlman and Heide (2021) point out, "technology itself is not a solution to organizational challenges" (p.81) and "technology cannot create listening, but it can facilitate the listening process" (p.81)

Supporting the communications efforts of manages and leaders

Senior leadership communication has been an ongoing challenge for Canadian public service organizations as indicated by the perpetually low scores for this topic in engagement

surveys for all jurisdictions (Public Service Commissioners' Interjurisdictional Working Group, 2019). It is a topic of high interest when discussing the results of engagement surveys, however, the solutions to improving senior leadership communication are well researched and documented (Mishra, Boynton & Mishra, 2014). The Government of British Columbia's Public Service Agency developed a best practice document (BC Public Service Agency, n.d.). As noted by two interviewees, the internal communications experience of senior leaders during the pandemic may provide an opportunity for communications practitioners to implement approaches that in the past have been resisted. Although most jurisdictions postponed their employee engagement surveys in 2020, those that did run says noted increases in scores related to senior leadership communication.

Many of the interviewees talked about the need for healthy interpersonal communication between managers and their teams and between individuals. They talked about internal communications beyond just the need to disseminate corporate messaging or share the latest health safety or employee benefit updates. A number of interviewees were using words like "empathy," "compassion", "humility", "authenticity," and "humanity" to describe the approach in their communications practices and in the advice that they were giving their senior leaders.

The focus on empathy and humanity in the way that managers and senior leaders communicate with employees starts to touch on workplace psychological safety. As noted by Sturges (1994), helping employees "process and manage the psychological effects of the crisis" is an important goal of internal communications in a crisis.

Since most employees indicate that their preferred channel of communication is in-person from their supervisor (Mishra, Boynton, & Mishra, 2014) it makes sense that the internal

communications function would focus attention on this approach and make this a key tactic in any internal communications strategy.

Limitations

While the pandemic has resulted in a significant increase of remote working situations in Canadian public service organizations, this experience may not be an accurate representation of remote working arrangements post-pandemic. Most employees will not be faced with the same challenges such as a lack of childcare options or kids requiring home-schooling. Presumably those employees embracing remote working options in the future will have an adequate home office set up and the equipment and infrastructure necessary to make it a smoother experience. The anxiety and uncertainty of the pandemic and the related policy responses, such as lockdowns, quarantines and mask mandates, present additional challenges that may also impact the work experience of many employees. Although many people have indicated an interest in remote working at least part of the time, it is yet to be seen how many will embrace remote work arrangements over the longer term.

It should also be acknowledged that the pandemic is not yet over, and most organizations are not yet in a position to engage in a robust evaluation of their organizational responses to the crisis. Most Canadian public service organizations postponed their employee engagement surveys in 2020 and many have not yet fielded their surveys in 2021 or are still awaiting the results. Therefore, a full understanding of the impact on the workforce and whether findings, such as increases in scores for leadership communication, are a widespread phenomenon.

This research was focused on public service organizations and the experience of public servants is likely to be quite different from employees in other sectors. Especially public servants in office-based positions with strong job security and a robust benefits and leave package.

Implications for practice

The practices of the interviewees in most cases aligned with what the literature identified as best practices with regards to internal communication with remote employees. For a number of the interviewees the experience of the pandemic was a confirmation and reinforcement of what they already understood to be important tactics and strategies for internal communication, but the experience of the pandemic has both reinforced these and also provided strong evidence that empowers them to push for these approaches when advising managers and senior leaders.

Understanding the tools

With the increase of remote working since March 2020, there is also an increased awareness of the need to be intentional when choosing the right communications channel depending on the task or issue. Media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1983) provides a model to help internal communicators think through which channel is most appropriate for communicating a particular issue and provide a clear rationale for advising managers and leaders on which approach to take any why that will be the most effective. If the standard approach for an internal communications team is to add any new information to the intranet, send out an all-staff email and consider the issue communicated then this simple model provides a framework to help them think through a more sophisticated and potentially effective strategy. Although most of the interviewees seemed to clearly understand the need to adapt their strategy based on the issue(s) to be communicated, the challenge of finding adequate substitutes to face-to-face communication when employees are working from home has reinforced the importance of this channel and forced communicators to be innovative and come up with substitutes. This may also explain the increased emphasis on injecting more humanity and empathy into other channels such as email

or videoconferencing because of a need to overcompensate for the lack of opportunity to convey emotion when face-to-face communication is not possible.

Reaching remote employees (and all employees) through their managers

The internal communications matrix outlined by Welch and Jackson (2007) reinforces the media richness theory insofar as it prompts the communicator to consider the issue to be communicated and then identify who best to communicate that information to employees. A key consideration here is the need to prepare communication materials to adequately brief other people in the organization, such as line managers, so they can confidently engage in two-way communication with their staff about the issue. While this may not be the case for every issue that needs to be communicated, if the issue is complex and/or emotional (e.g., a new remote work policy, information about mental health supports) the internal communications team may need to provide keys message and Q&As to line managers in addition to the consistent corporate messaging. Many public servants who are traditionally not office-based, such as paramedics, teachers, and heavy equipment operators do not have regular access to the internet and email or may be too busy to read information from the corporate internal communications team. By providing their managers with the information they need to communicate important information internal communications teams may more effectively reach this important internal audience. The busy remote employee, even those who are office-based/knowledge workers would also benefit from this approach if as most indicate, and the literature confirms, their preferred method for receiving information is from their supervisor.

The importance of developing internal communication strategies that incorporate multiple channels of communication and consider the best messenger to share the information also speaks to the importance of frequency. In the feedback provided by IPAC survey

respondents, people expressed a desire for more communication. It's likely that most people do not want the same information shared with them in three successive all-staff emails. Instead by considering channels and messengers, internal communicators can plan for the same issue – especially a complex issue – to be communicated on the intranet, then announced through an all-staff email, followed up by a message from the deputy minister, then from a manager in a weekly staff meeting with the team and a final check-in during one-on-one meetings between managers and employees. Frequency is important and so is consistency and ample opportunities for two-way dialogue.

Regular and empathetic leadership communication

The COVID-19 pandemic was an equalizer insofar as everyone was dealing with the same level of uncertainty about the impact that the virus would have and how best to respond to minimize the risk of infection in workplaces. While privilege and positional power does alter the experience for people (e.g., a senior executive with no children at home and a comfortable home office will have a different experience to a single parent working at the kitchen table and simultaneously home-schooling their children) no individual knew with any certainty exactly how the pandemic would play out and what the best approach would be to keep people safe while maintaining programs and services for the public. Therefore, senior leaders were also dealing with high levels of uncertainty, anxiety and many were also working remotely. Where internal communicators included in this study often noted success when it came to leadership communications was in those situations where leaders acknowledged the challenges of the situation both for employees and for themselves. This crisis may present an opportunity for communicators to demonstrate the importance of more transparent and vulnerable communication from leaders and it will be important that internal communications teams collect

the evidence from this experience in the form of anecdotes as well as data, such as the results of employee engagement surveys.

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