

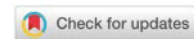
CONTEMPORARY CONCEPTS OF INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS MANAGEMENT AND THEIR APPLICABILITY IN PUBLIC ENTERPRISES

Zoran Ristić^{1*}, Maja Vrbanac², Milan Rašković³

¹Faculty of Organizational Studies EDUKA, University of the Academy of Commerce, Belgrade, Serbia,
e-mail: zoranris@yahoo.com

²Faculty of Entrepreneurial Business and Real Estate Management, University Union Nikola Tesla, Belgrade, Serbia, e-mail: majavrbanac86@gmail.com

³Faculty of Business and Law, MB University, Belgrade, Serbia,
e-mail: milan.raskovic@bureaucube.com



Abstract: Internal corporate communications and relationships that develop in the working process have always been complex, stemming from different positions through which capital owners, management, and employees engage. The primary goal for owners is typically profit maximization, while employees seek higher wages and better working conditions, which imply higher operating costs, thus directly opposing the interests of the former. Whereas internal communications were previously largely neglected and their significance for the success of companies not fully understood, and disputes typically resolved through physical conflicts between employees and employers, today, communication and awareness of the existence of parties that should engage in dialogue rather than conflict have spawned new, contemporary theories of management and improvement of internal communications and relationships, directly contributing to the creation of new management concepts encountered in companies aiming for effective and efficient utilization of their most significant resources—human potential.

Planning internal communications now unfolds in an environment that is increasingly complex and challenging, with explosive growth in communication channels, a growing diversity of the employee base, and a vast amount of internal information being the reality management of companies faces daily. Traditional company leadership models based on rigid hierarchy, command, maintaining constant tension, and the like become counterproductive in such an environment. Given the above, this paper analyzes the communications of capital owners, management, and employees, highlights their legal regulation, international norms and standards, and emphasizes the importance of internal communications for public enterprises in Serbia, which should strive to create good internal interpersonal relationships, quality organizational culture and climate, and competitive advantages based on human potential in an increasingly demanding market. The paper is expected to stimulate the scientific and professional community to further research in this area and contribute to a better understanding of the importance internal communications have in achieving the goals of public enterprises in Serbia and their coping with the challenges of the modern environment.

Keywords: Internal communications, internal relationships, human potential.

Field: Social Sciences, and Humanities.

1. INTRODUCTION

Internal communications, according to the assessments of many experts, are more significant than external communications for all those companies that aim to achieve their goals in an increasingly demanding and competitive market. Their importance particularly becomes evident during periods of crisis, reorganization, launching large projects, and the like. The changes brought about by globalization impose the need for adaptation of internal organization in all companies, regardless of their industry and ownership (Panić, Andrejić & Stanković, 2015). Considering the direct link to company goals and their development, investment in human resources and internal communication represents the foundation of every sound strategic thinking (Smiljković S, 2015). Internal communication, dialogue, and negotiation processes among capital owners, management representatives, and employees represent the cornerstone of successful business in the contemporary business environment. However, given the existence of diverse interests, neither dialogue nor negotiation are devoid of conflicts. On the other hand, practice has shown that dialogue and negotiation contribute to social peace, adapting to economic and social changes in increasingly unstable and turbulent environments. Conflict within companies is less likely in a conducive environment where there is a strong commitment to aligning interests rather than challenging them (International Labour Office Sectoral Activities Dept. collective bargaining, 2017). The absence of communication, dialogue, and negotiation among capital owners, management representatives, and employees undermines the foundations of participatory democracy and socio-economically sustainable development of society (SSSS, 2021).

*Corresponding author: zoranris@yahoo.com



Collective bargaining and collective agreements, as a result of dialogue and negotiation processes, have proven to be the most suitable instrument in practice for establishing a balance between the interests of labor, management, and capital owners in market economy conditions. Their particular value stems from the fact that they arise through the agreement of the will of the contracting parties, unlike other legal acts governing collective interests (Constitution and laws), behind which stands the monopoly of coercion held by the state (Milošević, 2016). Negotiation forms vary from country to country, within a single country, or industrial sector. Several factors influence the way negotiations are conducted, including the national legal framework, existing negotiation models, bargaining power, and the prevalence of precarious work in the country or sector (IndustriALL Global Union, 2015). Dialogue and negotiation are widely recognized as key instruments for regulating working conditions and relations between employers and employees, ensuring a fairer distribution of surplus resources, improving working conditions, and preserving the dignity of workers, but at the same time institutionalizing industrial conflicts. Therefore, literature often emphasizes that conflicting expectations of employees and employers can be reconciled through negotiations, as power is confronted with power. (Urdarević, 2021).

Perhaps, due to unfavorable circumstances in the decades behind us, the importance of all this may have been neglected in these regions. Slow penetration of modern management knowledge, especially in public enterprises, the quality of existing education programs, weak interaction between science and industry, are just some of the reasons why this is so. However, the transition to modern business models of public enterprises requires ensuring a whole set of prerequisites, among which one of the central issues is certainly: How to inspire employees to work with "heart"? How to influence their understanding, awareness, expectations, aspirations...? How to instill in them a sense of identification with the organization, its successes and failures? (Ristić, 2002). Without quality internal communication, none of the above is possible.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Insight into the literature of this field has revealed that numerous papers have been written on the topic of internal communication, yet there exists a significant difference between the suggestions and conclusions found therein and the practices of public enterprises in Serbia. Almost all authors who have engaged with this topic are unanimous in the view that internal communication is the foundation of the success of all company activities. However, the need for a more detailed analysis of works in this field, the extraction of key messages and suggestions, and particularly the highlighting of legal bases related to the rules of formal internal communication (through collective bargaining) seems justified, considering the attitude that still a large number of public enterprises in Serbia have towards this crucial business segment.

Building upon the aforementioned, the paper first applies a descriptive method of analysis, pointing out the most significant findings of scientific and professional works in this area. Subsequently, the current state of internal communication in public enterprises in Serbia is analyzed, and appropriate conclusions are drawn. Description represents the first, yet also a very important level of understanding, as all other levels of comprehension are based precisely on description (Vujević, 2002). Therefore, the scientific aim of this paper is to describe internal communication using secondary sources of data, and then focus on our reality and point out the current state of internal communications.

In order to gain insights into possible directions for improving the legal framework for internal communications in public enterprises in Serbia, the method of collecting primary data through interviews was applied. The authors of this paper organized interviews in 10 public enterprises whose founder is the Republic of Serbia or local self-government units (with representatives of management and employees/unions). A semi-structured interview method with focus groups (group interviews) was applied, with pre-formulated yet open-ended questions to allow flexibility and "in-depth" exploration of internal communications, incorporating the personal experiences of the respondents, which are crucial for drawing appropriate conclusions. (Ayres, 2008). With the participants' consent, interviews were recorded in audio format to enable subsequent playback and analysis. Although there is a certain stigma associated with interviews as a scientific method, especially within our region, the authors of this paper believe that interviews represent an important research method. Through interviews, phenomena in the field of social sciences and humanities can be explored in depth, particularly from the perspective of their subjects – people (Wattles, 2019).

The social aim of this paper is to raise awareness of the importance of internal communication for all companies, regardless of their ownership (public/private) or size. Through such an approach, the authors believe that this paper holds both theoretical and practical value. Firstly, it contributes to a

better understanding of the significance of internal communication and its impact on business outcomes, and it can be beneficial to managers striving to develop internal communications to enhance internal relationships, increase employee satisfaction, and ultimately achieve better results.

3. RESULTS

Internal communications encompass all activities conducted for the exchange of information and support in achieving business goals, while simultaneously addressing the social and psychological needs of employees. They play a key role at all levels of the organization, contributing to its efficient functioning. (Milošević, 2023). In modern conditions, the boundaries between internal and external company communication are blurring, so internal communication is perceived as part of overall corporate communication (Milanović, Matić & Jurčić, 2022). Internal communication represents a fundamental component of successful company development and has a direct impact on employee efficiency, commitment, satisfaction, and motivation, thus serving as the foundation of strategic management (Novaković, Perić & Cogoljević, 2023). Many theorists, when discussing internal marketing, have emphasized the importance of internal communications as two-way “streets” between employees and management, with the main goal being the establishment of trust (Dobrijević, 2008). Internal organizational boundaries in companies are becoming increasingly blurred, organizing and coordinating activities through detailed planning is becoming less significant, and, more importantly, management is developing a “softer” skill (wisdom) to extract the best for the organization from each individual. A “grid-shaped”, non-hierarchical organization is emerging, which ensures smooth flow of information, encourages taking responsibility, and fosters interaction between “equal,” informal communication and leadership guidance regardless of hierarchical levels (Ristić, Mujanović & Damjanović, 2018).

Relations that exist and develop in the process of work have always been complex and have arisen from different positions from which capital owners, management representatives, and employees entered. For the former, the predominant goal has always been profit increase, while employees have strived to attain more humane working conditions, which implied higher costs for capital owners and thus were directly opposed to their interests. While in the 19th century disputes were mostly resolved through physical conflicts, communication, dialogue, negotiation, and awareness of common interests have given rise to new, modern theories of labor relations and directly contributed to the creation of labor law as we know it today in the vast majority of countries (Reljanović & Misailović, 2021). While companies in the 1990s were primarily concerned with employee retention by improving working conditions rather than communication, today internal communication is seen as a component of overall corporate communication, aiming to encourage employee loyalty and retention (Milanović, Matić & Jurčić, 2015).

However, unlike the prevailing understanding today, there was previously a prevailing belief that all of this disrupts the flexible adaptation of companies, represents a source of labor market rigidity, and had a negative impact on business efficiency. Such a viewpoint was encouraged by neoliberal discourse based on theories promoting labor market deregulation to improve economic efficiency. According to these perspectives, dialogue and negotiation are restrictive instruments that reduce productivity and inhibit the flexibility of enterprises. In other words, dialogue and negotiation lead to wage increases, and consequently labor costs, leading capital representatives to begin limiting hiring or resorting to employee layoffs. However, the theoretical work of Freeman and Medoff (1984) shed light on another aspect of dialogue and negotiation between capital owners, management representatives, and employees. Namely, dialogue and negotiation provide employees with a voice in decision-making that can be used to improve labor relations and enhance overall work performance. The results of their research have shown that in employers where such practices exist, there is a reduction in wage inequality, an increase in social security levels due to fewer layoffs, and higher productivity (Urdarević, 2021). The market economic system can function efficiently only if the economic entities constituting it strive to maximize profit in their behavior and if there is a roughly balanced relationship between this interest and the interest of employees to achieve higher wages, on the other hand. This balance is not achieved spontaneously and haphazardly, which is why regulation of these relationships through internal communication, dialogue, and negotiation is resorted to. Interestingly, it was the capital owners who first initiated dialogue and negotiation, seeking to legally regulate their relationship with employees. Over time, the state itself becomes involved in this process (Zavoda, 2018).

In the initial studies on negotiation within companies, Dunlop (1944) and Leontief (1946) were the pioneers (Froyen, 1990). This negotiation became increasingly affirmed after the end of World War I, so the first legal regulation of this area occurred in Germany in 1918, Austria and France in 1919, Italy in 1926, the Netherlands in 1927, and Sweden in 1928, followed by other countries later on. The history of dialogue

and negotiation within companies spans two centuries. Initially, they compensated for the absence of labor legislation. However, today, despite the existence of labor and social legislation, negotiations and dialogue have not lost their significance, as their primary aim is to qualitatively and quantitatively improve employees' rights and working conditions in relation to the law. Therefore, negotiation as a means of regulating labor relations fundamentally differs from their regulation by the state through laws and other regulations, as well as from the situation in which each employee individually negotiates with the employer about their working conditions. (Lončar et al, 2015). Negotiation between capital and labor representatives is subject to international labor standards (conventions and recommendations) of the ILO, among which the following stand out: Convention No. 98 concerning rights of employees to organize and engage in collective bargaining (1949), Convention No. 154 and Recommendation No. 163, concerning collective bargaining (from 1981), and Recommendation No. 91 concerning collective agreements.

The prevailing belief among management in public enterprises in Serbia that the motto "work hard" leads to success seems to require a change. Hard work without understanding, flexibility, and employee enthusiasm leads to nowhere. Good internal communication becomes a paradigm for good knowledge management within the company and the company itself. Management models in which information solely flows "top-down" without feedback must be replaced by a different approach, an approach of knowledge gathering and communication that becomes a "two-way street" (Soškić, Maličić, Maličić, 2022). The survey conducted in the first half of March 2024 in Serbia (180 respondents) showed that 14% of respondents believe that internal communication is more important than external communication for a company's operations, and that the vast majority of respondents, nearly 85%, consider internal and external communication equally important for the success of the company, which is in line with global practice and perception of the importance of the company's reputation among employees, as well as among external target audiences (Nova ekonomija, 2024).

4. DISCUSSIONS

Although internal communication is crucial for successful operations, research shows that only 3.9 percent of companies in Serbia have a clear strategy for managing employee relations. (Smiljković, 2015). Most companies deal with internal communications ad hoc, only addressing them after becoming aware of problems that may not have arisen if there had been planned, timely internal communication. In Serbia, the beginning of formal dialogue and communication within companies is associated with the period between the two world wars. During this time, negotiation between capital and labor representatives was envisioned as a possibility with the adoption of the Labor Protection Law of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1922, and it became mandatory with the enactment of the Crafts Law in 1931. After World War II, dialogue and negotiation between capital and labor representatives in Serbia were more symbolic. Collective agreements were in contradiction with the system of workers' self-management, meaning the role and position of workers, who autonomously regulated their mutual relations based on the Constitution and laws, as well as rights and obligations related to collective labor and management within the work organization. Such a state persisted until the late 1980s and early 1990s. Negotiation during this period practically existed only in the private sector (Law on Labor Relations of 1957), and there were about 3% of such enterprises according to some estimates in relation to their total number. However, the Basic Law on Labor Relations of 1965 followed, by which collective agreements, as a result of negotiation between capital and labor representatives, were no longer provided for even in this sector. As for the relations between employees and employers in the social sector, they were regulated by law and self-management general acts. The real dialogue and negotiation between capital and labor representatives in Serbia practically began to develop in the late 1980s with the enactment of the Law on Basic Labor Rights, which recognizes the actual existence of collective agreements. In accordance with the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia from 1990 and the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia from 2006, negotiation between capital and labor representatives is a constitutional category. Therefore, in the labor legislation of the Republic of Serbia today, there are formal legal grounds for dialogue and negotiation within companies, but they are not sufficient and do not act as incentives for its development. Although at first glance, it may seem that the Labor Law promotes dialogue and negotiation between capital and labor representatives as a way of regulating rights and obligations in the employment relationship, a deeper analysis shows that the provisions are not complete or precise, do not act as incentives, and often have only a cosmetic effect. If several articles of the Labor Law are interpreted together, it is clear that the preference given to dialogue and negotiation is undermined by the introduction of a series of exceptions, some of which are such that they completely undermine the ostensibly proclaimed "privileged position" of dialogue and negotiation (SSSS, 2021). The rules on negotiation contained in the Labor Law provide for the form of collective

agreements, the duty of participants to negotiate, and the possibility of arbitration for dispute resolution, but there is a lack of positive legal regulation of this process. Consequently, the negotiation procedure between labor and capital representatives in labor law is not sufficiently regulated, basic principles on which negotiation participants must base their behavior are not prescribed, negotiation techniques are not regulated, and no responsibility is envisaged for capital representatives as negotiation participants for irresponsible and unscrupulous conduct during negotiations, or behavior clearly aimed at obstructing and interrupting negotiations.

4.1. POSSIBLE COURSES OF ACTION FOR IMPROVING INTERNAL COMMUNICATION IN PUBLIC ENTERPRISES IN SERBIA

Based on the analysis of the attitudes of respondents covered in group interviews conducted by the authors of this paper in 10 public enterprises, it can be concluded that, first and foremost, activities regarding amendments to the Labor Law should be directed towards a different arrangement of the system of legal acts regulating rights and obligations in the employment relationship with the employer, which will genuinely favor agreements over unilateral regulation of employment relationships. In this regard, it is necessary to establish that:

- that rights and obligations in the employment relationship are primarily regulated through dialogue via the negotiation process between capital and labor representatives,
- the validity of the employer's independent general act is limited, with the obligation that, if there is a previously signed general act with employee representatives, it must be respected until the conclusion of a new one, and negotiation during that time must be mandatory, involving a mediator/arbitrator,
- in all amendments and additions to laws regulating rights, obligations, and responsibilities in the employment relationship, ensure that the content of labor relations is largely regulated through dialogue and negotiation. Legal regulation of rights and obligations in the employment relationship should be such that both employees and employers have a strong interest in negotiating. The law should provide for general principles that protect the fundamental principles of modern labor law and set guidelines for closer and more detailed regulation of labor relations at a narrower or individual level. The law must not, either openly or covertly, discourage negotiation between capital and labor representatives.
- the negotiation procedure is more detailed by law, especially:
 1. determining the mandatory form and content of the submitted initiative, as well as the response to the initiative to commence negotiations,
 2. regulating the negotiation procedure (location, time, and manner of conducting meetings, deadlines, dynamics, keeping minutes, etc.),
 3. determining and elaborating on the basic principles and violations of negotiation principles,
 4. determining and elaborating on the principle of accessibility of relevant data to negotiation participants,
 5. establishing special protection for employee representatives participating in negotiations.

For the legal regulation of the negotiation process between capital and labor representatives in public enterprises in Serbia to make sense, it is necessary to entrust inspection authorities with special powers regarding supervision and control of that process, as well as to provide appropriate sanctions for negotiators who commit any violations of the law. In addition to the above, it is necessary to impose an obligation on negotiation participants in public enterprises, regardless of the nature of their activities, to initiate a procedure for peaceful dispute resolution before the Agency for Peaceful Resolution of Labor Disputes in case of any issues preventing the continuation of negotiations. The duty to attempt peaceful dispute resolution would bind negotiation participants after a certain period from the start of negotiations, and the refusal of any participant to participate in the peaceful resolution process would be subject to appropriate sanctions. Participants should be obligated to attempt to resolve the dispute through mediation, arbitration, or other alternative dispute resolution methods, where together with representatives of the parties in dispute, they would make a recommendation that would not be binding unless the participants agree otherwise.

5. CONCLUSIONS

It's an understatement to say that human resources are the most crucial asset of any company today. Companies are increasingly leveraging modern advanced technology that facilitates and accelerates operations, but this should never undermine the importance of respecting the significance of internal communications, which can be seen as the "bloodstream" of every organization. Conversations,

negotiations, consultations, as forms of exchanging expertise and collaboration within the company, are gaining increasing importance (Šoškić, Maličić, Maličić, 2022). Aligning the needs to achieve employee satisfaction and company success is just one aspect of continuous adaptation and reconciliation in employer-employee relationships, especially in increasingly turbulent environments. Good communication, dialogue, and negotiation within companies are the foundation of successful internal and external positioning, as it directly impacts the efficiency, satisfaction, and motivation of employees, as well as the value of companies, their products, and brand. Due to its direct connection to the goals of capital owners and company development, investing in improving this communication and negotiation process forms the basis of any good strategic thinking. Unfortunately, many companies recognize the importance of internal communication only in a crisis situation. For some, especially in such situations, investing in dialogue, communication, and negotiation with employees has paid off multiple times, as they managed to preserve their reputation in times of crisis. In general, everything done in external communication should start within the company. The long-term success of a company is directly linked to the effectiveness of communication and dialogue within the organization.

Decentralization and placing focus on communications within public enterprises in Serbia between capital owners, capital representatives, and labor, create serious issues, especially where there is lower employee organization rates and weaker integrated relationships between national-level employee structures and those at the enterprise level. Employees in public enterprises in Serbia predominantly attempt to convince employers of their readiness to be "partners" in the process of improving company performance. On the other hand, management representatives seem not to recognize this readiness as significant for the successful operation of the enterprise and mostly reduce communication with employees to those forms prescribed by law. Debates are increasingly taking place on the topic of partnership with employers, with advocates of this model insisting that transitioning from an atmosphere of hostility towards employers to one of constructive engagement is a way to gain support not only from employers but also from employees. On the other hand, critics of this model argue that such partnership implies a fundamentally subordinate role that prevents the creation of an independent employee organization based on the actions of all its individuals.

The success of negotiations between capital and labor representatives largely depends on the economic, institutional, political, and legal environment in which dialogue and negotiations take place. In a situation where global labor markets are characterized by inequality, exclusion, and job insecurity, such negotiations represent a significant instrument that reduces inequality and ensures equal conditions for all participants in the market. By adopting the proposed recommendations within this framework, based on an analysis of the current situation, the legislative framework would be improved in terms of promoting negotiations and dialogue between capital and labor representatives in public enterprises in Serbia. By implementing these solutions, the number of concluded collective agreements would increase, trust and partnership relations would be strengthened, and an overall environment for improving the position of employees and establishing conditions for dignified employment.

Based on the results of the conducted research, it can generally be concluded that almost every manager in a public enterprise in Serbia understands that communication with internal stakeholders, i.e., employees, is equally important for success as external market communication. However, the results also suggest that in practice, there are numerous issues in this communication and that it is still in need of improvement in terms of the legal framework for its regulation. The key responsibility for establishing good internal communication primarily lies with the management of public enterprises because well-organized and functional channels of internal communication ensure swift and efficient flow of information within the organization, and information is crucial for their business success in today's world. Accordingly, all our public enterprises must include internal communication in their strategic objectives, and a well-crafted internal communication strategy will greatly contribute to achieving overall corporate goals.

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