Guest editorial: Digitalization of Corporate Communications: a multi-stakeholder approach

Forced digitization and organizational changes

The forced confinement caused by the COVID-19 health crisis has required companies to change their production dynamics, digitalizing workplaces, abandoning physical spaces and infrastructures, focusing on promoting remote work, as well as mechanics and dynamics of organizational communication exchanges with their different stakeholders through digital channels, in order to maintain their production processes and improve efficiency in this new and changing scenario.

However, given the situation's urgency, the digitalization process has not been gradual. From one day to the next, organizations have had to opt for these mechanisms to give continuity to their productive activities and business plans (Brockhaus *et al.*, 2023). This has meant, among other things, that internal stakeholders of the organizations have had to bear, in many cases, labor costs while getting used to the dynamics of remote work and sharing physical space with family members.

Other collateral phenomena, such as fatigue and burnout due to excessive video conferencing, extended working hours, information and e-mail overload, and stress due to confinement itself, are some of the effects of this «new» and changing ecosystem (Ravina-Ripoll *et al.*, 2021, 2022, 2023).

Furthermore, this digitization process, which in many cases was a product of improvisation, highlighted the need for organizations to have continuing education plans and programs in place to deal with the changing platforms and interfaces (Romero-Rodríguez *et al.*, 2020) because within the «skill economy», formal training – college, universities . . . – are excellent spaces for teaching enduring abilities, such as critical thinking and problem solving, but what tends to be more challenging for them is to understand and keep up with the rapidly changing skills that companies are looking for in entry-level jobs (Beltrán Hernández de Galindo *et al.*, 2019).

Relationships with external stakeholders have also undergone significant changes as conventional media and means are losing relevance in the emergence of digital narratives that achieve greater visibility and engagement (Borau-Boira *et al.*, 2023; Castillo-Abdul *et al.*, 2022b; Li *et al.*, 2022). It is not in vain that social networks such as Instagram, YouTube and Tik Tok, have become channels of enriched commercial communication, spaces for emotional bonding, attention to external audiences and customer relationship management channels (Castillo-Abdul *et al.*, 2022a; Núñez-Barriopedro *et al.*, 2023).

Also, although prior to the pandemic, new actors were already appearing in the digital ecosystem, the inevitable mediamorphosis led to a proliferation of influencers and micro-influencers, from the conventional content creators, YouTubers and streamers – and their proliferation in paid channels such as Twitch or Patreon – to the newest and most popular podcasts (Leoz-Aizpuru and Pedrero-Esteban, 2022), have meant a new challenge for

brands and organizations, in a scenario increasingly adapted to *a la carte* and *prêt-à-porter* consumption, and more difficult to generalize in terms of micro-segmented audiences (Romero-Rodríguez *et al.*, 2022).

Digitization and international academic interest

The digitization of workplaces also has been gaining particular relevance in the scientific community, even before the COVID-19 health crisis. With a simple search in the Web of Science (WoS) for the terms "Digitalization" AND (boolean) " AND (boolean) "Work" by subject (category), a total of 3,328 total results emerge. Of these results, 1,232 are from computer science, 1,047 are from business economics, 1,027 from engineering, 554 from education and educational research, 272 from communication, 249 from science technology, 240 from environmental science and 234 from psychology.

However, when the bibliometric results are analyzed by year, it can be seen how the topic of labor digitalization and its effects began to take on – even before confinement – an important role in the last five years (see Figure 1).

As shown in Figure 1, the trend of publications and citations per year since 2017 is exponential, with a slight increase since 2019. Such is the current interest of the international scientific community in the digitization of work that only halfway through 2022, 4,704 citations to papers with the reported keywords have already been accumulated. Almost as important is that of the accumulated 3,328 emerging papers in the five years (2017–2021), 14,104 citations have been accumulated, giving an average per item of 4.24.

What the future holds

Nowadays, talking about the difference between the offline and the digital world would be meaningless since we have been adapting to the conquest of ICTs in our daily work. Faced with this, organizations seek to adapt their internal work mechanisms to improve efficiency, reduce costs and allow remote work, with all the advantages and inconveniences that this can mean in terms of work–life balance, respect for working hours, information oversaturation, social isolation and the paradigm shift from supervision to the fulfillment of goals and objectives.
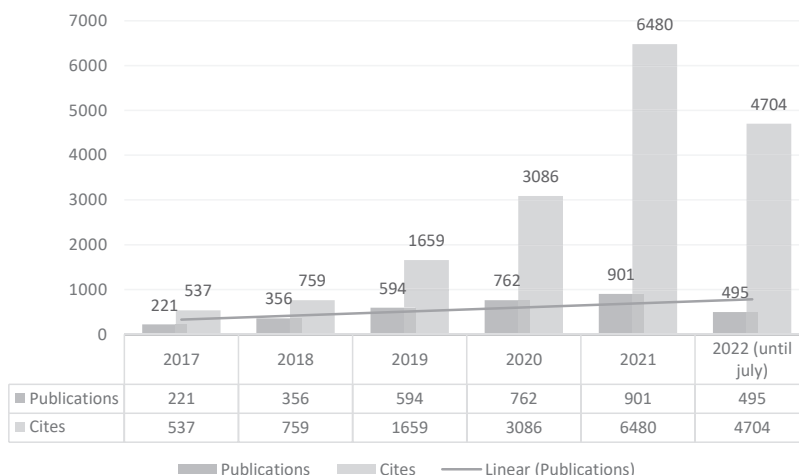

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022 (until july)
Publications	221	356	594	762	901	495
Cites	537	759	1659	3086	6480	4704

Publications　　Cites　　Linear (Publications)

Figure 1.
Publications and research impacts on workplace digitization in the Web of Science (WoS) (2017–July 2022)

Nevertheless, these changes are not being generated at the same speed throughout society, as there are still digital, economic, generational, age and geographic gaps that do not allow us all to adapt in the same way and at the same speed to digitization. For example, in Spain, many banking institutions have opted to close branches in towns and cities, focusing more on technological infrastructure, biometric-based security and online banking that allows almost any transaction to be made from a cell phone. However, the elderly and people in rural areas who do not have sufficient digital skills – and in some cases, do not even have devices – are left without banking services because when the branch in their town or city closes, the nearest bank office may be several kilometers away.

Although digitalization is indeed unstoppable and non-negotiable, it is no less certain that organizations must attend to the adverse effects that these changes are causing both in their members and in their external stakeholders, because while some are allowed to experiment with the metaverse from Corporate Communications, their stakeholders may not even know or be unable to connect to the Internet. This undoubtedly shows that there is a two-speed digitalization in which the organization must ensure that no one is left behind.

The challenge is even more significant in internal communication because if the trend of remote work and teleworking increases, maintaining cohesion in a team that does not share spaces for relaxation and relational maintenance, with which it only interacts through e-mails, intranet messages and videoconferences on work-related issues, can eventually cause problems of organizational co-existence and, ultimately, negatively affect the work environment.

These paradigmatic changes must, of course, be accompanied by specific training on interfaces and platforms, but also by organizational policies that promote work–life balance and the right to disconnection and privacy since an erroneous view that may be gaining strength is that with remote work schedules are flexible and that the availability of the members of the organization must be absolute, including days and hours of rest.

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