



## **Comunicación de crisis: Lecciones aprendidas en un escenario post pandemia<sup>1</sup>**

## **Internal crisis communications: Lessons learned in a post-pandemic scenario<sup>1</sup>**

## **Comunicação de crise: respostas e lições em um cenário pós-pandêmica<sup>1</sup>**

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## Resumen

El objetivo de esta investigación fue identificar las formas en que la crisis provocada por la pandemia del Covid 19 impactó en los sistemas de gestión de comunicación interna de crisis en empresas de Ecuador, Colombia y Chile, y vislumbrar las enseñanzas que este proceso dejó para las organizaciones. Para ello, se aplicó una metodología cualitativa mediante el uso de entrevistas semiestructuradas a 11 jefes de comunicación de las empresas en estudio. Los hallazgos mostraron que las empresas abordaron sus sistemas de comunicaciones internas de manera más estratégica con el doble objetivo de salvar vidas y mantener en funcionamiento a sus organizaciones. A través de la comunicación interna estratégica de crisis como subsistema de comunicación organizacional, las empresas no solo mostraron una gran capacidad de adaptación tecnológica en el uso de los canales de comunicación, sino también una mayor integración entre sus esfuerzos de comunicación organizacional para construir confianza con sus públicos clave y salvaguardar su reputación durante la pandemia. Las lecciones de la gestión de crisis en este periodo posibilitan a los gerentes y encargados de comunicación establecer estrategias para afrontar futuras crisis como parte de su aprendizaje organizacional y mejoramiento continuo.

**Palabras clave:** comunicación interna, gestión de crisis, comunicación organizacional, tecnología, pandemia.

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## Abstract

The objective of this study was to identify the ways in which the crisis caused by the Covid 19 pandemic impacted the internal crisis communication management systems in companies in Ecuador, Colombia, and Chile, and to describe the lessons learned. A qualitative methodology was applied through semi-structured interviews with 11 communication heads of the companies under study. The findings showed that companies approached their internal communication systems more strategically, with the dual goals of saving lives and keeping their organizations operational. Through strategic internal crisis communication as an organizational communication subsystem, companies not only showed a great capacity for technological adaptation in the use of communication channels but also greater integration between their organizational communication efforts to build trust with key audiences and safeguard their reputation during the pandemic. The lessons of crisis management in this period enable upper management and communication managers to establish strategies to face future crises as part of their organizational learning and continuous improvement.

**Keywords:** internal communication, crisis management, organizational communication, technology, pandemic.

## Resumo

O objetivo desta investigação foi identificar as formas como a crise provocada pela pandemia de Covid 19 impactou os sistemas internos de gestão da comunicação de crises nas empresas do Equador, Colômbia e Chile, e perspetivar as lições que este processo deixou às organizações. Para isso, aplicou-se uma metodologia qualitativa através da utilização de entrevistas semiestruturadas com 11 responsáveis de comunicação das empresas em estudo. As conclusões mostraram que as empresas abordaram os seus sistemas de comunicação interna de forma mais estratégica, com o duplo objetivo de salvar vidas e manter as suas organizações em funcionamento. Através da comunicação estratégica de crise interna como subsistema de comunicação organizacional, as empresas demonstraram não só uma grande capacidade de adaptação tecnológica na utilização dos canais de comunicação, mas também uma maior integração entre os seus esforços de comunicação organizacional para construir confiança com os seus públicos -chave e salvaguardar a sua reputação durante o período de crise. As lições da gestão de crises neste período permitem aos gestores e gestores de comunicação estabelecer estratégias para enfrentar crises futuras como parte da sua aprendizagem organizacional e melhoria contínua.

**Palavras-chave:** comunicação interna, gestão de crise, comunicação organizacional, tecnologia, pandemia

## Introduction

Organizations, as social systems, rely on internal communication as a critical subsystem that connects different parts of the organization, enabling them to interrelate and fulfill their respective functions. From a process perspective, internal communication transcends merely delivering information; it plays a pivotal role in facilitating meaning-making processes and fostering active communicative behaviors across organizational levels (Mazzei, 2010, cited in Heide & Simonsson, 2021). However, the importance of these processes becomes most evident during times of crisis, when disruptions in communication flow threaten an organization's capacity to adapt, innovate, and grow (Li et al., 2021). This dynamic was particularly pronounced during the Covid-19 pandemic, which created a climate of uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (Heide & Simonsson, 2021; Márquez, Molina, & Benalcázar, 2023; Presti & Mendes, 2023), placing unprecedented demands on internal communication departments to address anxiety, empathy, and organizational efficacy (Coombs, 2020; Arzuaga-Williams et. al,2021).

While much of the existing literature on internal crisis communication focuses on experiences in North America, Europe, and Asia (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Heide & Simonsson, 2015; Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2011; Mohamad et al., 2022), a knowledge gap remains in the context of Latin America. This study aims to address this gap by examining the internal crisis communication strategies employed by 11 large companies in Ecuador, Colombia, and Chile, which span diverse economic sectors and operate within a shared Latin American cultural framework. By focusing on these countries, characterized by free-market structures and significant export and foreign investment activities (Labarca & Godoy, 2022), this study expands the global understanding of internal crisis communication practices and their effectiveness in navigating uncertainty.

To achieve this, the study explores three research questions: (Q1) How did the Covid-19 pandemic impact the internal crisis management systems of the selected companies? (Q2) How did these organizations react and adapt through their internal communication efforts? (Q3) What lessons were learned that can guide future practices? This article is structured to systematically address these questions. First, the theoretical framework highlights the evolution of internal communication as a strategic function. Next, the methodology outlines the qualitative approach used to capture insights from the communication professionals. The results section presents key findings on crisis management, adaptation strategies, and communication tools, and the discussion synthesizes these insights to propose actionable recommendations for fostering resilience and improving crisis communication systems in organizations.

### Internal Crisis Communication

Internal communication has evolved from a purely instrumental function to a strategic management tool that is integral to fostering organizational resilience (Cuenca & Verazzi, 2018). According to Guerrero-Alvarado, Sotelo González, & Cabezuolo

Lorenzo (2022), this evolution is driven by factors such as economic crises, globalization, and digital transformation, such as those seen during the 2008 financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2015).

Effective internal communication plays a pivotal role in delivering transparent, timely information that keeps employees informed, connected, and engaged, thus strengthening organizational culture and identity (Vargas-Prieto & Arrieta-Díaz, 2021; Khan, 2021; Yue, 2021; Yue et al., 2022). As organizations face crises that disrupt established routines and processes, communication departments must lead the meaning-making process to align the workforce with organizational objectives (Weick, 1995, 2012; Verazzi, Padrós Verges & Vallmajó Ferrer, 2021). According to Dhanesh & Duthler (2021), effective internal crisis communication fosters cognitive, emotional, and social engagement, enabling organizations to address employee needs and drive appropriate responses during crises.

Mazzei et al. (2022) define internal crisis communication as “the dynamic and continuous communication process that involves all members of the organization as receivers, transmitters, and generators of meaning, before, during, and after the crisis occurs” (p. 2). This process must be both preventive and adaptive, reflecting the organization’s culture and context (Chaudri, Armbrust & Nguyen, 2024; Heide & Simonsson, 2015). Heide & Simonsson (2019) argue that internal crisis communication integrates elements of both crisis communication and change communication, addressing ambiguity and fostering understanding among stakeholders.

Two main approaches to internal crisis communication were identified. The managerial approach, rooted in functionalist philosophy, seeks generalizable practices for efficient crisis management. The process approach, grounded in social constructionism, emphasizes the continuous, meaning-oriented interaction between organizations and their environments (Heide & Simonsson, 2019). Both approaches highlight the importance of a holistic integrated strategy rather than fragmented efforts.

Mazzei & Ravazzani’s (2015) Multidimensional Model of internal crisis communication strategies provides a framework for understanding the communication objectives and content. Cognitive objectives aim to reduce uncertainty, thereby enhancing employee sense of security. Affective objectives build trust and a sense of belonging, whereas behavioral objectives maintain commitment and collaboration. Communication content can be categorized as informative, providing clarity on policies and strategies; identification-based, reinforcing organizational culture and identity; and factual, detailing specific actions undertaken to address the crisis.

In summary, internal crisis communication is essential for guiding organizations through periods of disruption. By fostering transparency, trust, and collaboration, communication departments play a vital role in maintaining operational continuity and strengthening organizational resilience in the face of uncertainty.

## Methodology

To investigate internal crisis communication practices during the Covid-19 pandemic and the lessons learned, the study employed semi-structured interviews that were conducted as the primary data collection method. This approach was deemed appropriate for exploring the complex processes and decisions made by communication departments during the crisis, providing rich qualitative insights that a closed survey would not achieve (Hernández Sampieri et al., 2014). Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to articulate their experiences and perspectives in their own words, fostering a deeper understanding of organizational responses to the pandemic.

The study involved interviews with 11 communication professionals from large companies in Ecuador, Colombia, and Chile. These companies represented critical economic sectors, including retail, energy, manufacturing, and oil and gas, and the participants held roles as communication and sustainability managers or directors. The participant pool was drawn from a database of 96 companies included in a prior study on communication best practices (Durán et al., 2020) and the top 100 largest companies listed by specialized magazines in each country (Ekos in Ecuador, América Economía in Chile, and Dinero in Colombia). A combination of purposive and snowball sampling was used to identify participants with additional contacts recruited through professional networks and phone outreach. While the researchers aimed to include an equal number of participants from each country, time constraints and availability resulted in a total of 11 interviews, including five participants from Ecuador (See Table 1). Anonymity was ensured throughout the study to address participants' concerns about confidentiality.

**Table 1.** Participant profiles<sup>6</sup>

COUNTRY	COMPANY	ACTIVITY	SECTOR	INTERVIEWEE (ROLE)
CHILE	SDC	Retail	TERTIARY	Manager of Legal Affairs and Sustainability
CHILE	CBN	Energy	SECONDARY	Manager of Communications
CHILE	WMT	Retail	TERTIARY	Assistant Manager, External Communications and Corporate Affairs
COLOMBIA	NCH	Food	SECONDARY	Coordinator, Cultural Transformation and Communications
COLOMBIA	EPT	Oil and gas	PRIMARY	Director, Corporate Communications and Sustainability
COLOMBIA	ISG	Energy	TERTIARY	Coordinator, Corporate Relations
ECUADOR	RSL	Oil and gas	PRIMARY	Coordinator, Corporate Relations
ECUADOR	CTL	Manufacturing	SECONDARY	Manager of Communications

<sup>6</sup> Note: Companies are identified using code to guarantee confidentiality.

ECUADOR	CLC	Energy	PRIMARY	Director of Communications Health and Safety Specialist Manager, Environmental Management (3 professionals)
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*Source:* Own work

Interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom and lasted approximately 45 minutes each. The conversations were recorded, transcribed, and subsequently translated into English by one of the researchers. Warm-up questions helped establish trust and rapport, while the main questions delved into the participants' internal communication objectives, strategies, and sustainability actions during the pandemic. Open-ended questions encouraged candid responses and allowed follow-up queries, yielding comprehensive insights.

The transcriptions were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), a method suitable for exploring the meanings that participants attributed to their experiences and the influence of contextual factors. Preliminary coding was followed by an iterative process to refine the themes and identify key categories related to internal crisis communication management. These categories encompassed communication objectives, strategies, and the use of communication channels, providing a nuanced understanding of how organizations navigated the challenges of the pandemic. The findings provide valuable insights into effective internal crisis communication practices and their role in fostering organizational resilience.

## Results

### Crisis Management

The interviews revealed significant alignment across organizations regarding the evolving role of internal communications during the Covid-19 pandemic. Multiple professionals noted that, as the crisis began, organizations relied heavily on their communications departments to address uncertainty about confinement duration and return-to-work conditions. This reliance expanded the scope of these departments, as exemplified by the communications manager of CTL (Ecuador), who stated, “We not only had to inform people, but also persuade and make them feel that they should be at peace... and that we would worry about their stability and personal health, as well as that of their families.”

Segmentation of internal audiences has emerged as a key strategy across organizations. At NCH (Colombia), communication efforts were divided between administrative staff working remotely and those working in manufacturing plants. Similarly, CTL and CLC (Ecuador) tailored messages to employees based on work shifts



and varying levels of access to digital resources. This segmentation was essential for delivering messages that addressed the unique concerns of each group.

Crisis Committees have also played a critical role in managing the pandemic. Some organizations, such as EPT (Colombia), have created additional regional committees to complement pre-existing Business Crisis Committees. These bodies were staffed with diverse members who provided localized responses to the crisis. At CLC (Ecuador), the adaptation of an existing crisis communication protocol originally designed for natural disasters underscores the organization's proactive approach. This protocol details clear and concise coordination activities to ensure efficient responses.

Organizations such as IGN (Colombia) extended the scope of crisis communication plans to include the concerns of external stakeholders such as contractors. IGN's communications manager remarked, "I consider what is happening with the interest groups which of course include the workers, their concerns, their well-being, but also to protect the reputation of the company." This approach exemplifies the evolution of crisis plans to address the multifaceted challenges.

The pandemic also prompted organizations to reassess the location and structure of their internal communication teams. The SDC (Chile) relocated its communications team to the human resources department to better address the cultural and psychological aspects of the workforce. As the communications manager of SDC explained: "Internal communications not only require experts in marketing and communications, but also experts in behavior, organizational psychology, work culture, and work climate." This interdisciplinary approach highlights the increasing complexity of internal communications.

## **Communication Objectives**

The interviews identified two primary objectives of internal communication during the pandemic: safeguarding employee health and ensuring operational continuity. These objectives were pursued through strategies that combined educational content, persuasive messaging, and operational adjustments.

The health and well-being of employees were prioritized through comprehensive biosafety education. For example, EPT (Colombia) extended its communication efforts beyond employees to include their families and retirees, showcasing an inclusive approach to health-related messaging. Essential service providers, such as CLC (Ecuador), balanced safety measures with operational demands and reflect the dual role of internal communications in addressing public and organizational needs.

Building trust and fostering a sense of belonging have emerged as affective objectives. CTL (Ecuador) emphasized reassurance about employees' stability and health. Similarly, SDC (Chile) demonstrated a commitment to ethical decision-making by



balancing profitability with workforce care. As an SDC executive explained, “Even in a crisis, we have to put the quality of the company that we have been building on the table.”

## **Strategies in Crisis Contexts**

The pandemic necessitated innovative communication strategies, particularly in the adoption of digital tools. These platforms enabled organizations to disseminate critical information, maintain engagement, and adapt to changing circumstances. For example, the CLC (Ecuador) implemented a digital communication plan to ensure that employees understood health protocols and return-to-work guidelines.

Trust-building strategies were integral to communication efforts. The communication team at IGN (Colombia) incorporated occupational psychologists, behavioral experts, and medical professionals into its communications team to enhance the credibility of its messaging. Similarly, NCH (Colombia) leveraged lessons from its China operations, compiling them into a “Lessons Learned from the Covid-19 Pandemic” document to inform its strategic approach.

Structural changes also influenced communication strategies. In SDC (Chile), stakeholder feedback prompted adjustments to remote work arrangements, leading to lasting changes in communication practices. This iterative approach highlights the importance of feedback loops in refining crisis strategies.

## **Communication Tools and Channels**

Adapting communication tools to the demands of the pandemic presented challenges and opportunities. One-way channels, such as email and intranet, remained central to disseminating information, whereas two-way platforms, such as WhatsApp, gained prominence for their immediacy and accessibility. CLC (Ecuador) used WhatsApp to distribute messages to internal and external stakeholders, whereas NCH (Colombia) leveraged the platform for real-time feedback.

Digital conferencing tools, such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, have been widely adopted to maintain collaboration and engagement. Hybrid models combining virtual and in-person participation ensured inclusivity. Weekly live streams in EPT (Colombia) and internal zoom sessions in WMT (Chile) exemplify the integration of digital tools into communication strategies.

Although platforms such as WhatsApp proved effective, their adoption was not universal. CTL (Ecuador) faced restrictions on using WhatsApp because of data security concerns, relying instead on email and family networks to reach employees.

In summary, the pandemic underscored the critical role of internal communications in crisis management. The strategic use of digital platforms, audience segmentation, and interdisciplinary collaboration enabled organizations to navigate the complex challenges of the pandemic. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding

of how organizations can leverage internal communications to build resilience and adapt to future crises.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

This study focused on analyzing internal crisis communication management in organizations in Colombia, Ecuador, and Chile during the COVID-19 pandemic, a time marked by uncertainty and rapid changes in organizational structures and operations. Drawing on interviews with communication leaders, this study highlights the pivotal role that internal communication played in facilitating meaning-making processes and fostering active communication behaviors across all organizational levels (Mazzei, 2010, as cited in Heide & Simonsson, 2021).

The pandemic necessitated a shift from traditional operational tactics to strategic and integrative communication practices (Heide & Simonsson, 2015). This transition was evident in how organizations approached internal crisis communication with a broader interdisciplinary focus, incorporating perspectives from behavioral sciences and public health. Many internal communication departments were relocated to human resource divisions, emphasizing their role in shaping organizational culture and addressing employee well-being. This finding aligns with the viewpoints of Krohling-Kunsch (2014), who advocates a more holistic approach to organizational communications.

### **Addressing the Impact of the Pandemic**

In response to the first research question, the findings show that the pandemic significantly disrupted traditional communication systems, which required organizations to adopt a more strategic and adaptive approach. Communication departments expanded their responsibilities, managing not only information dissemination but also trust-building and engagement strategies. This shift was particularly notable in the segmentation of internal audiences, which allowed organizations to tailor messages to specific groups based on their roles and needs. For instance, administrative staff working remotely required different communication approaches compared to on-site manufacturing workers (NCH, Colombia; CTL, Ecuador). This differentiation underscores the importance of understanding audience-specific challenges in crafting relevant and effective messages.

The integration of cognitive, affective, and behavioral objectives into internal communication strategies became critical. Informative content reduced uncertainty, affective messaging fostered trust and belonging, and behavioral content encouraged employees' adherence to safety protocols and operational continuity. These findings resonate with Mazzei and Ravazzani's (2015) multidimensional model of internal crisis communication strategies, highlighting the value of diverse content types in addressing complex crises.

## **Adapting Internal Communication Systems**

The second research question explored how companies adapted their communication practices during crises. The central theme was the adoption of new technologies to enhance message delivery and engagement. Digital platforms, such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and WhatsApp, became essential tools for fostering two-way communication and promoting real-time updates. At CTL (Ecuador), the integration of hybrid communication models combining virtual and in-person interactions was particularly effective in maintaining employee morale and operational alignment. Similarly, WhatsApp, traditionally considered a personal tool, has emerged as a strategic channel because of its immediacy and accessibility, despite some organizations restricting its use for security reasons.

In addition to technological adaptation, the restructuring of crisis management protocols was another critical adaptation. Organizations, such as EPT (Colombia) and SDC (Chile), established or enhanced crisis committees to address emerging challenges. These committees facilitated coordinated decision-making and ensured that communication strategies aligned with operational and reputational priorities. The integration of diverse expertise, including health and safety specialists, further strengthens the credibility and effectiveness of communication initiatives.

## **Lessons Learned: Integration, Trust, and Belonging**

The third research question examined the lessons learned from the pandemic experience. One key insight was the importance of integrated communication strategies that align messaging, channel selection, and audience segmentation. By fostering convergence among departments, organizations improved their ability to deliver consistent and coherent messages to stakeholders. This approach echoes the findings of Kroling-Kunsch (2011), who emphasizes the value of interdisciplinary collaboration in achieving communication objectives.

Another critical lesson was the need to build and sustain trust within the organization, as the pandemic amplified employees' need for clear, transparent, and empathetic communication. For example, companies including IGN (Colombia) and CLC (Ecuador) prioritized employee well-being by addressing health and safety concerns and reinforcing organizational commitments to ethical and socially responsible practices. These efforts contributed to a sense of stability and belonging, which were crucial for maintaining employee morale and productivity during a period of unprecedented disruption.

## **Contributions to the Field**

This study contributes to the field of internal crisis communication by highlighting the intersection of strategic communication, organizational culture, and crisis management. The findings underscore the necessity of adopting a multidimensional

approach to communication that integrates cognitive, affective, and behavioral objectives. Additionally, this study offers practical insights into the use of digital platforms and audience segmentation as tools for enhancing message relevance and reach.

The emphasis on interdisciplinary collaboration and the inclusion of behavioral and psychological expertise represent significant advancements in internal communication practices. These innovations not only address immediate crisis needs but also position organizations for long-term success by fostering resilience and adaptability.

## Strategic Recommendations

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance internal crisis communication management.

1. **Proactive Planning:** Organizations should develop comprehensive crisis communication plans that anticipate potential scenarios and outline clear protocols for message dissemination and stakeholder engagement.
2. **Empathy and Transparency:** Communication efforts should prioritize transparency and empathetic messaging to build trust and reinforce organizational values.
3. **Technological Integration:** Investing in adaptable and user-friendly communication platforms is essential to maintain connectivity and operational continuity during crises.
4. **Interdisciplinary Collaboration:** Encouraging collaboration across departments, including human resources, public relations, and behavioral sciences, can enhance the effectiveness of communication strategies.
5. **Continuous Evaluation:** Post-crisis evaluations should be conducted to assess the effectiveness of communication efforts and to identify areas for improvement.

## Future Research Directions

While this study provides valuable insights into internal crisis communication practices in the Latin American context, further research is needed to explore how these findings can be applied across different cultural and organizational settings. Comparative studies that examine practices in other regions could enhance our understanding of global best practices. Additionally, future research could investigate the long-term impacts of pandemic-driven communication adaptations on organizational culture and employee engagement.

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic presented organizations with unprecedented challenges, underscoring the critical role of internal crisis communication in navigating

uncertainty and fostering resilience. By adopting strategic, empathetic, and adaptive communication practices, the companies in this study demonstrated the potential for internal communication to drive organizational success during crises. These findings provide a foundation for advancing internal communication theory and practice and offer valuable lessons for organizations facing future disruptions.

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