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A Delphi Study to Identify STANDARDS FOR INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

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BACKGROUND

Public relations practitioners have expressed difficulty in measuring and evaluating internal communication (IC) efforts.¹ In addition, though high-effective organizations have been shown to practice IC and measurement more than low-effective organizations, only 50 percent of practitioners indicated having a formal approach to measuring and evaluating their IC initiatives.² While a variety of barriers to effective IC have been cited, including scarce funds and staff, the lack of a standardized approach to measuring it has compounded these difficulties.³

To remedy this problem, the Institute for Public Relations (IPR) and the Commission on Research, Measurement, and Evaluation (IPRMC) created a 11-member international task force comprised of academics and practitioners to develop internal communication standards.

What is a standard?

Standards are defined as an idea or thing used as a measure, norm, or model in comparative evaluations, which is advantageous for public relations activities in that they allow for reliable and efficiently measured comparisons between and within campaigns (Michaelson & Stacks, 2011, p.4; "About Public Relations," 2016).

Why are measurement standards needed?



In light of the variability of measurement terminology, terms, and models proposed to evaluate public relations, the IPR prioritized the development and testing of standards in recent years. In 2012, the Coalition for Research Standards was created to develop and promote a broad platform of standards within the public relations industry aligned with the International Organization for Standardization's (ISO) principles:

1. Standards are voluntary and based on market need;
2. are developed by global experts in the field, and
3. achieve consensus among a wide audience of experts.

("About Public Relations," 2016).

To date, 85 organizations have pledged their support for public relations standards in general ("About Public Relations," 2016). Standards have been developed for traditional media measurement (Eisenmann, O'Neil, & Geddes, 2016), ethics (Bowen & Stacks, 2013), and the communication lifecycle (Michaelson & Stacks, 2011) and have been proposed for social media measurement and return on investment ("About Public Relations," 2016).

1 (Davis, 2015; Meng & Berger, 2012; Meng & Pan, 2012; Richardson, 2015)

2 (Towers Watson, 2013; as cited in Meng & Berger, 2012)

3 (Meng & Berger, 2012)

The IC measurement standards effort

The IPRMC task force reviewed academic and practice literature and met multiple times in 2015 to identify initial concepts to include as possible standards. In 2016, four members of the task force (the authors) conducted a Delphi study with a purposive sample of IC thought leaders to determine whether a wider audience of practitioners agreed with the task force's recommended standards and definitions.



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To fill the gap in IC measurement, the following research questions were proposed:

RQ1: What internal communication standards should be included?

RQ2: How should these communication standards be defined?



METHOD

In 2016, we conducted a two-round Delphi study with a purposive sample of IC thought leaders to determine if a wider audience of practitioners agreed with the task force's recommended standards and definitions. We used the Delphi technique to establish the standards because of its ability to achieve consensus and elicit opinions from a panel of experts, both of which support ISO standardization principles.⁴ In 2015 and 2016, we presented the potential standards to more than 150 communication practitioners and academics at three international public relations conferences and gathered and incorporated their feedback into our standards definitions and Delphi questionnaire.

Participants for this Delphi study were identified based upon our professional contacts and snowball sampling. Participants were required to have a minimum of ten years of experience in the communication industry, including responsibility for IC for at least five years. Recruitment emails were sent to 84 participants in both Rounds 1 and 2, although two people declined because they did not feel qualified to participate. A total of 22 of the 82 people completed the survey in both rounds, for a response rate of 27%.

4 Wakefield and Watson, (2014)

Delphi Study confirms task force assumptions

The standards were grouped as



- (a) outtakes, whether employees received, paid attention to, comprehended or retained particular messages;
- (b) outcomes, evidence of changes to or reinforcement of opinions, attitudes, or behaviors; and
- (3) organizational impact, if and how IC has influenced organizational performance.

Outtakes

- Respondents explained that awareness merely represented the “first step” in measurement, and that if employees have sufficient understanding and retention, it can be assumed that awareness was present

Outcomes

- More than 50% of participants report measuring satisfaction, attitude, empowerment, collaboration, and trust.
- Roughly one-third of respondents mentioned “trust” as the most important standard in measuring outcomes.

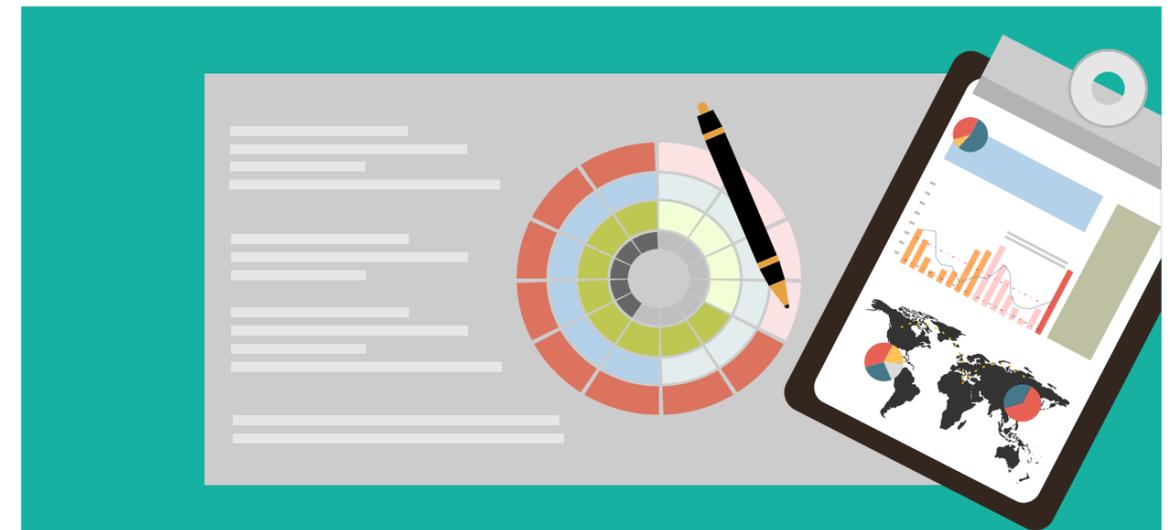
Organizational Impact

- Retention of employees and safety were the most frequent standards already being measured in organizations
- Roughly one-third of respondents mentioned “productivity” as the most important standard in measuring organizational impact due to its connection to business results, though some mentioned the difficulty in specifically measuring the standard.

Here are a few highlights and observations.

Based on feedback from Round 1, we made some changes to the wording of the definitions and standards. Aside from a few exceptions, the majority of respondents agreed with our standards and their definitions, a crucial step in enacting them. The modified standards list presented in Round 2 secured 90 percent participant approval.

- A total of 68% of participants said that “engagement” is embedded in other concepts and should not be added as a stand-alone standard.
- We created a list of 22 proposed IC standards and definitions to help professionals effectively and efficiently guide measurement and evaluation.



CONCLUSIONS

The standardization process has added clarity to understanding which items should be measured. Much of the outtake and outcome standards can be measured through typical social science means, including surveys, focus groups and interviews. The business impact measures are not commonly measured at this time. There remains an urgent need for appropriate tools to help practitioners perform these measures. Nonetheless, practitioners should be able to examine current IC measurement activities and vet them against the list of standards and make appropriate changes.

NEXT STEPS

We plan to provide suggestions for how to measure against the standards, and test our suggestions with select organizations for validity and reliability. Ultimately we plan to provide a tested and effective guidebook and set of measurement instructions that will simplify and codify IC measurement.

Figure 1: Proposed Standards & Definitions

Participants were next asked a series of questions about their use of the standards in their workplaces. Figure 1 highlights those results, together with the percentage of respondents measuring the standards in Round 1.

Standard	Definition	n	%*
Outtakes			
Awareness	Whether employees have heard of an organizational message, issue, or topic	18	90
Knowledge	Employees' level of comprehension about organizational messages, issues, or topics	10	50
Understanding	Employees' ability to relate their knowledge to their work in a way that helps the organization achieve its goals	13	65
Relevance	Degree to which employees find communication from the organization meaningful and useful	**	**
Retention of Information	Degree to which employees can recall key messages or topics when asked after an x timeframe	9	45
Outcomes			
Attitude	A way of thinking or feeling about a subject (about an organization, topic, or issue) ranging from very positive to very negative	11	64.71
Advocacy	Employees' discretionary effort and time to promote or defend an organization and its products and services	8	47.06
Authenticity	Perception that an organization is transparent, honest, and fair, especially regarding the pursuit of its organizational objectives	**	**
Empowerment	Employees have the information, rewards, and power to take initiative and make decisions to solve problems and improve performance	11	64.71
Collaboration	The process of employees across different divisions and or units coming together to solve a problem and/or create something successfully	10	58.82
Teamwork	The process of employees within the same unit coming together to successfully achieve a common goal or objective under the leadership of an appointed manager	8	47.06
Discretionary Effort	The amount of effort employees give to an organization, a team, or a project, above and beyond what is required	6	35.29
Trust	A belief in the reliability, truth, and integrity of the organization's leadership, decision-making, and communication	10	58.82
Satisfaction	Extent to which employees are happy or content with their job or work	14	82.35
Transparency	The willingness of the organization to share positive and negative information with employees in a timely fashion	6	35.29
Fairness	Employee perception that organizational processes that allocate resources and resolve disputes are impartial and just	4	23.53
Organizational Impact			
Productivity	The quality and quantity of work output based on resources	10	47.62
Innovation	Thinking differently and experimenting with new approaches, ideas, or behaviors related to the organization	9	42.86
Continuous Improvement	The process by which employees offer small or large improvements to improve efficiency, productivity, and quality of a product or process in the work environment	7	33.33
Reputation	Stakeholders'—both internal and external—evaluation of an organization based upon personal and observed experiences with the company and its communication	12	57.14
Employee Retention	The number or percentage of employees who remain employed after X period of time	15	71.43
Safety	Employees' freedom from physical and emotional harm, injury or loss	15	71.43

* Percentages vary depending on the number of respondents per section. **Added following Round 2 of the study.