The impact of integrated organizational communication on organizational sustainability

The paper examines the strategic integration and management of organizational communication, by synergizing external and internal stakeholders, so as to facilitate the achievement of corporate goals, amongst which corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability issues should be included.

**Keywords:** organizational communication, strategy, integration, sustainability, corporate social responsibility (CSR).

Introduction

Organizations are formed by people and communication is an essential factor for their existence, performance and sustainable endurance along the challenging times and demands to be faced in a competitive world of well-informed and increasingly sustainability-aware clients, employees, consumers and citizens in general.

The contribution that communication makes into organizational life, growth and success is unarguably indispensable in order to set rolling all the daily internal and external processes, networks and interactions typical of every organization. Thus, organizational communication, as an inseparable component of the very essence of any organization, should smoothly and strategically integrate all the communicative processes and their elements, aiming at synergy and harmony in seeking internal, corporate and external, market-oriented goals. Each communicative action should be inspired by and based on a clearly defined philosophy and strategically planned and integrated communication policy which takes into account the needs, demands, interests and expectations of all stakeholders, publics and society.

Communication in organizations, as well as in the whole society, has to face the challenges of new global concerns, such as the widely debated issue of sustainability. There may be some organizations who have already started to implement this integration and are successfully and responsibly aligning their communication policies.
However, an integrated organizational communication quite often fails to win its place amongst other strategic goals, thus remaining a tool for promotion and superficial expression of corporate social responsibility (CSR) isolated actions.

In this article the author intends to examine the extent and scope of this integration in order to find out how organization management deals with this challenge, understanding that such strategic integration has a direct impact on their corporate image, overall performance as a market player, and ultimately, on its and organizational sustainability.

The paper consists of five sections: the first deals with communication in organizations, discussing its evolution from ordinary phenomenon to scholar study. The second presents the increasing awareness of enterprises about the need to be communication-oriented organizations. In the third, the author examines the role of communication professionals in corporate sustainability processes. The last theoretical section deals with integrated communication management for sustainability, advocating the need of Chief Communications Officer (CCO). Then comes the empirical study with the findings, followed by conclusions and recommendations.

**Communication in organizations: from ordinary phenomenon to scholar study**

The first academic attempts to theorize on organizational communication can be perhaps traced back to the 70s, with Charles Redding’s work “Communication within the organization” (1972), who earned him the widely acknowledged title of the father of organizational communication. C. Redding (1972) described communication as “referring to the behaviours of human beings, or the artefacts created by human beings, which result in messages being received by one or more persons”.

Organizational communication scholars historically have had little success in establishing unequivocal parameters for their field. G. L. Kreps (1986), with some writers defining organizational communication broadly and others limiting substantially its scope. As A. Shelby (1993) states, the traditional approach to organizational communication, which is based on a belief in an objective reality, is functionalist in perspective, where the organization is considered a relatively stable structure within which communication flows. A challenging alternative paradigm is the interpretive approach, which focuses not on organizations, but on organizing processes through which subjective reality is constructed. Then, if the organization is conceived of as people interacting and giving meaning to that interaction, communication becomes an organization-making function rather than just an organization-maintaining one. Communication does not just serve the organization; it is the organization. Communication, then, is central to organizational existence and does more than simply carry out organizational plans.

Though most definitions focus on organizational communication as an internal phenomenon, that is, operating inside the organization, some include ‘external’ or ‘outside’ communication as well; that is, communication between the organization and its environment. B. Haggblade (1982), for example, suggested that Organizational Communication is concerned with
any type of communication activity as it affects the managing of an organization, while J. W. Gibson and R. M. Hodgetts (1986) concentrated on the transfer of information and knowledge among organizational members for the purpose of achieving organizational efficiency and effectiveness. Several decades later, organizational communication research generated four paradigms, nowadays widely recognized by scholars. One of these is the well-known Systems Theory. Probably the most influential single theory to emerge from the systems approach was proposed back in the 1960s by Karl Weick. He begins his explanation with the observation that an organization’s environment includes information as well as material resources. By the end of the 20th century, the complex growth of information environment has been always on the increase. Naturally, the organization and its members both shape, and are shaped by, the information environment in which they operate, as K. Weick would notice, borrowing this concept from the interpretive approach. All these factors introduce what he called “equivocality,” a central idea, because the goal of organizational communication is equivocality reduction. Though organization members have enacted an information environment, they each bring different interpretations of what that environment means. Therefore, part of the organizing process is to select the best interpretations and then to retain them as a guide for future enactments and selections. This collective process of enactment, selection, and retention is what K. Weick would call retrospective sense-making.

Crossing the threshold towards the 21st century, T. Davenport (1998) stated that information is data endowed with relevance and purpose, which of course suggests that data by itself has little relevance or purpose. Information moves around organizations through hard and soft networks. Unlike data, information has meaning. Not only does it potentially shape the receiver, it has a shape: it is organized to some purpose. We transform data into information by adding value in various ways. The more value we add, the more competitive, necessary and sustainable we become.

Several decades after W. C. Redding’s the very first scholarly attempts to theorize on organizational communication, F. M. Jablin and L. L. Putnam (2001) provided a list of five research areas that they considered as integral to the field of organizational communication, namely: leadership, teams, communication networks, organizational culture, and organizational learning. Today, each of these areas have developed into new fields of scholar study where perhaps communication is but an amalgamating component, a kind of omnipresent and taken-for-granted intangible element.

Towards communication-oriented organizations

At this stage we may reinforce the idea that communication in organizational life can be flexible, natural and informal, and yet it requires thoughtful and strategic planning. Strategic communication is an emerging area of study in the communication and management social sciences. Several definitions of strategic communication have surfaced. P. Argenti, R. Howell, and K. A. Beck (2005) define strategic communication as “aligned with the company’s overall strategy, to enhance
its strategic positioning”. K. Hallahan, D. Holtzhausen, D. van Ruler, D. Verčič, and K. Sriramesh (2007, as cited in G. F. Thomas and K. J. Stephens, 2015) define it as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission”. J. E. Grunig (2006), from the public relations domain, describes it as a “bridging activity” between organizations that should be institutionalized. The authors show that strategic communication is operating across traditional research study boundaries, having an impact on the strategic direction of the organization.

E. Invernizzi and S. Romenti (2011) and other Italian scholars discussed the strategic role of communication in the organizational structure of a company, stating that the role of company communication has evolved and become increasingly more complex. In 2008 a research project was conducted in Italy building on previous similar studies in the United States (GAP Study, 2008) and Europe (Moreno et al., 2009 as quoted in E. Invernizzi and S. Romenti). The data obtained allowed Italian scholars to highlight the progressively growing importance of the communication function within the organisational structure of large Italian companies, which emphasizes the strategic contribution that communication makes to management and to organisational development of a company. Some relevant findings of their research are worth mentioning:

- More corporate communication departments have been created;
- Communication managers have been appointed and included in the board;
- Specialized technical communication activities are increasingly being carried out inside companies.

One more extremely relevant finding is the exponential increase in the numbers of CCOs: from 22% in 1994 to 78% in 2008. Moreover, these Chief Communication Officers are accountable directly to the CEO, the same as managers of other areas, such as Human Resources, Finances, Production and Marketing, already settled long ago. This last fact unarguable speaks for itself: qualitative and quantitative changes are to be implemented in companies, if communication is really to be considered more than just one more function to be allocated all through other departments.

Scholars of communication stress the strategic role of communication and distinguish three ways in which communication contributes to corporate governance:

- Defining and disseminating corporate strategies and their underlying values;
- Analysing and interpreting organisational context;
- Activating symmetric relationships with company stakeholders.

Scientific approaches (Cornelissen, 2008; van Riel, 1995) claim that there are some communication activities which can be defined as strategic in as much as they acquaint key stakeholders, both internal and external with the contents of company strategy and important corporate decisions.

Communication can truly offer a strategic contribution to decisional processes by feeding information, which, at a later stage will become relevant contribution to strategic options. These communication activities stimulate management to align strategies and processes with the company social context and thus meet the most relevant expectations of stakeholders.
Information is not merely gathered and fed in, but interpreted and attributed sense and meaning, as part of the process that K. Weick (1995) defined when discussing organisational sense-making. The inclusion of communication in the dominant coalition implies that the process of sense-making may gain a more wholesome outlook. The role of the CCO would then be more of a facilitator rather than a manager of communication, because their role would consist more of creating meaning-laden processes which then lead to the strategic priorities of the organisation (Holtzhausen, 2002).

The CCO is then a professional facilitator, who contributes to the implementation of company's decisions by influencing the ways in which decisions are communicated and carried out. Communication is in itself a process that enables decisional processes, whereby contents are transmitted to interested parties. Then human resources are to be motivated and fully involved, counting on the support of leadership and every specialized department. Aligning the communication of decisions with the opinions and attitudes of the stakeholders requires active and reflective listening in order to understand the expectations of the main stakeholders. It is the responsibility of the CCO to forecast the impact that decisions can have on stakeholders and to contribute to ad hoc decision making. This can be considered the turning point to ‘test’ the degree of a company's move towards becoming a communication-oriented corporation, since it would differ from traditional companies precisely in the fact that communication takes on a predominant role in guiding both the strategic and the operational decisions of the company.

The role of communication in corporate sustainability processes

For the last decades sustainability has become a buzz-word, a kind of ‘must’ to be included on the list of successful corporate performance. As B. Signitzer et al. (2008) affirm, companies engage in communications about sustainability issues for marketing, business, and/or societal reasons. When entering key words such as ‘sustainability’ combined with ‘communication’, ‘organizational’ and ‘corporate’, most results provided by search engines will show examples of either green or environmental initiatives, tinted with PR shades, or CSR expressions that are very often presented as a proof of how much an organization pays attention to sustainability issues. B. Signitzer et al. (2008) make a very valid point by stating that the organization as a whole should implement sustainability, which requires not only the support of top management, but also input from and the networking of several other corporate systems such as legal, research and development, quality management, human resources, and communication management. These same authors point out that at the company level, the idea of sustainable development finds its equivalent in the term corporate sustainability. They view corporate sustainability as an evolving management concept which constitutes an alternative to the traditional models of short-time wealth maximization (Wilson, 2003). Going deeper into the attribute of sustainable, as applicable not only to the already widely used collocation of sustainable development, scholars have begun to use it to assess responsible business making, socially sensitive business initiatives and so on. Nevertheless, we may readily
accept the claim expressed by N. Paech and R. Pfriem (2004) that a completely sustainable company does not, or cannot, exist, because corporate sustainability is conceptualized as a process of permanent improvement. The concept of ‘sustainable’ is relative and descriptive: it tells about how an organization plans, designs its strategies to implement and manage processes towards a balance of economic, social, and environmental goals and values.

B. Signitzer et al. (2008) provide a relevant analysis of the role of communication in corporate sustainability processes with a wider approach of corporate sustainability (see figure 1 below) and the introduction of the concept of corporate sustainability communications (CSC), which they define as an evolving concept that refers to corporate communications about sustainability issues. Under the terminological roof of sustainable development, they position the narrower concept of corporate sustainability, which in its turn is used as another umbrella term for several other concepts related to the role of business in society, as shown in figure 1, CSC being one of them.

B. Signitzer et al. (2008) argue that CSC is the term they use to refer to corporate communications about sustainability issues; however it should not be regarded as a mere additional program to be attached to other areas of public relations; CSC should rather result from the integration of sustainability issues into existing programme areas. Corporate sustainability and sustainability communications can be managed and carried out in several different formats, channels and media, like information campaigns, stakeholder dialogue on sustainability topics, etc. And despite the self-interest that it may imply from the side of the reportedly ‘self-promoting’ companies, it may still bring about considerable benefits for both

Fig. 1. Corporate sustainability and other related terms

Source: B. Signitzer, et al. (2008)
economic success and a more sustainable future.

From an organizational perspective, the practice of CSC can be considered a communicative function that may be useful for the companies in several ways: improvement of organizational image, enhancement of trust and the positioning of the organization as credible and sustainable. The strategic alignment of these communications ‘ad extra’ with internal communication on the topic of sustainability can become “a catalyst for environmental learning and change processes within the company” (Sarkis et al., 2000), and ultimately bring in innovation and competitive advantage. In keeping with this pursuit for strategic integration of organizational communication for sustainability, it may be added that, notwithstanding the widely accepted regard for good relations with clients and customers as the most important stakeholder group, a well-aligned internal CSC would also include the need to increase sensitivity amongst employees towards the idea of future-orientation or to help create more sustainable production processes.

Organizations which seek the title of sustainable should follow some normative principles throughout the CSC process such as two-way communication, congruency between words and deeds, strive for consensus orientation, and should obviously apply the principles of sustainability in the communication process itself both with both internal and external stakeholders. CSC provides a suitable platform for the smooth alignment of internal and external PR, as CSC and PR are closely interrelated.

As D. van Ruler and D. Verčič (2004; 2005) explain, public relations imply reflective tasks, since it is the responsibility of PR specialists to ensure the continuous adjustment of corporate decision processes to society’s changing norms and values. D. van Ruler and D. Verčič (2004; 2005) also point out the importance of an organization’s legitimation within society and they argue that public relations is primarily a “strategic process of viewing an organization from the outside. Thus communication management from a reflective approach should first and foremost focus on the organization’s inclusiveness and preservation of the licence to operate. Then, public relations in general, and CSC as a dimension of it, is not only about “relations with the publics, but it also creates a platform for public debate and, consequently, a public sphere”. Truth be said, some organizations may choose to only do greenwashing through the practice of CSC with the short-term aim of improving their reputation, while there may be – and fortunately there are – several other organizations that clearly see sustainability management as a necessary means to guarantee long-term success, hence their firm decision to integrate CSC as a potential catalyst for organizational and social change.

On unrevealing the reasons why organizations ‘care’ so much for sustainability issues, J. Iramain (2009) points out that PR (and/or corporate affairs communication) seek to work out the mutual adaptation between organizations and their publics and environments; however this adaptation is not sought as an end in itself, but rather a means for organizations to achieve their goals. Truly, organizations do try to tailor their performance to meet the needs of their publics and stakeholders, but this pursuit has clear strategic objectives: paving the way for organizational interests to be met as well. J. Iramain (2009) then
rightly links PR activity with the concept of organizational sustainability, explaining that in this context it gets closer to M. Wilson’s (2003) previously discussed corporate sustainability. It would embrace environmental development, CSR, relations with all interest groups linked with the organization, and the transparency in providing information to society about how the organization interact with its publics and the environment. In other words, corporate sustainability would consist of a set of interactions with stakeholders that generate mutual adaptation and set up the basis for consensus and common interests. These interaction practices would help to reduce potential conflicts and facilitate the resolution of emerging ones. Consequently, these practices would make it possible for the organization to continue operating in the future, which in other words is precisely sustainability, the quality of being sustainable, endurable, something that can last and keep existing. It can be concluded that by ensuring the organizational future through the generation of favourable conditions in the public eye and the legitimation of corporate performance under the demanding scrutiny of stakeholders, this important function of corporate communication somehow ‘shields’ the organization making it stronger and sustainable.

Integrated communication management for sustainability: the case in favour of a CCO

During the last ten years there has been abundant discussion amongst scholars and practitioners about the importance of integrated communications; however, the focus is mostly on integrated marketing communications with an ‘s’, which has more to do with market-oriented communicative actions rather than with the wider concept of a wholesome communication strategy. It is undeniably vital to integrate different techniques and tactics of external communications, such as PR, advertising, lobbying, etc., so as to have a homogeneous and well-designed programme that helps to achieve the set marketing goals. Nevertheless, we would still be moving within the realm of communication ad extra, addressing external publics.

When D. Scheinsohn (2010) coined the term “strategic communications”, he made a distinction between the set of communication tactics and the overall communication strategy that these tactics are a part of. The goal of this integrated strategic communication is to design a global strategy that articulates all the tactic communications as a system based on the pillars of consistency and synergy.

Unfortunately, most organizations lack this understanding of the vital need for a really integrated communication strategy included in the general corporate strategy. The significance of the communicative aspect of strategic management is widely accepted and taken seriously in most cases from the part of successful executives. However, few organizations appoint a communication director/manager or CCO, and even if they do so, very often this person is in charge of either integrated marketing communications, or corporate relations, or PR, etc., again leaving aside the internal publics. In order to understand D. Scheinsohn’s (2010) proposed model, it is essential to distinguish two levels of communication, namely the strategic from the tactic, the latter embracing techniques that fulfil eminently
tactical functions of external communications mentioned before. These would be subject to the goals stipulated by strategic communication and serve to attain the objectives of the general corporate strategy.

H. Dinamarca (2011) insists on the crucial fact that there is one single communication in the organization, because the terms external or internal only imply an operative distinction; however, both domains and all their different functions are to be aligned with the specific strategy of the organization.

His model of integral communication for sustainability places sustainability at the very centre, as the backbone or axis to which all communications should converge, and from which they should stem. H. Dinamarca (2011) distinguishes four areas or functions, as it can be seen in Figure 3. Due to the specific competencies and functions required in some areas, they need to operate separately, as is the case of communication to the markets and the relations with the community. However, the central axis remains the same: strategic management of communication for sustainability. Institutional communication, as shown in the model, is oriented to stakeholders, in order to build and maintain the corporate reputation, which in contemporary terms is tied with sustainability, since reputation is no longer about creating a brand, but rather about sustaining the prestige, the good name forged through time with consistent and coherent performances.

Communication professionals are fully aware (or at least should be) of the fact that, in the long run, it is almost impossible to communicate inconsistencies, sooner or later the truth about the organization and its performance will come to light.

Scholar studies on communication management have already yielded other insights, relating the above-mentioned CSC (corporate sustainability communication) with CSR (corporate social responsibility). Such is the contribution of P. Lattuada (2011), who asserts that
Sustainable communication is CSR communication management, inasmuch as the key role of sustainable communication is the promotion of social change. Such is the stand that the author of this paper takes as well. And as the famous adagio rings, change must begin at home, thus, change should first of all be implemented in in-house communication, which should, in its turn, ‘overspill’ outwards, in stakeholder dialogue and marketing communication activities, etc. As P. Lattuada (2011) explains, sustainable communication understood as CSR communication adds value to the community by making a special contribution, by increasing the social capital of the organization through the expansive effect of communication towards internal and external publics. Though sustainable communication could be framed within corporate communication management, yet it would differ from other communications, because the role it plays takes a special stage where image, communication management and social capital converge to create added value both for the internal community (organization) and the external one (society). Professional management of CSR communication requires that the communication specialist or the team entrusted with these tasks be adequately internalized with the specific elements concerning this communicative function and area. This would empower the communication manager (CCO or team) to interpret the current panorama and the public stage and, then accordingly, outline the position that the organization takes on that stage, bearing in mind the corporate itinerary of its CSR performance. Then, the CCO or the alike manager would be entitled to set organizational goals together with the CEO or management board, so they walk together along this path towards strategy implementation by generating a suitable communication policy for the overall organizational development. In brief, the CCO can help to align the CSR communication initiatives with the sustainability of the organization by internalization, positioning and goal-setting. When we communicate

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<tr>
<th>Institutional or corporate communication</th>
<th>Internal Communication</th>
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<tr>
<td>- Planning the strategy</td>
<td>- Training in Emotional Intelligence: teamwork, network, leadership, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- PR</td>
<td>- Internal mediations</td>
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<td>- Media relations</td>
<td>- Administrative communication,</td>
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<td>- Reputation and transparency</td>
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<td>- Corporate image</td>
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<th>Communication with interest groups (or stakeholders)</th>
<th>Communication towards/with the markets</th>
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<tr>
<td>- License to operate</td>
<td>- Sustainable marketing</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Stakeholders governance</td>
<td>- Social networks,</td>
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<td>- Mediations</td>
<td>- Advertising</td>
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**Fig. 3. Model of integral communication for sustainability based on H. Dinamarca (2011)**

![Integral organizational communication for sustainability](image-url)
outwards, we become protagonists, we play a certain role. Thus, each organization should clearly define which role they want to be known for, according to their strengths, capabilities and resources, focusing on the areas where they perform the best, where they can create added value. Organizations are usually aware of this in terms of the promotion of their products, or services. From an overall organizational perspective, this is what institutional (or corporate) communication is about, as organizations are part of a larger system in society, where each component is a player that should take responsibility for its role: the role they assign themselves, and the one that others—society and stakeholders—expect the organization to enact. And it is precisely through strategic management of its CSR communication that organizations can promote a desired and expected social change, thus contributing to the growth of social capital, enhanced by the impact of communication on internal and external publics.

CSR communication management requires a high level of professionalization that leads to a better integration of this area with the overall communication strategy of the organization, where internal and external communication should be smoothly amalgamated. It is important to highlight that the CSR communication plan, included within other initiatives of external communication, aims at informing, and shaping a corporate image so as to generate a positive impact on publics, who will hopefully perceive the organization as it presents itself. This positive perception may then consolidate mutually beneficial bonds of cooperation between the organization and key stakeholders, as it should naturally be foreseen in the CSR strategy. The professionalized management of CSR communication implies tracking of changes, successes and failures with respect to the set goals. While internal communication tackles other goals, such as informing, motivating and generating a sense of belonging to the organization, these goals should eventually contribute to the full engagement of all organizational members with the corporate strategy. This alignment and full integration will require a consistent effort from the top management and the staff to enact internally what is announced externally; in other words, CSR demands that every corporate member takes on his/her own share of the common responsibility for the organizational community (microsociety) and for society as a whole, each from his/her own field of action.

Following M. Paladino and C. Álvarez Tejeiro (2006), there are relevant issues to be considered: first, the communication of truth, so that the released information on corporate performance matches actual achievements; second, corporate integrity, which emanates from the corporate mission; and third, personal integrity, which implies a real leap: organizations should stop thinking of CSR communication merely as a self-promotion tool, and begin to approach it per se. In simpler terms, when we tell others what we intend to do, it strengthens the sense of duty and makes us more committed to fulfil the promise. Then, once done, it is just right and fair to announce it. This entails a process of commitment-fulfilment-announcement which results in enhanced credibility and trust. CSR reporting thus understood is no longer mere self-promotion, but rather accountability for one’s duties to the community, beginning ‘at home’, i.e. first internal stakeholders and then the rest.
Integrated communication is not just the latest fashion, it is emerging as a real need and a smart solution, which obviously requires communications specialists with very high level of professionalism. However, taking on new or better trained staff is not enough. Integration also implies improved management of accountability and decision-making processes. Thus another condition for integrated communication would be the willingness to implement certain structural changes that would underlie a strategy oriented to integrated communication, as shown in the diagram below:

At this point, we may sum up by stating that it is of vital importance for the successful functioning of any organization to build and maintain a good corporate image in the eyes of the different corporate actors, from states and citizens to distributors and suppliers, from employees to neighbours. The pursuit for sustainability is a condition ‘sine qua non’ for good image, hence the importance of not only appearing as good, but of also being good, doing tangible good, and communicating it timely and professionally.

As R. White (2007) says, the (public) communicator is essentially an interconnector between those who wish to make something public or widely known and those who are searching for information in the public sphere. The special capacity of the communication professional is precisely to discover who wants to tell what and to whom, and to help them articulate it properly and timely. It may be difficult to grasp what the source of information seeks to reveal, but it is even harder to design the message in such a way that it suits and impacts the desired target audience, which may be a misinformed, an unprepared or reluctant, even indifferent public. The figure below is an attempt to summarize the main processes that help to seek this required integration for successful and sustainable communication:

A CCO has to function like a sensitive and sensible interconnector who can perceive the needs of the community where his/her organization performs and figure out where is the added value that makes his/her organization different from the rest, thus creating after all, a niche for competitive advantage. The key therefore lies in this interconnection: connecting...
the selected key parts and doing it with the most suitable means and ways, so that this network serves as the solid basis for integrated communication management with measurable results for the organization and the community.

The CCO must have the ability to make analysis, diagnosis and strategic identification of the parts that need interconnecting, so that communication synergize and integrates within the internal and external communication programmes, eventually permeating the whole corporate culture. Only then will communication promote social change from within towards society.

The profile of a 21st century CCO (or communication specialist) is clear: he/she must be an all-terrain bridge builder, an exquisite interconnector, able to cultivate what J. Habermas (1990) considered the highest level of moral maturity: the ability to take the perspective of others.

**Empirical study**

Qualitative methods have been chosen to find out the extent to which organizational (for some authors, corporate) sustainability, very often understood as CSR initiatives, has gained place in the corporate communications agenda and to illustrate the level of integration in the communication strategies. The author selected some institutions and companies that operate in Lithuania and conducted semi-structured interviews with CEO, HR and Communications managers, depending on who was in charge of communication policies, their design and implementation. Interviews were recorded, some respondents wished their identity and the company they work for not to be disclosed, while others did not mind revealing this information. For the sake of homogeneity, the data obtained is presented without giving out organizations or personal names,
though the positions held and the kind of business activities or services provided by these entities are mentioned. Amongst the selected organizations, three are Lithuanian higher education institutions (two state-owned and one private); other organizations are foreign capital multinational corporations with a branch in Lithuania. Exploratory qualitative research has allowed the author to investigate into the ways and whys some organizations do have communication departments or managers and what their functions are, in comparison with other institutions, where communication functions are distributed all throughout company structure. The findings show how communication professionals synergize their work, and what are the roles and tasks of organizational and/or corporate communication managers regarding these issues.

With respect to the degree of integration of communication in their organizations, the interviewed people’s responses ranged from highly and strategically integrated to poor or no integration at all. Only one of the analysed companies (organization 1 = O1, represented by respondent 1 = R1) fully displays in practice the theoretical models presented in this research paper, so the author has decided to illustrate to present the empirical aspect based on this successful organization. As the scope of this article is ruled by a limited number of pages, the data obtained from the rest of the interviews will not be included here.

Regarding the integration of corporate strategy and communication, the responses obtained allow us to state that that the whole company in all its branches all over the world works in globally integrated system that goes from organizational life-long learning to creating tangible and measurable value. And communication is at the core of these commitments: “all the strategy and the means are oriented to support and communicate it both inside and outside the company” <…> Starting from the internal aspect, we educate our employees in these main nutrition and health awareness issues. Everyone has to take part in events and trainings related to these topics, as they are our declared goals.”

Integration reaches all organizational stakeholders: “We go from education and training of our organizational members to the education of youth, and then try to reach their teachers and parents, ultimately wide society, and all sorts of governmental and public and private institutions, who support our initiatives in favour of health awareness promotion events. We hold internal and external cooking events and competitions with nutrition expert guests. Nutrition is communicated inside and outside.”

Full alignment of goals and their communication at all levels is implemented through clear channels of dissemination to make sure the message is transmitted to all interested parties: ”We integrate all these into our internal and external communication by including them in our documents, reports, available information and guidelines in the intranet, accessible to all.”

There is an ethical aspect to this, as stakeholders are considered significant evaluators of organizational performance: “We seek to be coherent: if we declare one thing, we try to show that we really do it. If we declare that, for instance, safety is important, we also enact it with all our stakeholders”. Integrative management of processes helps to ensure aligned communication when the communication manager is not left alone in the battlefield, but rather is
supported by superiors and colleagues: “Our communication is so much integrated that it is almost impossible to separate or draw lines. If we look at the HR, marketing or let's say the corporate communication plans, we see that all these topics keep repeating everywhere. Then the tools and specific means to implement them may differ” <…>. “We keep a strong alignment all through HR, Corporate Communication and all other areas so as to guarantee that we are all heading towards the corporate goals. It is all done through a quite complicated and thorough planning ahead for three years. This planning is revised every year.

Organizational structure facilitates integrated communication when executive management is willing to appoint a person or team in charge of these vital communication functions. As the corporate affairs manager for the Baltic Region of O1, the respondent described their accountability and line of command: “I am accountable straight to my general manager here in Lithuania, but according to O1 structural matrix, I have dotted lines with functional managers in Poland, because we are one region, then I also in Brussels for corporate issues and European relationships with a special lobbying programme, and then with the HQ in Switzerland. When I joined O1, I was fully trained during long induction almost for three years, so that I could really learn to take charge of the communication processes the way, style and methods that O1 does it.”

Every organization will for sure display a specific chart. No matter the difference, the key is ‘political will’ of top management to facilitate strategic integration taking into account their organizational specific features. Unarguably, a communication manager, CCO or a similar position seems really necessary in an organization, as this person’s role should be that of as strategic interconnector of all departments. However, the decision to search for a suitable candidate to fill in this important position has unfortunately not extended so widely yet in all countries and all organizations. As the R1 stated: this requires a special mind-set and corporate commitment. This approach is quite new in O1 here and globally. In the Baltic region this position got its place in the organizational structure matrix when I joined this company. The organization had already been working in the Baltic States for 10 years and they did not have a person appointed for this position. But then was created because the market growth made it naturally necessary. So even though the market size is small if compared to other European ones, the processes are the same, the issues and concerns are similar.

For a better understanding of the tasks and duties of a CCO, we may refer to the account of R1 and her experience in O: “I am a corporate affairs manager because our Baltic regions is too small (around 80 people working in the three Baltic states), but O1 has a CCO based in the HQ in Switzerland. In other branches of O1 my position takes different denominations, like corporate communication and PR manager, or something like that. It depends on the markets, on the diversification of functions and people in charge of them. In the Baltic region I am all alone, the team is only me and I am responsible not only for corporate affairs and corporate communications. European relationships, regulation issues, public affairs, media relations, all of these tasks fall under my competence. I work alone, because the market here is too small to allow any other structure. But obviously, I coordinate all in cooperation with all
the other department managers, who have more resources.

Once again, the size, sector or specific services and products an organization provides to its publics should not be the main factor in deciding whether or not and how communication should or could be integrated to contribute to the achievement of strategic goals. The need and value of having a separate position for a CCO or integrated communication manager is clear. R1 stated that “it is very useful to have this position directly accountable to the CEO and at the same time in full cooperation and alignment with the managers of all other areas. This allows the best use of all resources (human and material) in a very different and effective way.

It is not an easy task to assign separate communication management functions to several employees in a non-coordinated way. And in fact it is not even effective. This leads us to make the point for a specialized position that blends and harmonizes all the communicative processes and then channels the necessary information to whom and in the format it suits best. A rhetorical question from R1 may help us re-think the existing structures and mind-sets: “So where else or how else can you insert this position or this integrated strategic communication management function? If you put it under the marketing umbrella, it would only deal with marketing communications, which would leave all other questions out of scope. As regards regulation issues, (plenty of them and typical in food industry), where would you put them, under supply chain or sales? So, automatically, when processes, functions and structure elements are designed and arranged, it emerges as a clearly separate block.” This ‘separate’ block is precisely the whole portfolio of tasks that fall under responsibility of a CCO and his/her team, who then tries to strategically communicate with everyone for the common attainment of organizational goals. Naturally, cooperation agreement and liaison with each area are needed, as R1 puts it: “so I share or co-run processes of internal communication with HR, for instance, if I organize an event, I have to arrange with other departments regarding the content of seminars, trainings, or the necessary resources to take part in career days, for example. This is not only relevant from the point of view of HR to learn about good potential candidates as future employees. It is a corporate message to the market as well. There has never been a situation when we had to say this is purely or entirely HR or marketing or somebody else’s responsibility. But, true, it requires flexibility.”

Smart, learning and modern organizations should be flexible and ready to adapt to new challenges from within and outside. The last rhetorical question left to answer in this limited study reads as follows: to what extent does integrated and strongly aligned communication contribute to corporate sustainability? Empirical data allows us to emphasize that organizational growth and sustainability is closely related to the way it choose to communicate with all its publics: “corporate communication is up to certain extent quite a new function at O1. In our company, the approach is so conservative in the sense how to communicate, that even social media pose a real challenge for this kind of giant corporation. We have digital teams, great means of monitoring and tracking everything; however, processes are so complex, that sometimes I wonder whether we can be ahead or not, notwithstanding the numerous resources we have. <…> however, execution is the core: process manage-
ment and control. <…> there is a high level of centralization, but positive results justify this way of working.

Sustainable organizational growth may imply not only restructuring, re-defining functions, but sometimes, closer supervision and ironically, unwanted bureaucracy in order to keep communication flowing and reaching all stakeholders. O1 is a huge enterprise with several thousands of employees all over the world, so I cannot imagine how it would work other way. I do see some aspects that could be better managed, especially the decision-making pace, it could be faster. Yet, we are the largest player in the market of food and beverages, so we have four or eight eyes always on us, watching us like with a magnifying glass. Our consumers are sensitive and demanding, we have a lot of health regulations to abide to, and so sustainability is at the very core, like a hygienic factor, it ranges from human rights to water sources. We are already beyond basic CSR, which for us is taken for granted. We are fully engaged in creating shared value, so sustainability is compliance, an unquestionable issue.

I suppose that if O1 has been working for almost 150 years, has more than 200 brands and over 10000 products, we can speak of O1 as sustainable. The integration of our communication touches all levels of our performance.”

CCOs may be perfectly aware of their relevant role and so are perhaps top managers; however, the most challenging task still lies ahead: selling the idea in one’s own land. With reference to the need for internal PR as well as good external PR and CSR, R1 openly acknowledged this saying that “obviously, I cannot say that everything is ideal, because, let’s admit it, everyone tends to look at his/her own interest and focus on one’s duties. Sometimes, I have to struggle and confront some deep-rooted reluctance. They might say I expect too much. It is much easier to pass on the load to someone else. There is no single company where I have worked in similar positions, where I did not have to “sell ideas” first of all inside. Internal PR is essential, and nothing can be taken for granted. There can be no compromises of responsibilities, or saying, I could do less here, or maybe this position [of integrated communication manager] is not even necessary, or perhaps communication functions could simply be distributed amongst administration, HR and that is it. It would not work.”

Integrated strategic communication can have such a deep impact on organizational culture as to gradually transform it. And this is the ultimate goal of effective communication at any level: to bring about action and transform the environment in the desired direction. As R1 affirms, “we have developed a kind of shared meal culture and I have noticed that this has permeated everyday life of our organization: employees go less and less often to eat outside, they stay for the lunch break and cook and eat together in our kitchens, even our CEO (a foreigner) joins us quite often. We have to try ourselves what we offer to others, it has to become part of our lives.” <…> Over a year ago we began to make public announcement of our goals and commitments for the future. So O1 no longer uploads only the performance reports of recent achievements. We have gone a step beyond. By communicating our agenda for the three upcoming years to all publics, we are helping ourselves to be more open and more committed to all stakeholders. This is a condition for corporate sustainability.

O1 is a good example of integrated strategic communication and its sustainable growth can be to a great extent the
result of this approach to aligned policies, applied all over the world and for more than 100 years. Through integrated strategic communication, they are successfully adapting to the demands of social, economic and environmental challenges, implementing the necessary changes, at the same time keeping intact the core corporate values. In brief, O1 is on the right path to organizational sustainability through the implementation of integrated communication strategy.

Conclusions

1. Full alignment of corporate communication may partly be subjected to the size of the organization, the market share they have, the pace of its growth, the particular sector where they operate and other structural aspects. However, even small enterprises could manage their communication in an integrated way from the very beginning, thus ensuring a sustainable growth based on integrated strategic communication.

2. Communication managers are expected to be professional facilitators, directly accountable to their CEO, so that they can really contribute to the implementation of company decisions by professionally influencing the ways in which these decisions are communicated and carried out. For this, they should count on the support of executive leadership and every specialized department.

3. Alignment of strategic stakeholder communication requires active and reflective listening in order to understand all stakeholders’ expectations and the CCO plays a key role to forecast the impact of ad hoc executive decision making regarding stakeholder dialogue.

4. Professionalized management of integrated strategic communication implies tracking changes, successes and failures with respect to the set goals and making timely decisions to implement structural changes, steer the organization through crisis and communicate truth consistently and responsibly.

5. Integrated external and internal PR, CSR and CSC practices would make it possible for the organization to continue operating in the future, which in other words is precisely what sustainability is about: the quality of being sustainable, endurable, something that can last.

6. By ensuring organizational future through the generation of favourable conditions in the public eye and the legitimation of corporate performance under the judgement of all stakeholders, integrated strategic communication can ‘shield’ the organization making it stronger and sustainable.

7. The competitive advantage of organizational sustainability may lie precisely on the ability to grant communication the place it deserves, as nowadays organizations are, more than ever before, under demanding scrutiny for every word or deed.

8. Improvising in corporate communications may be too risky when survival is at stake. Thus, integrated, sound and responsible organizational communication should become a strategic concern of sustainability-aware leaders, who are also ready to make pertaining changes in their corporate structure to allocate the strategic position of integrated communication managers.
The impact of integrated organizational communication on organizational sustainability

References


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Organizacijas sudaro žmonēs, o komunikacija yra vienas iš pagrindinių veiksnių, lemiančių jų egzistavimą, veiklą ir darnumą iššūkių ir poreikių metu, puikiai informuotų ir vis labiau darnumą suvokiančių klientų, darbdavų, vartotojų ir apskritai piliečių pasaulyje, pilname konkurencijose.

Komunikacijos indėlis į organizacijos gyvenimą, augimą ir sėkmę yra nenuginčiama reikalingas siekti ir palaikyti kasdienius vidaus ir išorės procesus, tinklus ir sąveikas, kurios būdingos visai organizacijai. Todėl organizacinė komunikacija, kaip neatskiriama kiekvienos organizacijos dalis, turėtų sklandžiai ir straipsniškai integruoti visus komunikacijos procesus ir jių sudedamąsias dalis tam, kad pasiektų sinergiją ir darnumą nuoširdžiabūtingas, kurioms būdingas tarp jų susiję strateginių veiksmų integravimas. Kiekvienas komunikacijos veiksmas turėtų kilti ir remtis aiškiai apibrėžta filosofija ir strategiškai suplanuota ir integruota komunikacijos politika, kuri atsižvelgia į suinteresuotųjų šalių, publikų ir visuomenės norus, poreikius, interesus ir lūkesčius.

Komunikacija organizacijoje, taip pat ir visoje visuomenėje, susiduria su naujais pasauliniais iššūkiais, kaip plačiai aptarėti jaunų krašto klausa. Be abejo, yra keletas organizacijų, kurios jau vykdo šią integraciją ir sėkmingai bei atsakingai vienija savo organizacinės komunikacijos politiką. Tačiau integruota organizacinė komunikacija, deja, dažnai neužtikrina sau vietos tarp kitų strateginių tikslų ir lieka įrankiu savireklamai, tinkamai įsivaizduoti savo veiksmų išraišką.

Darnios organizacijos yra linkusios prisitaikyti prie aplinkos, kurioje jos veikia, kartu formuodama ir transformuodama pačią aplinką savo pridėtine vertę ir atsakingai požiūriu į daromąją įtaką visuomenėi, institucijoms ir asmenims. Organizacijos pajėgumas ir gebėjimas užmezgė ryšį su visomis savo tikslinėmis strategijomis (ar grupėmis) ir įsitylus įsivėžusius savo veiklos objektus, tinkamai pasirikioti ir užtikrinti savo veiklos efektyvumą, įtakos sėkmės priežastis, kaip organizacijos veikla galioja savo veiklos tikslų, kuriais organizacijos veikla sutampa su visuomenės poreikių. Organizacijos bendruomenė, būtent dėl kruopščiai integruotos strateginės komunikacijos.

Straipsnyje autorė nagrinėja šios integracijos įgyvendinimo ir taikymo lygį ir stadijas tam, kad juos įgyvendintu būtų galima ir efektyviai. Straipsnyje aprašyti, kaip organizacijos veikla turi veikti įvairių veiksmų, kuriai skiriamos neatskiriama kiekvienos organizacijos dalis, turėtų sklandžiai ir straipsniškai integruoti visus komunikacijos procesus ir jų sudedamąsias dalis tam, kad pasiektų sinergiją ir darnumą. Kiekvienas komunikacijos veiksmas turėtų kilti ir remtis aiškiai apibrėžta filosofija ir strategiškai suplanuota ir integruota komunikacijos politika, kuri atsižvelgia į suinteresuotųjų šalių, publikų ir visuomenės norus, poreikius, interesus ir lūkesčius. Darnios organizacijos yra linkusios prisitaikyti prie aplinkos, kurioje jos veikia, kartu formuodama ir transformuodama pačią aplinką savo pridėtine vertę ir atsakingai požiūriu į daromąją įtaką visuomenėi, institucijoms ir asmenims. Organizacijos pajėgumas ir gebėjimas užmezgė ryšį su visomis savo tikslinėmis strategijomis (ar grupėmis) ir įsitylus įsivėžusius savo veiklos objektus, tinkamai pasirikioti ir užtikrinti savo veiklos efektyvumą, įtakos sėkmės priežastis, kaip organizacijos veikla galioja savo veiklos tikslų, kuriais organizacijos veikla sutampa su visuomenės poreikių. Organizacijos bendruomenė, būtent dėl kruopščiai integruotos strateginės komunikacijos.

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