

Digital Communication Strategies for Higher Education Institutes

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ABSTRACT

Effective digital communication strategies can create efficient for Higher Education institutions. The geographical location and culture of any educational institution is a serious factor that can affect the overall strategic decisions, and influence the methods of implementing digital communication.

This article presents a research design created, and explains the data collection methodologies used for the investigation of this topic.

The results, data analysis and interpretation are also presented on this article, based on positive and negative impacts that occur during the implementation in the higher education sector of Cyprus.

Keywords: *Strategic communication, Human Resources, Sustainability, Strategic Planning, Multicultural environment, higher education*



INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

Globalization brings new business and economic challenges that pushes organizations to design sustainable innovative solutions in order to achieve their goals, to survive and create a competitive advantage. The need for the development of suitable digital communication methods, strategies, practices, in a complex multicultural working environment are very important for organizations which must make decisions about sustainable and innovative strategic communication implementations.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Organisations are often place value on new methods of communication, both internally and externally so the role of strategic digital communication is to explore ways to transmit serious messages to stakeholders in order to achievement the goals.

1.2 Overall Objective of the Study

The objectives of this research are: a) to examine the model of a digital communication in current organisations, b) to examine the role of leadership to assure the quality and the functional values based on the digitalisation, b) to examine the concept of digital employee development to bridge the gap of the learners, d) to present decisions of management on strategic communication in the Higher Education sector. e) to critically discuss current communication strategies aroused by organisations, f) to evaluate implementations of strategic communication to bridge different levels of employment.

1.2.1 Specific Objectives of the Study

This research is trying to do a depth investigation of what currently exist in higher education sector regarding strategic digital communication. This article analyses the innovative digital communication findings of higher education institutions in order readers to think of new strategies to fill the gaps which are exist at the moment in this sector.

1.3 Research Questions

The scope of this research was to find answers on the following questions:

a) *“How digital transformation can change the way organisations communicate with stakeholders?”*,



b) *“What are the essentials that a digital leader should know to communicate effectively in an organisation?”*, c) *“What are the specific skills that a digital leader should have to transform communication effectively?”*, d) *“What is the role of a leader to the need for a digitally transformation management change of an organisation?”*.

METHODOLOGY

2.0 Introduction

Each organization operates differently, so it is up to each organization to use existing theories and findings in practice to create innovative and competitive solutions, plans and strategies for a better business environment in the 21st century. A university, college or any other academic institute usually includes significant theoretical and abstract elements, as well as practical application (depending on the subject area of each course such as in law, medicine, dentistry, pharmacy and veterinary medicine). The basic requirements for entry into an undergraduate qualification are usually a high school certificate, and into a postgraduate program level a bachelor's degree. For entry into vocational qualifications some relevant working experiences is very important but not necessary. This article presents plans of delivering strategic communication, as well as evaluating data collected about methods of communication.

2.1 Research Procedure

Books and any other sources are the keys to enter the door of new experiences. Any new information should come to fill the gaps and add on previous knowledge with respect to previous work and sources. According to Robson: “An empirical strategy is conducting research into a particular contemporary phenomenon in real life conditions”. The collection of data method for this research includes questionnaires, interviews (either individual or group), observation, and the repertory grid. According to Saunders et al (2009: 136), there are three layers: research strategies, research options and time horizons. "These three layers can be considered to be the focus of the research design process, that is, to transform the research question into a research program" (Saunders, as presented in Robson book in 2002).



2.2 Research Design

"The strategic use of case study has a great ability to produce answers like 'why?', 'What?', and 'how?'" (Saunders et al, 2009: 146). The use of a case study is also very important for researcher if they are looking to gain "a rich understanding of the research framework and the procedures established" (Morris and Wood 1991 as presented in Saunders et al 2009: 146).

The main examination area for this research is going to use the Higher Education sector, and more specific private colleges and universities of Cyprus. The research method will use the interview method, to collect qualitative data, and the questionnaire method to collect quantitative data.

2.3 Ethical Considerations

The issues of 'confidence' and 'confidentiality' during an interview and the completion of a questionnaire by participants must be taken very seriously by researchers. Participants must remain anonymous as the main target is to examine given answers and not accuse or reward them. Interviews can show reactions and emotions as well as tone of voice, facial expressions and any hesitations. Questionnaires are also very important since the researcher has the opportunity to receive in writing important and useful information about the field of research. However, by asking in depth questions about the research topic, it might acquire in-depth knowledge and data, which should be carefully protected, and destroyed information given which could hurt the participant. Some examples include a list of completed questionnaires and a recorded interview. Furthermore, the use of any bibliography and references during a survey review should be carefully presented on the final assignments, as authors' work might be taken as interception of other's primary data. All primary data is a copyright of the examiner author, and should be borrow with respect.

2.4 Study population

Each organization is operating in a different way. Whatever are the personal qualifications and working experiences of employees, there is always something new to learn. "Several communication researchers have successfully used quantitative methods in order to evaluate the relationship between leadership and communication, in relation to employee performance" (Contartesi, 2010; Embry, 2009; Kennedy, 2009; Rouse, 2009a; Rouse & Schuttler, 2009). This is why organizations are trying to use continuous education methods in order to train their employees in a way that will act based



on the culture of the organization. This article presents the level of effectiveness from the participation on training programs for the personal development of employees based on what is exist in real life actions.

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

3.0 Introduction

The changing working environment of digitalization should show more emphasis on the psychological, social, and rhetorical principles of strategic communication. The outcomes of strategic communication shows how important are the role of a digital leader on how to improve any new planning and how to implement organisation's change. The more experienced digital leaders have better results on achieving their goals, and face humanity, characters and emotions with respect. Good interpersonal skills and time management skills by digital leaders are very important for the success of the organisation which always help on giving a competitive advantage. Scientists around the world have researched and understood the importance of leaders, and have recognized the 'power of motivation' as their main tool of success. Strategic communication operates on a large scale, reaching and involving virtually everyone in the society. Market Segmentation, which includes Demographic, Geographic, Psychoanalytic, Behaviouristic usage and benefit are the key elements for a successful strategic communication plan.

3.1 Biographical Characteristics of the Respondents

3.1.1 The Republic of Cyprus

Cyprus is a beautiful island in the Mediterranean Sea at the crossroads of Europe, Asia and Africa. Cyprus is the third largest island in the Mediterranean with a population of approximately 800,000. "Throughout the centuries, Cyprus has been a meeting place of civilizations and cultures. The island has superb mountain scenery, forests, fascinating coastlines and beaches, and a rich historical and archaeological heritage bearing witness to its long and diverse history. The marvellous climate of the island offers endless opportunities to nature lovers. In May 2004, Cyprus joined the European Union and became its easternmost and southernmost outpost" (source: www.aspectsofcyprus.com).

“The country's economy has emerged as one of the leading business and financial centers in the region. Various sectors of the economy like tourism, banking, insurance and telecommunications provide the economy with a cutting edge. In January 2008, Cyprus joined the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) and the Euro(€). The official languages of the Constitution of Cyprus are Greek and Turkish, but English is widely spoken. English is also the language of instruction in the private institutions of tertiary education for the vast majority of their programs of study” (source: www.cyprustourism.org).

3.1.2 Higher Education in Cyprus

The Department of Higher and Tertiary Education (DHTE) is an authority within the Ministry of Education and Culture responsible for Higher Education (HE) regarding all sectors and issues linked to Higher Education. “The Department aims at the creation of the appropriate conditions for the provision of higher education and training in academic and professional programs of studies to the larger possible number of people” (source: www.highereducation.ac.cy). Cyprus’ accession to the European Union (EU), in 2004, has brought forward new challenges for the Department of Higher and Tertiary Education which has taken significant steps towards the establishment of Cyprus as a regional educational and research center and has also implemented a series of measures regarding the alignment of the Cypriot educational policy and vision with that of the European Union. “The Lisbon Strategy, which has been adopted by the European Union, aspires to turn the EU into the most competitive knowledge-based economy with more work positions and social cohesion. Main goals and challenges of Higher Education (HE) in Cyprus is to enhance quality assurance in HE through keeping up with the Bologna Process, active involvement in Bologna Process and its implementation in Cyprus Education, develop Cyprus into a regional centre for education and research, increase the number of people attending HE in Cyprus; increase the number of students attending programs related to science, technology and communication” (Source: Lisbon Recognition Convention, 1999). According to the Ministry of Education and Culture (2011) of the Republic of Cyprus “Higher and Tertiary Education is also directly linked to the European membership of Cyprus since matters such as the recognition of academic qualifications and student and academic staff mobility are dominant among the issues handled by the DHTE” (www.moec.gov.cy accessed on 13th April 2020).

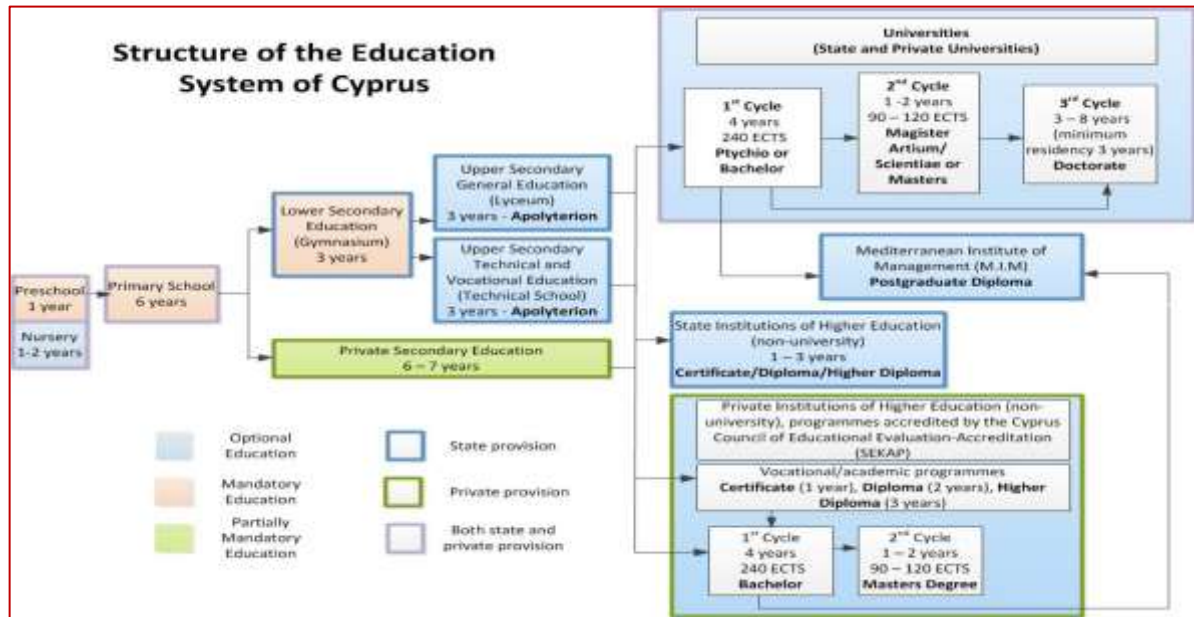


Figure 1: Structure of the Education System in Cyprus

Source: www.highereducation.ac.cy (accessed 16th April 2020)

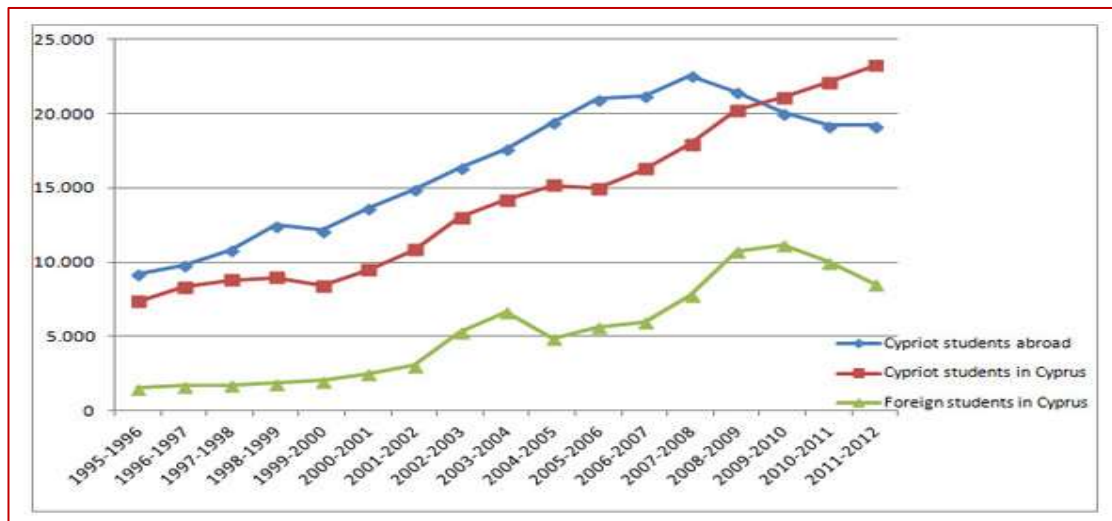


Table 1: Cypriot and foreign students in Cyprus and Cypriot students studying abroad

Source: www.highereducation.ac.cy (accessed 16th April 2020)

3.2 Human Resource Department - Public University

The arrangement of a meeting with a human resource officer at a public university in Nicosia helped to investigate further about the internal communication in the organization and also investigate in depth the methods and strategies are following regarding communication between employees. This person has provided me with tangible information about the implementation and development of employees regarding communication, as well as with information regarding electronic communication at workplace. This person also informed me about the policy and strategies of the university regarding communication, by providing me with some copies of them. Of course, the process takes seriously all the expenses and costs of the planned strategies as well as any training programmes that could support staff regarding their communication at workplace. The university in most cases covers between 50% and 100% of the costs and that depends on the financial resources available at the moment of the training program and any available funding for this reason. There is also the possibility to cover part of these costs from funding by the European Union (EU). 50% of the training courses covers administrative staff of an organization, 40% of the budget covers heads of departments, and 10% of expenses for courses and seminars in abroad. More detail information about the current situation with numbers about participation and budgets can be found in appendices below.

3.3 Training and Development Unit– Private University

A private university in Cyprus has accepted my enquiry for a meeting in order to discuss everything that is related to the training and development of human resources. According to the training and development head of Training and development unit, Mr S.C, “the University gives priority to immediate needs in training and development, as defined by the heads of the schools, and heads of the departments, which are aligned with strategic objectives of the University” ... “The provision of quality and targeted training is always developed with good communication between employees and the head of their management”. Training programs are prepared for a specific target and reason in order to satisfy the knowledge needs of employees at the university. The training and development unit decides about the rates of education per semester based on the EFQM system and according to the strategic targets of the university. Mr S.C. argued that “the annual amount needs that must be spend for an average 4 to 5 days for training per person is around €250.000 Euros. According to Mr

S.C. “There is always a reviewing method for the training in order to examine how helpful and successful was a training course for the participants arise from the 360th feedback”. According to Torrington (2008:311) “The term 360-degree feedback is used to refer to multi-rater feedback, and has to do with performance management systems and as a separate development activity. It provides a better way to capture the complexities of performance, and it is often used to a survey questionnaire and statistical analysis. This feedback can be selected from all staff of all levels, and it can be benefit mainly for the line manager who will be able to observe the individual in a limited range of situations. It can be also be mention that the 360-degree feedback needs to be careful when is used so that the employees will not take this experience as a threat for them by their organizations”.

3.4 Academic Director – Private College

In February 2020, I have visited a private college and asked from them to talk with an officer regarding Academic Affairs. The Academic Director has accepted me in her office and mentioned that one of her main duties is to receive enquiries from all academic staff regarding their continue training and development on new knowledge. The academic director explained that she receives all enquiries and then transfer them to the Director of the college that will examine the possibilities on how to satisfy their needs. Also the college gives to its students a questionnaire that need to complete at the end of each semester. On that questionnaire is included everything that has to do with the course they study as well as an appraisal in order to evaluate their instructors regarding their communication and engagement during the semester. Based on these evaluations the academic director will inform the general director in order to see what kind of training and development need to be prepared for academic staff. All questionnaires are collected and keep save in case someone wants to ask and see them. A general report is prepared each semester by the academic director with all information mentioned before. Unfortunately, Miss A. H. was not authorized to show me more information on these results during the interview due to the policy of the college. Motivation in an international workplace needs to be used differently, in order to stimulate and encourage employee performance even that is across cultures or between men and women. A leader should develop people’s cultures in a way that can be ‘connected’ with others.



3.5 Academic Staff – Private University

Dr. C.L.K, Lecturer at a private university in subject areas related to Human Resources mentioned during the interview that “the University does not organize any training courses for its staff very often, for economic reasons mainly, except in special cases, like programs that have to do with soft skills i.e. team building or communication, and other like methods of how to ‘handle’ special needs students, and training on the use of Moodle (learning management system).

3.6 Academic Officer – Private College

Almost all new semesters start in February so it was not easy to arrange an interview with the person responsible for the enrolment of students. Very busy environment and not easy to get the information needed. Mr E.E, said that “the college in examining all available options that could improve the quality of a class environment both for academic staff as well as for students... Projectors, borders, tables, chairs, air-conditioning and heating, health and safety issues are very important in order to have a healthy environment in every academic year....All are discussed with the general director of the college in order to examine if the available budget could solve most the enquiries for each academic semester”.

3.7 Career Centre – Private University

Short programs are always flexible based on each organization’s needs, and their contents are updated based on latest findings, special arrangements and group sizes. The manager of this Centre argued that “they give the tools for the improvement of needs in someone’s career and in their organizations” “The high standards and state of the art facilities provide a learning experience that ensures, perfect training investment results for the organizations” ... “Personal development training programs, gain skills in minimizing and dealing with stress which helps to avoid feeling overwhelmed in any area of life. Communication skills development plays a very important role in the everyday lives of employees in relation to time management, positive attitude, practical goals and aid in every aspect of life. Also, this Centre can support its partners to find full time or part time new employees from the list of its students, and on the same time partners can also give options of internships in order to help students get new working experiences in real life situations. The manager of the Centre mentioned that until the end of April last year, the number of students took part on



internship programs (based on available places) were increased from 15 to 30, and the number of staff from private sector that attended training programs of the university were 126 persons. Unfortunately, due to the limited time by the manager I did not have the opportunity to collect information from previous years in order to compare them with this year's numbers. Also, Cyprus' entrance into the European Union offers the opportunity to all academic and administrative staff of the university for continues improvement under the Erasmus Plus programs for employees around Europe. Unfortunately, she was not in a place to give me amounts spent for this reason by the European Union.

3.8 Human Resource Development Authority of Cyprus (HRDA)

The Human Resource Development Authority of Cyprus (HRDA) is “a semi-government organization which originally established under the provisions of Law 21 of 1974 under the name of Industrial Training Authority of Cyprus” (HRDA, 2018). “It has been designed to meet the needs of the economy as a whole, as well as to support those enterprises that need some help and for the labor force”. Mr. E. S., Human Resource Officer of the Training Directorate at the HRDA, is responsible “for the assessment of the economy's manpower training needs, the formulation of training policies and the upgrading of the training system”. Mr. E.S. said during the interview “that a participant should meet the training needs of existing staff and the training of managers in new concepts and methods of management, and specialized topics aimed based on the planning, organizing, and implementing of training programs from business conducted either in Cyprus or in abroad if necessary”. According to the HRDA in the year 2015 (HRDA 2015, p. 286,288) “5393 training programs were subsidized for 57152 participants and the total expenditure amounted to €12.494.614. There is an increase compared to 5012 training programs, and 52829 participants from €10.542.522 in 2014 (HRDA 2014, p.21)”... “95% of the programs implemented in 2015 fell in the category of Continuing Training, whereas the percentage for Initial Training was only 5%”. Each year, the HRD Authority offered two scholarships awarded to a member of its staff at Bachelor's and Master's level at a selected higher education institution of Cyprus. The amount covered by the HRDA for training programs has increased from €35.541 Euros in 2010 to €132.352 Euros in 2018.



DISCUSSION ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

4.0 Introduction

The degrees to which strategic communication factors are implicated and improved to become successful are based on the encouraged engagement and positive flexible behaviour of employees. There are also very much depend on the way motivation and training are complicated to achieve a strategic communication plan and also on the ways in which employees can lead and manage others' performance at workplace. Effective digital solutions often are significant on whether the design of a strategic plan could succeed and provide autonomy for leaders to act and implement managerial decisions. A digital solution of a challenge can be evaluated as successful only after continues actions, implementations and evaluations of strategic communication plans. A successful strategic communication plan should have excellent communication abilities and an important working involvement whenever organizational sizes, and continues learning. The idea of designing and developing a strategic communication plan for achieving a development is arising based on the goals that have been set by each organization. To update a strategic plan for development needs to identify the necessary skills that must be improved, devise activities to improve those skills, identify the resources to perform those activities, identify the measures to record progress, and work out a timeline because without all these elements it is not possible to make an impact on communication's development. Motivation is having a key role to a psychological process that will bring a communication improvement. A person with an unsatisfied need will do whatever is possible and behave in a way that would satisfy that need. Maslow's motivation theory is saying that human beings are motivated by unsatisfied needs, and that certain lower factors need to be satisfied before higher needs can be satisfied. Therefore, it is important for all organizations to understand all its employees' needs and try to satisfy them in order to pursue higher-level motivators, and create continues digital communicators who could be a serious fact for success. The level of success will get better performance, more satisfaction, and productivity. Downs and Adrian (2004:11) classifies that "the benefits of communication review is related to strategic planning, feedback and training". The power of a good communicating manager would affect the daily productivity of the internal working environment.

4.1 Survey Evaluation

The aim of this investigation was to find answers on the following research questions: a) *“How digital transformation can change the way organisations communicate with stakeholders?”*, b) *“What are the essentials that a digital leader should know to communicate effectively in an organisation?”*, c) *“What are the specific skills that a digital leader should have to transform communication effectively?”*, b) *“What is the role of a leader to the need for a digitally transformation management change of an organisation?”*.

A. “How digital transformation can change the way organisations communicate with stakeholders?”

The action of not paying attention to employees equally, could show a serious misunderstanding of multigenerational differences. Managers who show more attention on how to earn more money create lack of trust and bad communication between employees, and colleagues do not respect each other. The research showed that the differences between generations have immediate effect of productivity. This is because older employees do not collaborate with younger employees and act based on experience ‘mechanically’, without paying attention to the modern methods or techniques that have been learnt by digital leaders and managers. On the other side, younger employees have entered an organization with modern skills and methods that have been learnt at colleges and universities. Those helped them to follow modern rules and computerized skills in order to survive in the competitive workplace environment. As a result, the two sides come in contract, by being competitive between them by having bad communication (like emotions, words, tensions). Here comes the role of a leader that need to find a solution to this conflict in order to bring the two sides together.

B. “What are the essentials that a digital leader should know to communicate effectively in an organisation?”

The role a digital leader is to find any gaps so that could have the best possible communication between employees. For example, if an instructor does not speak good English or a student does not speak or write good English then both should participate on English language classes. Also the leader is responsible for the communication between the top management and other administrative staff, as

well as students regarding e.g examinations, registration of students, schedule of class, and payments or salaries. The Emotional Intelligence (EQ), is a very good tool that someone needs to make a training, to ‘take someone else’s position’ in order to understand how he/she feels on a specific situation. The development of this kind of performance could help to improve communication between employees. For example, by understanding each other’s needs, culture, religion, behaviours should get prepared for a better and ‘healthy’ environment. This is not easy to send a message to a ‘difficult and problematic’ personality. There is also the generational difference so a message must be sending in a clear and simple way. A multinational working environment is also a complicated case that speak different languages or has other believes, even the majority of people communicate in English, there is also a difference on decoding a message in another language.

C. “What are the specific skills that a digital leader should have to transform communication effectively?”

Leaders have an everyday communication with employees. Leaders prepare everyday plans and suggest changes according to each situation. Leaders are moving together with the team, and they do not give orders like managers. They must understand team’s needs and decisions to transfer them to the general management. This article presents the role and the ‘power’ of a leader as well as the important role of a leader in teamwork. Everyone needs each other in order to succeed, and to create passion, motivation and organizational culture.

D. “What is the role of a leader to the need for a digitally transformation management change of an organisation?”

Employees looked to have completed with good faith the questionnaire, as the results on it showed the ‘perfect job’ that their leader has done in their department. Bad communication that does not work properly can create mistakes which could damage the whole strategy, and affect development and performance at workplace.

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