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**Author(s):** Pekkala, Kaisa

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## Managing the Communicative Organization: A Qualitative Analysis of Knowledge-intensive Companies

The increase in employees' communicative role in organizations has been acknowledged in the literature in recent years (Andersson, 2019; Heide and Simonsson, 2011; Kim and Rhee, 2011; Madsen and Verhoeven, 2019; Mazzei, 2010; Pekkala and Luoma-aho, 2017; van Zoonen et al., 2018). The emergence of digital media, particularly social media, has enabled employees to communicate across organizational boundaries about their work, profession and organization (Men, 2014).

Employees' communication behavior (ECB) in digital media has been linked to organizational reputation (Kim and Rhee, 2011; Helm, 2011), the promotion of corporate products and services (Dreher, 2014), social selling (Warren, 2016), employer branding (Mangold and Miles, 2007), organizational resilience (Vos, 2017), strategizing (Whittington et al., 2011) and the generation of new knowledge (Mazzei, 2014). Yet despite the increased interest in ECB, its antecedents and contributions to organizational performance, there is very little understanding with respect to the ways in which companies manage employees' work-related communication in social media. However, there has been a long-standing consensus among management scholars, particularly in the area of behavioral management, that employees' performance in the organizational context is very much dependent on conditions created by managerial work, which either increases or decreases employees' motivation (e.g. Herzberg, 1966 and McGregor, 1960).

The integration of behavioral management theories and communication management literature has been lacking due to the prevailing paradigmatic thinking in which corporate communication and its management has been the exclusive task of the members of the

dominant coalition, meaning organizational leaders and communication practitioners (Grunig, 1992). A recent literature review by Zerfass and Volk (2018) revealed that previous communication management research has paid comparatively little attention to the communication function as a unit of analysis. “Instead, a greater focus has been laid on the professional roles of communication practitioners and their individual strategic contribution to the corporation” (Zerfass and Volk, 2018, p. 399). As a consequence, many key patterns in communication management systems and structures remain unexplored (Moss et al., 2017). Additionally, the extant literature on communication management, particularly in the area of corporate communication and strategic communication, has largely been built on an approach in which organizations are univocal and consistency is the key guiding principle of communication management to external publics (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011), while employees’ communicative role has been relevant mainly in the internal organizational context. This paradigm is changing, however, as employees are increasingly taking on the role of active communicators (Agregta and Bonin, 2011; Huang et al., 2013; Madsen and Verhoeven, 2019). One of the novel avenues that builds on the assumption that organizations are increasingly multivocal is the research area of the “communicative organization,” which perceives each employee as a potential communicator in today’s mediatized and polyphonic environment (Kuhn, 2008; Schoeneborn, 2011).

The present study builds on this limited knowledge about the management of employees’ work-related communication and argues that by integrating behavioral management as a subarea of the communication management discussion, we are able to theorize communication management in an era where organizations operate through multiple voices of employees as active communicators. The term management is broadly defined here as including leadership (Mintzberg, 2009) and is understood as the process of working with and through individuals, groups and other resources (such as technology) to accomplish

organizational goals. Ultimately, management is perceived here as enacting authority to create conditions for individual behavior in an organizational context and hence, it is seen as a design function (Kuhn, 2008). Communication management is an integral part of any organization, as organizations can only achieve their goals and objectives through the coordinated efforts of their members (Adler, 1999).

The objective of this paper is to explore how employees' work-related communication is managed in knowledge-intensive organizations and the paper is organized as follows: First, the literature related to communication management and ECB is reviewed and key theoretical approaches and concepts are introduced. Second, in the empirical part of the paper, the methods and the sample used in the exploratory study are described, before presenting and discussing the findings.

### **Literature review**

The literature review addresses the core constructs of the study, including ECB, the multivocal organizational communication system (MOCS) and management of the communicative organization (MCO).

Following the "communicative organization" approach (Kuhn, 2008; Schoeneborn, 2011), the paper focuses on finding answers to how organizations through their communication management create organizational conditions that enable and motivate employees to communicate professionally in social media. To this end, the paper draws on corporate communication, public relations, organizational communication and the management literature. Before providing a more detailed review of the management literature, the paper focuses on the literature related to ECB in organizations and the communication context since organizational behavior is always situational in nature (Meyer et al., 2010).

### **Employees' communication behavior (ECB)**

The emergence of post-bureaucratic and knowledge-intensive organizations (Alvesson, 2004) and the increased use of social media among employees has shifted communication power (Men, 2014) and the responsibility (Andersson, 2019; Gulbrandsen and Just, 2016) for corporate communication outcomes to individual employees communicating on behalf of their employers. This has recently prompted scholars to study ECB, including individual and organizational antecedents that enable positive communication behavior [e.g. self-enhancement (Lee, 2020); the employee–organization relationship (Kang and Sung, 2017); symmetrical internal communication (Men, 2014)]; the key processes in ECB (e.g. megaphoning and scouting, Kim and Rhee, 2011); the consequences of social media use in organizational contexts and identifying important organizational (e.g. reputation, Helm, 2011; Dreher, 2014) and individual outcomes (e.g. job performance, Cao et al., 2016).

Kim and Rhee (2011) conceptualized ECB into two categories, which they termed megaphoning and scouting. They defined megaphoning as “employees’ positive or negative external communication behaviors about their organization” (p. 246) and scouting as “employees’ voluntary communication efforts to bring relevant information to the organization” (p. 247). Positive megaphoning has also been conceptualized as employee advocacy (Men, 2014) and defined as “the voluntary promotion or defense of a company, its products or brands by an employee externally” (Men, 2014, p. 262). An employee advocate may have a variety of ways to communicate on behalf of their employers. Vos (2017), for example, stated that individuals can contribute to their organizations in social media by drawing attention to a topic, influencing the direction of the debate, showing accountability to maintain legitimacy or gain acceptance, educating publics and engaging social media users to provide input and participate in joint problem-solving (Vos, 2017, pp. 18–19). Through these activities, employees enact important communicative roles through which they embody,

promote and defend their organizations, scout for information and insights about the operating environment and build and maintain relationships with stakeholders (Madsen and Verhoeven, 2019).

### **The Multivocal Organizational Communication System (MOCS)**

The emergence of employees' work-related communication through the use of digital media with an increasing number of organizational communicators is changing organizational power structures (Riemer et al., 2015). Communication in the organizational context is argued to be changing from being exclusively univocal in nature toward being multivocal (Huang et al., 2013). As employees from different parts of the organization are increasingly communicating both inside and outside organizational boundaries, and hence the source of the voice is no longer centrally located and legitimized by the management or communications function, it is increasingly stemming from individual employees' communication with stakeholders across those boundaries (Agresta and Bonin, 2011; Huang et al., 2013).

Huang et al. (2015) defined univocality as an institutional, formal, centralized and mostly top-down mode of communication, while, conversely, multivocality refers to a more user-centric, distributed, informal and inherently participative mode of communication that creates polyphony. In this paper, the term univocal corporate communication is used to describe communication from a single source, initiated by the organization's central communications team or leadership, which has traditionally been seen as formal corporate communication. Huang et al. (2015) defined the content of univocal communication as organization-published content (OPC), referring to content generated by small teams "under the guidance of senior management" (p. 51). A multivocal mode of communication is, instead, based on user-generated content (UGC) and refers to organization members using

their personal voice and character and engaging in dialog with stakeholders internally or externally on topics that relate to the organization's brand, products and organizational culture, which has traditionally been seen as informal corporate communication. Multivocal communication is thus based on UGC (Huang et al., 2015), namely, content "created outside of professional routines and practices" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). This paper provides the more specific definition of employee-generated content, which refers to content generated by employees concerning their work, career, profession or employer.

Recent research suggests that in digital media environments organizational reputation becomes coproduced, requiring organizations "to embrace the same creative style of expression favored by their audiences" (Etter et al., 2019, p. 47) as "social media users are a multitude of actors, whose motivations, sources of information and constraints are comparatively more diverse" (ibid., p. 34). Moreover, Christensen and Cornelissen (2011, p. 395) suggested that corporate communication is no longer an exclusively managerial project but the "ideal that is shared and kept alive by many different actors inside and outside the organization." This mode of communication, where many different actors communicate on behalf of the organization simultaneously, is termed as the MOCS in this paper, consisting of both organization- and employee-generated contents.

### **Management of the Communicative Organization (MCO)**

Despite the increased importance of employees' communicative role and its potentially strong effects on an organization's reputation (Miles and Mangold, 2014; Helm, 2011; Mazzei, 2014), surprisingly little research has addressed the management practice of ECB in social media. A vast majority of the existing literature and research focus on social media policies as instruments for management (Banghart et al., 2018; O'Connor et al., 2016; Parker et al., 2019) and very few empirical studies (e.g. Felix et al., 2017 and Walden, 2018) have



taken a broader “social media governance” approach to manage employees’ communication (e.g. Macnamara and Zerfass, 2012). However, this type of framework views individual employees and their identities quite narrowly – as members of an organization – either creating or diminishing organizational value, protecting or hurting the organization (Stohl et al., 2017) and does not take into account that employees’ advocacy behavior is voluntary in nature and requires organizational identification and job satisfaction (Van Dick et al., 2008) and thus, a positive employee–organization relationship (Kang and Sung, 2017). The governance model describes management practices conducted in many of today’s organizations but does not reveal why some organizations are more successful than others.

Overall, the communication management literature has drawn for the most part on two management literature streams: strategic management and the excellence approach.

According to both of these theoretical frameworks, employees have been seen as important assets for organizations but their motivation has not been the locus of the literature among these frameworks. Grunig’s (1992) excellence theory of public relations, inspired by the excellence management approach originated by Peters and Waterman (1982), “specifies how public relations makes organizations more effective” (Grunig, 1992, p. 27). The aim of the excellence approach is to strive for improvement and toward best practices. In addition to the excellence approach, in recent years, corporate communication and public relations have been increasingly practiced and theorized within the framework of strategic management (Macnamara and Zerfass, 2012). Strategic management is defined by Greene et al. (1985) as “a continuous process of thinking through the current mission of the organisation, thinking through the current environmental conditions, and then combining these elements by setting forth a guide for tomorrow’s decisions and results” (p. 536).

Strategic management has resulted in dividing management activities between strategic and operational management (Zerfass and Volk, 2018). A recent attempt to create a strategic

framework for social media use in organizations has been made by Felix et al. (2017), who conceptualized the dimensions of social media marketing into four blocks: scope, culture, structure and governance. At the operational level, Walden (2018) found that communication practitioners engage in three operational activities to guide employees' social media use: serving as a reactive–technical resource, supporting employee communities and responding to incidental monitoring of social media posts.

In this paper, it is argued that introducing the behavioral management approach to the communication management discussion can advance understanding of how organizations can manage ECB. The behavioral management approach focuses on human motivation and how organizations can best motivate their employees to work willingly and effectively. One of the classic theories of motivation was created by Herzberg 1966 and his dual-factor theory posits that employees have two different kinds of needs, which either prevent job dissatisfaction or increase motivation, resulting in superior performance. The motivation theories in the work domain have evolved and broadened over the years and the understanding that individuals are motivated differently duly points to differences in people's orientations toward the initiation and regulation of their behavior (Mitchell, 1982; Gagne and Deci, 2005). Self-determination theory (SDT) differentiates between intrinsic motivation, which refers to doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable, and extrinsic motivation, which refers to doing something because it leads to a separate outcome (Deci and Ryan, 1985) and, further, between autonomous motivation (acting with a sense of volition) and controlled motivation (acting with a sense of pressure) (Gagne and Deci, 2005). SDT has also contributed to the literature by positing that there are three universal psychological needs, namely, for competence, autonomy and relatedness, which are prerequisites for high-quality performance. SDT has been used to study the relationship between motivation and technology acceptance (Lee et al., 2015) and self-determination has been found to moderate the relationship between

employees' perceived external reputation and organizational citizenship behavior (Schaarschmidt et al., 2015).

In summary, there is as yet very little understanding of how organizations manage their employees' communication at different levels, as the communication literature has been built on ideals of univocality and consistency in communication management (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011), while the management framework has leaned on the strategic management and excellence approaches and has not been theorized from the behavior management point of view. This study aims to contribute to this identified research deficit through an exploratory empirical study and in-depth analysis, leading to the development of a theoretical model – Management of Communicative Organization (MCO).

### **The research method**

In order to explore in depth how organizations manage employees' communication, the study takes an exploratory, qualitative approach (Bryman, 2016). The data were collected from six different professional organizations operating in the service sector (one organization in management consulting, two organizations in legal services and three organizations operating in financial services) in Finland. The six companies participating in the study employed a total of 22,996 employees (on average in 2019). The rationale for focusing on this particular sector is that an employee's role as an organizational communicator and advocate has become important specifically in knowledge-intensive firms (KIFs), such as law firms, and management consultancies as their success depends on their employees' ability to gain and demonstrate expertise (Alvesson, 2004; Treem, 2016). In total, the researcher conducted 23 interviews among organizational leaders responsible for employee engagement in social media in their respective organizations. In each company, the head of communication/ external communication (6) and the head of human resources (HR)/human resources

development (HRD) (6) were interviewed. Additionally, four organizations had wider teams involved in coordinating communication and advocacy programs in their respective organizations. Those respondents occupied the following roles: head of social media (3), head of editorial and strategic communication (1), manager, external communication (1), head of internal communication (2), manager HRD (2), manager employer branding (1), senior vice-president, private customers (1). The anonymity of the interviewees and their companies was assured, and the interviews were conducted with the help of a semi-structured interview guideline, which included the following topics presented in this article:

- (1) Company background: operating environment, organizational culture and structure
- (2) ECB: leaders' perception of employees' communication behavior and its outcomes
- (3) Management processes: existing management objectives and processes regarding engaging, empowering, controlling and developing employees' communication.

The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 min and were conducted face to face. They were held in Finnish and direct quotes were translated into English for the presentation of the results within this article. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed using software for qualitative data analysis (NVivo). The interview transcripts amounted to 602 pages of text (Times New Roman, 12pt, double-spaced) in all.

The interviews were supplemented with further data such as internal documents on social media policies and publicly available information on company websites and in social media. The use of data from multiple sources contributed to data triangulation (Flick, 2007).

To ensure qualitative rigor, the data were analyzed using the three-step process recommended by Gioia et al. (2013). In each step, the constant comparative method was applied, in which different parts of the data are constantly compared with all other parts of the data to explore variations, similarities and differences. First, open coding was conducted before determining first-order concepts. Second, these concepts were grouped into second-

order themes, taking into account the results of the literature review. Here, it became evident that the processes that formed the first-order concepts varied based on the contextual factors identified. Thus, three distinctively aggregated patterns, in this case communication management approaches, were identified altogether and named according to their underlying orientation: “individual-,” “corporate-” and “business-oriented approaches.”

### **Findings**

This section begins by introducing the organizational differentiating factors that were identified during the data analysis and outlines three different management approaches adopted by companies coping with different internal and external environments. The section concludes with an examination of the key processes identified in managing employees’ communication in knowledge-intensive organizations.

#### **Managing employee communicators**

The interviews confirmed that employees’ work-related communication in social media is regarded as an increasingly important area among the knowledge-intensive companies and that it has required companies to establish new managerial processes. According to the analysis, all of the companies were undergoing change caused by external factors, namely, the emergence of new communication technologies, business transformation caused by digitalization, changing transparency expectations and increased competition for talent.

Above all, the increasing use of digital communication in professional communication and the opportunities and the threats it has created were identified as the main drivers for establishing management processes that both enable and motivate employees in their work-related communication in social media. All of the interviewed organizations pointed out the importance of ECB for their reputation and had created processes that allowed them to

manage multivocal communication and employee-generated content. As one of the interviewees pointed out:

“It is not only about saying that communication is everyone’s responsibility, and “Start doing it!”. Instead, we offer tools, opportunities and support, coaching and help for employees to be able to take on that new task.” (Interviewee 16)

The most common communication management processes mentioned by the respondents were increasing awareness and creating common understanding, creating community, communicating expectations, allocating time for communication, providing tools and content, training, coaching and supporting, providing feedback and rewarding.

Although all of the organizations participating in the study were operating in the service sector, faced similar external trends in their operating environment, employed knowledge workers and had some common processes and practices in place, the interviews revealed that there were some contextual differences that affected the way in which employees’ communication was managed, namely: culture and norms, strategic orientation toward communication, leadership commitment and support, roles and responsibilities and competence. The data structure of the organizational differentiating factors is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The data structure of the organizational differentiating factors

First-order concepts	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimensions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working culture</li> <li>• Organizational communication culture</li> <li>• Weighing opportunities and risks in management decisions</li> <li>• Attitudes toward rules and policies</li> <li>• Attitudes toward new technologies</li> <li>• Tolerance of individual differences</li> <li>• Respecting the boundaries between professional and private life</li> </ul>	Culture and norms affecting communication management	Organizational differentiating factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceiving communications as a way of doing business</li> <li>• Perceiving communication as a central driver e.g. the motor for an organizational change</li> <li>• Perceiving communication as a strategic goal</li> </ul>	Strategic orientation toward communication	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distribution of communication responsibility</li> <li>• Perception of the role of communication professionals in organizations</li> </ul>	Communication roles and responsibilities	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding of contemporary communication</li> <li>• Experience in employee communication management</li> <li>• Ability to develop new management practices for new processes</li> </ul>	Organizational communication competence	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mandate from the CEO and top management to move from univocal to multivocal communication</li> <li>• Top management being active in social media and acting as role models</li> <li>• Planning and follow-up of employee communication in management meetings</li> </ul>	Leadership commitment and support	

For instance, employees’ communication with external stakeholders was viewed as an opportunity or a threat depending on the organizational culture and the norms that were manifested in the relationship between organizational leaders and employees. When the communication culture was open, employees’ communication was seen as an opportunity and the management focused on enabling employee communication. As one communication professional stated:

“I think it is not only about communication but about something more general related to trust and how people are managed. If the organization needs to micromanage the time employees use in social media, I think it is a sign of distrust. Then the company is measuring the wrong things. It is not relevant how the employee uses his or her time, but what results he or she is able to achieve. The focus should be on results.” (Interviewee 4)

Conversely, when the culture and norms enhanced control, the focus was on guiding and creating mechanisms to control employees' work-related communication. In these types of organizations, the management emphasizes consistency. As another communication professional put it:

“I would say that these recent tech developments and all the tools we have in use allow almost anyone to do whatever they want. And it actually looks fine. The only problem is if the colors, graphics or tone of voice are not according to the guidelines. The way in which we want to be seen and perceived. Then it's a problem.” (Interviewee 15)

Moreover, the strategic orientation toward communication differed between companies. In some companies, communication was seen as a strategic goal in itself, while in one organization it was seen as a tool for achieving results in other areas and in another it was not on the priority list at all when considering areas of development in that specific organization.

Organizations also differed in how they had structured their communication and related roles and responsibilities. In some organizations, the communication responsibility was distributed among all members of the organization and seen as a part of employees' work role. In other organizations, the ownership of corporate communication resided in the communications department, which considered itself as ultimately responsible for driving the communication activities and the employees' role was considered to be more instrumental.

Moreover, leadership commitment and support varied across different organizations. The influence of organizational leaders on the communication culture and its development work was highlighted by all interviewees but the actual supporting activities differed between the organizations. As one interviewee stated:

“If employees themselves had initiated this internally, it would have met with resistance from the top management and communications department. But the top management were so committed to supporting this. This is not to say that commitment alone



would make the change happen, but it is almost a prerequisite for doing this successfully.”

(Interview 4)

Finally, the novelty of the phenomenon also affected the level of maturity in managing employee communication in social media. In some organizations the strategic decision to engage all employees in organizational communication had already been made several years prior, while in others the work had just started. Hence, the organizational competence in functioning as a multivocal system differed. Additionally, in some organizations, the development work had been systematic and in others more ad hoc. So the level of experience and intensity of the development work differed between organizations.

**Different managerial approaches**

With regard to the organizational differentiating factors mentioned above, three patterns of managerial processes were identified, which were named “individual-,” “corporate- and “business-oriented approaches.” The data structure of these three different managerial approaches is presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. The data structure of three different managerial approaches

First-order concepts	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimensions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trusting and respecting professionalism of individual employees</li> <li>• Viewing individual differences as a richness</li> </ul>	Guiding beliefs among communication leadership	Individual-oriented
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aiming for efficiency and quality in communication</li> <li>• Focus on consistency of communication</li> <li>• Communication team having ownership of organizational communication</li> </ul>		Corporate-oriented
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Viewing organizational communication as a part of business and everyone’s work</li> </ul>		Business-oriented
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Willingness to make expertise visible</li> <li>• Willingness to attract new talent</li> <li>• Willingness to acquire new knowledge</li> </ul>		Individual-oriented

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Willingness to improve organizational visibility and discoverability</li> <li>• Willingness to enhance employer brand</li> <li>• Being aware that communication department resources are insufficient to operate in contemporary media landscape</li> <li>• Being worried that other organizations are more advanced</li> <li>• Being worried about employees harming the reputation</li> </ul>	Drivers for development of employees' communication	Corporate-oriented
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Willingness to create new business</li> <li>• Strategic decision to be on the cutting edge in organizational communication</li> <li>• Understanding that many voices have a greater effect than one single voice</li> </ul>		Business-oriented
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing awareness</li> <li>• Creating community</li> <li>• Communicating expectations</li> <li>• Allocating time</li> <li>• Providing tools and content</li> <li>• Training</li> <li>• Coaching and supporting</li> <li>• Providing feedback and rewarding</li> </ul>	Employees' communication management processes	Individual-oriented
		Corporate-oriented
		Business-oriented
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dependence on active and skillful individuals</li> </ul>	Perceived challenges in managing employees' work-related communication	Individual-oriented
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficult to engage individuals</li> </ul>		Corporate-oriented
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requires plenty of work and time to make this approach function well</li> </ul>		Business-oriented

**Individual-oriented approach**

This approach relied on the individuality and self-responsibility of employees and the managerial focus was on enabling individual employees to empower and educate themselves. In organizations applying this type of management approach, the hierarchical structure was fairly flat and employees trusted each other's abilities to conduct the work-related tasks.

The drivers for engaging employees to communicate about their work and act as organizational advocates were the willingness to be perceived as an insightful organization and to make their employees' expertise visible. Such companies were eager to acquire the best talent from the job market, to which end employees' work-related communication was considered important in attracting new talent to join the company. For existing employees,

social media also offered a place to gain new knowledge and to stay up-to-date on industry news and events.

Communication management was focused on enhancing individual employees, both in terms of their expertise and their personality. All communication about the organization was based on promoting individual employees and their expertise, with corporate webpages featuring employees prominently.

“Our Internet pages are structured in such a way that every piece of content our employees create is linked to the individual who produced it, and this is the way we aim to generate traffic between different platforms and tools.” (Interviewee 2)

According to the interviewees, employees had a great deal of autonomy regarding how they performed their work. There was strong resistance toward manuals and guidelines so the management approach respected the organizational culture in this matter, and instead of creating policies and procedures, the emphasis was on inspiring and encouraging employees and enhancing the uniqueness of the organization and each individual’s important role in it. This was summed up as follows:

“We have strong resistance to all manuals. We communicate a lot about our communication objectives and we always explain what we are doing in our department in our communications and on our marketing sites. And we try to inspire people by showing our passion and by communicating our achievements and results.” (Interviewee 2)

Overall, such organizations valued their employees as important assets. They were also highly dependent on their experts and if an active and insightful communicator left the organization, it was difficult to find a replacement. The management approach was also affected by certain constraints because the culture and norms dominated behaviors. Hence, it took time and effort and required patience and persistence from the communication professionals to achieve the intended results.

### **Corporate-oriented approach**

In the corporate-oriented management approach, the communications department played a central role in driving organizational communication initiatives and processes. Many of the management processes were applied in a paternalistic manner. However, the managerial work differed between companies depending on the extent to which organizational leaders were committed to supporting employees as active communicators and signaled the importance of this through their own communication and example. Companies where leaders were more committed showed higher levels of trust toward employees' ability to communicate at work. When employees were seen as trusted advocates, they were trained, supported and guided to communicate actively. On the other hand, when leaders were less committed, the focus of managerial work was on preparing for risks and creating guidelines for employees to follow and systematic processes that would encourage employees to communicate about their work did not exist.

As one interviewee from a company where leaders were highly committed to employee communication stated:

“We (the communications department) help our people to write those blogs, we create templates and background materials for them. We help in editing and fine-tuning their content so we kind of support them in content production. When the content is ready, we advise them on how to send it out with ready-made post alternatives so it is easy for them to share content. We also use a tool called Smarp, which allows people to see what is going on and to share content easily in their social media networks. For both social media and Smarp, we have regular training sessions in which everyone can participate, and then we are available afterwards so whenever anyone needs support we help with writing, and guide them on how to produce different types of content such as blogs. We offer consultation ourselves,

or then we offer support by providing external writers who create the content on their behalf. So we really offer whatever they want in terms of support, and we never abandon them.”

(Interviewee 8)

The communications department had a central role in providing support, as well as in driving the communication initiatives and making sure that things happened. All work-related content such as blog posts and articles were published through the employee advocacy platform by members of the communications department. This allowed the communications professionals to check and verify that the content was in accordance with the required guidelines. On the other hand, the communications department was able to support employees in their communications efforts by providing draft content and posts that employees could then modify and share among their networks.

When the leadership commitment was low, there was an apparent lack of trust among organizational leaders toward employees' ability to communicate on behalf of their organizations and the focus of the managerial work was on content. Employees were asked to follow detailed guidelines and policies, as one interviewee stated:

“We have so many existing policies that staff may not always be familiar with all of them. Employees are required to undergo code of conduct training every year, part of which is a reminder about the basic policy concerning how you talk about your company and that you need to be objective when doing so. And that when acting as a representative of your company, you should not put your own views forward. And that those things should always be kept in mind and separate from each other.” (Interviewee 15)

Overall, in these types of companies, the working culture was hectic and customer work and other areas of organizational development were often prioritized above communication among the leadership and employees in general. The interviewees argued that they felt that communication was often regarded as an add-on to employees' daily work.

They reported that it was difficult to engage employees in communicating actively, although they were supported and guided. One of the explanations for this inactivity could be that the employees perceived work-related communication as an extra duty. The managerial strategy and practices supported the view that the ultimate responsibility for and ownership of the communication was still in the hands of the communication professionals.

### **Business-oriented approach**

Within organizations that adopted a business-oriented management approach, social media communication was perceived as an integral part of doing business. Such organizations had a strong vision for the future as far as organizational communication was concerned and employees were perceived as integrated assets in making this vision a reality. The communication management was therefore based on future insight, an understanding of technological affordances, being connected to employees' daily work and the organizational culture. This means that communication leads were well aware of recent developments and opportunities in the communication environment, as one interviewee stated:

“I think that our Head of Communications at that time identified some silent signals about where the world is going. Actually not only about where the world is going, but in which direction we should develop it.” (Interviewee 4)

The driver for the systematic development of employees' work-related communication and supportive management practices was the objective to become a thought leader and, ultimately, to gain new business through being perceived as a premier partner in the respective industry. These expectations were communicated internally to all employees. As one member of staff put it:

“I would say that we are now in a very desirable situation. We have been working hard during the past two and a half years to change our culture in such a way that communication

is everyone's responsibility and belongs to everyone. We used to have a strong mindset about communication being handled exclusively in the communications department, but now we are shifting toward the mindset that communication is everyone's responsibility."

(Interviewee 16)

One of the early decisions made by the communication management was the decision to communicate about shared responsibility and the discussion was always linked to business objectives. Although everyone was perceived as a communicator, individuals were encouraged to find their own style, channels and interest areas and to be their authentic selves. One interviewee expressed it this way:

"From the very beginning, we launched the idea that communication is on everyone's desk and part of that was the so-called distributed content management model, which means that the communications department does not update all channels and webpages exclusively. . . We saw that employees had the knowledge and that they are on top of that substance and should take more responsibility for sharing it. For example, if product managers are responsible for making sure that their product is competitive, we think that part of that responsibility involves communicating about that product and its benefits. That created some resistance in the beginning and it has been a rocky road to becoming what we are today."

(Interviewee 3)

The business-oriented management approach emphasized the systematic training and coaching of employees. The training sessions were often organized by the communications department and there was a dedicated person or team to coach employees. Interviewees also stated that more experienced peers were encouraged to act as mentors for less experienced employees. So the ownership of the development work was also shared between employees and the communications department.

In addition to training and coaching, employees were supported in the event of problematic situations, for example. The change whereby employees became organizational advocates posed new risks and challenges, which required the communication management to create new supporting practices. For example, an employee's personal messages in social media could be construed as representing the organizational view, even though that was not the intention. In some cases, social media users could tag official company accounts and company leadership and try to cast employees in a negative light. These kinds of situations could be very stressful for employees and organizational support might duly be needed. As one interviewee explained:

“These situations are very challenging from the staff's point of view if, for example, someone has a different opinion than our employee and then our employee's tweet is retweeted, and there are comments to the effect that people should look at what the employee is doing by himself. It is quite a difficult situation for that employee, as he might be thinking that he has messed up and feel scared that will he lose his job and there will be consequences. I have always tried to call the employee in these circumstances and say that you have not done anything wrong, and that you should not be worried about that.” (Interviewee 4)

If mistakes were made, they were seen as opportunities for improvement, and informing employees about their mistakes was handled with sensitivity to ensure that they would not feel apprehensive about communicating in the future. As one interviewee pointed out:

“I always aim for caution because if the situation is handled in the wrong way, and the emphasis is on the mistake and what the employee has done wrong, they might become paralyzed and unwilling to communicate anymore. What we absolutely do not want is for anyone to become afraid of communicating.” (Interviewee 4)



Overall, the business-oriented approach of managing employee communication called for a visionary mindset and plenty of work by the communications department to get started. According to the interviewees, the hard work paid off when employees bought into the idea and started to see communication as a part of their work, which in turn motivated other employees and changed the organizational culture and norms in the long-term.

### **Management processes in different managerial approaches**

The data showed that communication management processes, including increasing awareness and creating a common understanding, creating community, communicating expectations, allocating time for communication, providing tools and content, training, coaching and supporting, providing feedback and rewarding were used differently depending on the managerial approach adopted in each organization. The different processes and their application (derived from open coding) are presented in Figure 3. The processes are divided into two categories: enablers (processes that enable employees' intended communication behavior) and motivators (processes that can increase employees' motivation to communicate) as they affect behavior in different ways, following Herzberg's (1966) dual-factor theory. According to this theory, the maintenance factors as such – called enablers in this model – do not increase performance but, if absent, can decrease employee output. On the other hand, motivators can have a positive effect on behavior and serve to motivate employees to enhance their performance.

Figure 3. The different management processes and their application

Processes	Individual-oriented	Corporate-oriented	Business-oriented	Effect on behavior
Increasing awareness and understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highlighting individual employees in all corporate communication</li> <li>• Inspiring with success stories</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participating in organizational forums to present communication governance model and support provided</li> <li>• Engaging organizational leaders e.g. CEO to set an example</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicating the strategic decision that everyone is a communicator in the organization</li> <li>• Integrating all communication around business objectives</li> <li>• Introducing multilevel framework for engaging employees in organizational communication</li> </ul>	Motivator
Creating community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasizing the uniqueness of the organization and each individual's role in it</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building brand that each employee can be proud of</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasizing everyone's role in strategy realization</li> <li>• Creating fun and a somewhat competitive climate that encourages people to put themselves out there</li> </ul>	Motivator
Communicating Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicating about responsibility to provide insights</li> <li>• Communicating about responsibility to be easily discovered and accessed in online channels</li> <li>• Communicating good work through role models</li> <li>• Respecting individuals' decisions on how they are willing to communicate</li> <li>• Communicating that the organization does not need social media policies as there is trust in individual assessment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicating governance model for employees' communication behavior</li> <li>• Engaging organizational leaders e.g. CEO to set example</li> <li>• Selecting strategic themes and dedicating individual professionals to create content on those selected themes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicating about shared responsibility</li> <li>• Including communication objectives in goal-setting discussion among key spokespeople</li> <li>• Creating fun and a somewhat competitive climate that encourages people to put themselves out there</li> <li>• Encouraging employees to be their authentic selves in social media</li> <li>• Promoting role models</li> </ul>	Motivator
Allocating time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encouraging employees to allocate time for communicating</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allowing key spokespeople to allocate time for communication in timesheets</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allowing employees to allocate time for communication as a standard procedure</li> </ul>	Enabler
Providing tools and training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizing training sessions</li> <li>• Providing technologies and tools for employees' use</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing rules and policies to guide employees' communication</li> <li>• Acquiring and maintaining employee advocacy platforms, which function as internal content hubs for employees (e.g. Smarp)</li> <li>• Training employees to communicate in social media and preparing for crisis situations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizing training for each advocacy level</li> <li>• Using peer-mentoring as part of training</li> <li>• Encouraging employees to learn by doing</li> </ul>	Enabler
Providing content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating some ready-made content for employees to share</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating plenty of ready-made content for employees to share</li> <li>• Using content-sharing tools such as Smarp</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having an inspiring strategy and creating internal stories that inspire for employees' content creation</li> <li>• Creating news about organization successes</li> </ul>	Enabler
Coaching and supporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coaching employees to make a start and improve</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supporting employees content generation (e.g. editing support)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing hands-on support when needed</li> </ul>	Enabler

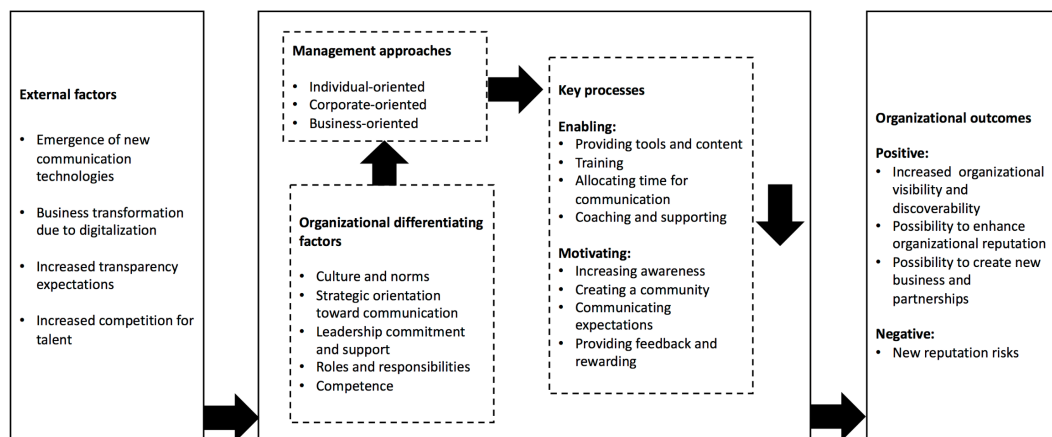
	<p>in their professional communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing hands-on support when needed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing hands-on support when needed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supporting employees when facing problematic situations in social media</li> <li>• Having professional communicators to follow communication and support employees in the most relevant discussion forums</li> </ul>	
<p>Providing feedback and rewarding</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building individuals' self-confidence in communicating professionally with constructive feedback</li> <li>• Recognizing the active communicators</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Following up and giving analyzed data and feedback to active employees</li> <li>• Recognizing active and successful communicators</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognizing active and successful communicators (internal messages, awards, small gifts)</li> <li>• Following up and giving analyzed data and feedback to key advocates</li> <li>• Rewarding employees for their communication activity</li> </ul>	<p>Motivator</p>

### Discussion

This study advances the field of communication management and ECB by empirically proving that organizations manage their employees' work-related communication and that the management processes and practices identified derive from the behavioral management tradition. Perhaps the most significant finding of the study is that in addition to managing content, communication management is transforming into the management of people who communicate. In addition, an important finding is that companies vary based on contextual factors in relation to how they manage their employees' communication. These differentiating factors, namely, culture and norms, strategic orientation toward communication, leadership commitment and support, roles and responsibilities and competence, are aligned with the existing literature on social media management (e.g. Felix et al., 2017). Based on these differentiating factors, the organizations under study applied different patterns of management processes, namely, "individual-," "corporate-" and "business-oriented." The suggested relationship between external factors, organizational

contextual factors, management approaches, key managerial processes and the organizational outcomes of employees' work-related communication is displayed in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Framework of Management of the Communicative Organization (MCO)



### *Key management processes*

Management processes are at the heart of the behavioral management model, and the task of communication management is to design the most appropriate combination of processes for each organization. The processes identified in this study were divided into two main categories – enablers and motivators – in line with Herzberg's (1966) dual-factor theory.

### *Enabling processes*

The first enabling process relates to ensuring that employees can access social media from their workplaces and devices and have appropriate platforms at their disposal such as a blog site to publish their professional content. Organizations can also enable ECB by providing

tools that function as internal content hubs where employees can discover and share content. These types of employee advocacy platforms (e.g. Smarp) were found to be beneficial, particularly in the beginning when employees were learning to use social media for work-related communication. However, some of the organizations pointed out that overreliance on centralized tools might encourage employees to share similar “default” content, rather than tailoring it for their own network and developing their own style and tone in work-related communication. By training employees to use social media and communicate effectively, organizations enable ECB by improving employees’ competence to take on this new communication role. Additionally, these processes can increase employees’ confidence in their own competence and hence their motivation (Gagne and Deci, 2005). By allocating sufficient time for communication (particularly relevant in organizations where employees were required to report their actual working hours, a typical procedure in industries where the customer is invoiced for the working hours, such as the consulting industry), organizations effectively enable ECB in the form of work-related communication activities. Moreover, by offering support in problematic situations, organizations create a feeling of psychological safety in that there is someone with the relevant expertise to hand in the event of challenging situations. Without this type of support, employees might feel insecure and be unwilling to engage in communication activities.

#### *Motivating processes*

The first motivating process relates to increasing awareness of social media communication. All of the companies considered this an important phase in the overall process, not least because it included communication about opportunities, benefits and risks for the individual, the organization and society in general. By increasing the understanding of opportunities and benefits, management can nurture employees’ intrinsic motivation – their interest in the activity itself and hence their feeling of autonomy. By creating a community, organizations

aim to increase employees' identification with and relatedness to the organization, which has been found to affect motivation and communication behavior positively (Van Dick et al., 2008). Communicating expectations, and having leaders exemplify these expectations, increases employees' extrinsic motivation, which is the prototype of controlled motivation, whereby people act with the intention of obtaining a desired consequence or avoiding an undesirable one (Gagne and Deci, 2005). Communication expectations may also enhance the feeling of relatedness, particularly if the person has internalized the expectations. All of the organizations also considered it important to give feedback and acknowledge and reward good work. None of the organizations had any financial rewards in place, but small gifts such as chocolate and movie tickets were given to employees who had excelled. All of the companies used social rewarding and some had organized galas to award prizes to the best employee communicators. Through this type of rewarding, organizations can enhance employees' self-efficacy, as well as both their intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Gagne and Deci, 2005).

When applied in practice, these processes not only benefitted the employees as active communicators but also the organizations insomuch as they cultivated more active communicators among their human resources. The processes also created new knowledge; for example, allocating specific time for communication made both the communication and the time allocated to it visible to employer and employee alike.

At the same time, the processes applied transformed the work of communication professionals in organizations as managing communications was extended to managing communicators – the most important change being that communication professionals are increasingly applying behavioral management in their daily operations. Additionally, similar to a recent paper by Leonardi and Vaast (2017), the present study found that the decisions to take social media and related tools into use were made primarily in the communications

department. This indicates that communication teams are required to have the latest knowledge and understanding about the communication technologies available to be able to support employees in their communicative role.

### **Theoretical implications**

Based on the findings, this article proposes a new field for the communication management literature, namely, MCO, which builds on behavior management knowledge and focuses on managing employee communicators in MOCs that are dependent on employee-generated content. The article suggests that, in addition to managing content, communication management should manage the people who communicate.

Figure 5 demonstrates the different management frameworks and their locus and compares the management paradigms applied in the corporate communication and public relations literature. In the table, MCO is conceptualized as a management framework to design organizational conditions that enable and motivate organizational members to communicate about their work, profession and organization. It introduces a novel area for academic discussion on how communication management affects ECB and attitudes, such as motivation. As Miles and Mangold (2014, p. 406) have posited, “managing employees’ voice in the social media era begins with ensuring that an appropriate organizational context is provided.”

This paper provides empirical evidence that communication management includes the ECB aspect and promotes what Eisenberg (1984) calls “unified diversity” (p. 230) – the ability for differences to coexist within the unity of the organization. With this conceptualization, the paper addresses the criticism expressed by Christensen and Cornelissen (2011) that contemporary management ignores the organizational and behavioral complexities of human communication.

Figure 5. The different management frameworks, paradigms and their locus

Discipline	Communication management framework	Applied management paradigms	Locus of management	Definitions
Public Relations	Public Relations	Excellence approach	Relationships between organization and its publics	“Public relations is a mechanism by which organizations and publics interact in a pluralistic system <i>to manage their interdependence and conflict</i> ” (Grunig, 1992, p. 9)
		Strategic management	Organizational decisions and communication programs	“It is important to view public relations as a strategic management function rather than as a purely interpretative function by explaining its role in strategic management and organizational governance.” (Kim, Hung-Baesecke, Yang, Grunig, 2013, p. 202)
		Behavioral management	Publics	“To understand the formation and evolution of reputation, it is necessary to understand the causes, processes, and consequences of communicative behaviors of active publics or highly involved behavioral relationship holders.” (Kim, Hung-Baesecke, Yang, Grunig, 2013, p. 207)
	Communicative Organization	Behavioral management	Communicators (Individual members of organizations)	Management framework to design organizational conditions that enable and motivate organizational members to communicate about their work, profession and organization.
Corporate Communication	Corporate Communication	Strategic management	Corporate communication (communication and symbols)	Corporate communication being an instrument of management by means of which all consciously used forms of internal and external communication are “harmonized” as effectively and efficiently as possible, so as to create a favourable basis for relationships with groups upon which the company is dependent (van Riel, 1995, p. 26). The vision of contemporary corporate communication, in other words, is <i>to manage all communications under one banner</i> (Christensen and Cornelissen 2011, p. 386).



**Limitations and future research directions**

As with every research project, this study has its limitations. First, the study was conducted among knowledge-intensive companies that are dependent on their employees' expertise. The decision to focus on such companies can be justified by arguing that as prior research focusing on managing employee communication is rare, the most informative sample could be obtained by selecting a field in which employees' expertise and corresponding communication would be a critical success factor and in which informants would be expected to have experience in managing employees' communication. Luckily this was the case, and the managerial approaches uncovered were even more varied than expected. Second, the study was conducted in Finland only and all of the interviewees were responsible for national communication programs, although some of the organizations were part of international companies. It would therefore be interesting to know how the proposed framework could be applied to other cultural contexts.

**Practical implications and conclusions**

This study provides insights into communication management and employees' work-related communication in knowledge-intensive companies. First of all, the article identifies the organizational differentiating factors that affect the way management is conducted in each organization. To this end, the article pinpoints three different management approaches, namely, individual-oriented approach, which is used in organizations with flat hierarchies, autonomy and shared leadership; corporate-oriented approach, which is used in organizations that have a hierarchical structure and which are willing to exert some level of control over employees' communication and business-oriented approach, which is used in companies that have made a strategic decision to engage employees in using social media at work to realize

the full potential of the digital communication technologies available. In addition, the article describes management processes designed to enable and motivate employees' work-related communication and thus provides a good starting point for companies willing to develop their managerial work in this area.

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