

Let's Break It Down: A Qualitative Analysis of the Role of Communication Pauses in the Internal Corporate Communication of large German Companies

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Imprint

Sound or Silence? Current Developments in Organizational
Communication

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Let's Break It Down

A Qualitative Analysis of the Role of Communication Pauses in the Internal Corporate Communication of large German Companies

Emily Korsch, Valentin Leißner, Annika Müller, Sophie Sieghardt, Elena
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Abstract

The rising flood of emails, messages and meetings in the internal communication of large German companies is growing steadily. The growing number of daily messages as well as their frequency are causing employees to feel stressed. As a result, their productivity and job satisfaction decrease. This paper analyzes the role strategic communication pauses play in the internal corporate communication of large German companies. Using a qualitative research framework, based on semi-structured guided interviews with communication managers ($n = 9$), insights are gained into the use of communication pauses and reasons for implementing them in companies. The results show that the main reasons are the growing number of communication channels and the increasing quantity of communicated information. Both developments have been further driven by the digital transformation in particular. Furthermore, it is shown that communication pauses are defined and implemented very differently in companies, which is due to various factors, such as digital transformation, corporate culture and internal communication tools. Within the framework of the study, the term 'communication pause' is successfully defined for the first time. In addition, practical recommendations for the implementation of communication pauses in the internal communication of companies are provided.

Keywords: communication pause, internal communication, corporate communication, communication overload, digital transformation

Introduction

Under the term ‘calendar purge’, Shopify founder and CEO Tobi Lütke rang in the year 2023. For the company, this meant: All recurring meetings with more than two people will be permanently canceled, there will be no meetings on Wednesdays and all other meetings will be squeezed into a fixed time slot (Hofmann, 2023). "The best thing founders can do is subtract" is the rationale behind the measures that are largely intended to increase Shopify's efficiency (Hofmann, 2023). Other companies, such as SAP SE, who already introduced a ‘Focus Friday’ in 2022 with the aim of reducing stress and "finally working uninterrupted for two or three hours” (Martin-Jung, 2022), also show a similar tendency. In some countries, these developments are supported by the introduction of the ‘Right to Disconnect’, which has already been in force in France since 2017. The focus here primarily lies on the right of every employee to be unavailable after the end of working hours, as explained in a working report of the European Parliament (European Parliament, 2020). It seems that more and more companies are trying to increase their efficiency and reduce stress through concentrated internal communication. The fact that the rising flood of emails, messages and meetings in the internal communication of companies has been growing rapidly for years - additionally pushed by the digital transformation - has been documented in numerous scientific papers (see Barber & Santuzzi, 2015; Rose, 2014). At the same time, this creates a feeling of not being able to keep up among employees (McCurtry, 2014, p. 31). In addition, they have to filter out the relevant information for them from a large pool of information (Marchionini, 2010, p. 1), and at the same time there is pressure to instantly respond to all messages (Barber & Santuzzi, 2015, p. 173).

All of this leads to employees experiencing stress (Malhotra et al., 1982, p. 27), reduced productivity, and increased job dissatisfaction (Dean & Webb, 2011, p. 4). Although the introduction of communicative relief measures, such as communication pauses, is becoming abundantly clear, the introduction and implementation of them is currently still an exception

rather than an observable action by companies. The same applies to the scientific treatment of the topic. Up to now, there is no research on what communication pauses are, what measures they currently comprise or for what reasons and with what consequences they are used. Therefore, this paper addresses the following research-guiding question:

RQ: What role do strategic communication pauses play in the internal communication of large German companies?

The aim is not only to answer this question, but also to define the term for the first time and to assemble recommendations for further implementation of the measures through supporting insights into practice. The present paper is structured as follows:

First, the term *communication pause* and its components will closely be analyzed. Consequently, the term *pause* and a first definition are examined. This is followed by an explanation of the concept of digital transformation, as this area will be focused on in the research process. The theoretical groundwork is completed by an examination of the effects of digital transformation on corporate communication. This section is followed by the methodological procedure, in which the chosen methodology of semi-structured guided interviews is explained. Afterwards, the transcription and analysis procedures are illustrated. Subsequently, the results are systematically presented, interpreted and discussed in terms of the overarching research question. The study is concluded with a view on the limitations of the procedure as well as an outlook in the direction of future scientific and practical implications.

Theoretical Background

This paper examines the current state of research on communication pauses, focusing on the definition of key terms and looking at possible further developments that could be an influencing factor on the use of communication pauses, such as digital transformation. Taking into account relevant journals and literature, it is noticeable that there has neither been any scientific consideration of the topic of communication

pauses, nor has it been defined. For this reason, one goal of this study is to develop a definition. First, an initial working definition of communication pauses will be formulated independently by looking at the existing theoretical basis. However, this definition will be adjusted during the course of this work by taking into account the statements of the communication experts from the interviews.

Since the term ‘communication’ has already been widely researched and applied in everyday life and scientific contexts, this paper will not provide a definition of this term. Likewise, an understanding of the concepts of internal and strategic corporate communications is assumed. Of greater importance is a look at the term ‘pause’ and its definition: Similarly to the term ‘communication’, ‘pause’ is defined differently in various disciplines and from various perspectives. Particularly in psychology, the term finds special attention: For example, Buchholz (2018) and Bruneau (1973) studied the effect of pauses in conversations. The latter refers to pause-like interruptions, called interactive silences, in dialogues, conversations, discussions and debates that relate to affective, interpersonal relationships or serve to solve problems. Natural science disciplines also study pauses. These include the work of Kohashi et al. (2021), who studied communication through electrical signals from fish. They discovered that such pauses in electrical communication have a facilitating effect on behavioural responses from the receiver when signals are resumed (p. 3149). However, when comparing all previous definitions of pauses, it becomes apparent that the perspectives from the humanities and social sciences are generally outdated, and that there is a lack of cross-disciplinary definitions. For this reason, this paper relies on the definition of the Oxford English Dictionary, which defines ‘pause’ as follows: "To stop talking or doing something for a short time before continuing" (Oxford English Dictionary editorial office, n.d.). Combining the theoretical considerations, a first working definition of communication pauses is derived: *communication pauses are understood as the intentional interruption of a communication process.*

One goal of this paper is to verify and adapt this definition with the opinions of communication experts from the executive level of large German companies. Thus, the first research question (RQ1) can be derived:

RQ1: How are communication pauses defined and implemented in the organization?

The question focuses on the definition and implementation of communication pauses in the internal corporate communication. Another important theoretical perspective are the reasons for the emergence of communication pauses. It has been observed that since the spread of the digital transformation, entire work environments, processes and business strategies have changed due to the overload of information (Fitzgerald et al., 2014, p. 2; Matt et al., 2015, p. 339). Mergel et al. (2019) describe digital transformation as a "term adopted from the private sector, most often associated with the need to use new technologies to remain competitive in the Internet age" (p. 2). Other researchers, such as Fitzgerald et al. (2014), define the term as "the use of new digital technologies (e.g., social media, mobile, analytics or embedded devices) to enable significant business improvements (such as improving customer experience, streamlining operations or creating new business models)" (p. 2).

Digital transformation has had a significant impact on the workplace, blurring physical boundaries and increasing the diversity of information (Kéfer, 2021), and in this way leading to an information overload (Schick et al., 1990, p. 199). This overload is associated with an inability to process large volumes of messages (Marchionini, 2010, p. 1), a lack of perspective (Schick et al., 1990, p. 212), cognitive stress (Malhotra et al., 1982, p. 27) and an increased tolerance for error (Sparrow, 1999, p. 144). Thus, previous literature shows that digital transformation not only involves new technologies, but also the consideration of employee factors, changes in corporate strategy, structure and processes (Kane et al. 2015, p. 14-16). Digital transformation is an ongoing process, but one that has significantly

been accelerated since 2020, primarily due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Trennery et al., 2021, p. 1). Not only the health sector but also the business sector has faced challenges. The way of working and operating as an organization has fundamentally changed (Irawanto et al., 2021, p. 1). Increasing digitalization and globalization have contributed to this development (Jämsen et al., 2022, p. 2). One of the most significant changes was an increase of the work setup 'home office', which was voluntary at first in April 2020 and then became mandatory in Germany starting in January 2021 (German Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2021). "Working in a home office [...] refers to a flexible and location-independent form of work" (Weber et al., 2022, p. 3). Beno (2021) summarizes that the factors of increased productivity, efficiency, flexibility and job satisfaction lead to an improved work-life balance and can be attributed to working in a home office (p. 16). The benefits of increased efficiency and constant accessibility are not only limited to employees and managers. Above all, the high level of availability significantly accelerates the communication process and thus ensures a higher overall pace of work. If employees are always available, new work orders can be issued non-stop. The constant barrage of emails, messages and telephone calls can thus leave workers feeling overwhelmed, exhausted and powerless. The COVID-19 pandemic also highlighted the fact that working from home can be the cause of the constant merging of work and private life. People who work under these conditions often find it difficult to structure their workday and define clear breaks and free time. The work-life balance is thus put under enormous pressure. Also, the growing 'always-on' culture increases the pressure on employees to be available at all times and to respond to emails, phone calls and intranet messages as quickly as possible. Employees are finding it increasingly difficult to truly disconnect and utilize their free time for rejuvenation. In addition, the number of overtime hours is increasing, which further increases stress levels (Irawanto et al., 2021, p. 2). Extended periods of uninterrupted work caused by constant accessibility can lead to long-term

health problems for workers. Symptoms such as stress can result in mental illnesses, like burnout, over time (Lockwood, 2003, p. 6).

A turnaround in internal corporate communication appears necessary to address the persistent communicative burden caused by information overload. Therefore the two research questions:

RQ2: To what extent has the importance of communication pauses changed as a result of digital transformation in the workplace?

RQ3: What challenges and potentials do communication pauses offer as a strategy for internal corporate communication?

can be derived. They aim to explore the influence of digital transformation on the introduction of communication pauses and to examine the challenges as well as potentials of communication pauses as a strategy for internal corporate communication.

Method

Because of the explorative design of the study, qualitative in-depth interviews were utilized. This method was considered particularly suitable since the phenomenon of communication pauses has largely been neglected in empirical studies. Also, because internal communication practices within organizations are rarely made public, it was necessary to engage practitioners who possess decision-making authority regarding the internal communication within companies and could therefore provide insights into potential forms of communication pauses in this context. To gain an understanding of communication pauses and their implementation in the internal communication of large German companies, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 12 practitioners holding middle or higher management positions in the internal communication departments. The interviews were held from December 2022 to March 2023. The recruitment only concerned companies that already have experience with communication pauses. However, it was discovered that three out of the twelve companies did not actually employ any form of communication

pauses in their internal communication, and thus could not be considered for the study (marked grey in table 1 ‘Overview Interviewees’). The selection process for suitable participants involved sending standardized cover letters via email, LinkedIn or the respective corporate websites of companies that met the predefined criteria. These criteria encompassed companies from all sectors headquartered in Germany with over 250 employees. Typically, these companies have hierarchically structured communication departments, carry out strategic internal communications measures and possess the necessary resources to consider and implement communication pauses.

In Germany, there are approximately 12,000 companies meeting these criteria (Oppermann, 2019). Of these companies, only those that implement communication pauses in their internal communication are of interest for the study. The exact number of these, however, is unknown so far. Since the study aims to examine the significance of communication pauses, their development and use within a company as well as the opportunities and risks in the present and future, it was crucial to involve communicators within departments who are responsible for implementing and advancing communication pauses. These experts had to have the necessary knowledge to answer the questions posed in the interview, the practical experience within the organizational structures of their company as well as the required expertise to critically evaluate communication pauses in a communicative context.

Therefore, special attention was given to practitioners' job titles, with a particular interest in communication officers with HR responsibilities. As indicated in Table 1 ‘Overview Interviewees’, the respondents held positions such as Internal Communications Manager, Director Internal Communication, Director Corporate Affairs, Employee Communication Specialist, PR Manager, Communications and Change Manager, Senior Manager Corporate Communications & PR, Senior PR Specialist as well as Global Corporate Affairs. All interviewees work in large German companies in the following industries: Banking, Real Estate, Pet Food,

Technology, Logistics, Insurance, Sporting Goods, Automotive and Software. All interviews were conducted via Zoom.

Table 1
Overview Interviewees

Inter- viewee	Position	Company	Industry
1	Internal Communications Manager	DKB AG	Banking
2	Director Internal Communication	Vonovia SE	Real Estate
3	Director Corporate Affairs	Mars Pet Nutrition	Pet Food
4	Employee Communications Specialist	Siemens AG	Technology
5	Senior Advisor	Deutsche Telekom AG	Telecom- munications
6	Senior Manager Internal Communications & Digital Publishing Corporate Communications	Hermes Germany GmbH	Logistics
7	Communications & Change Manager	HDI Group	Insurance
8	Head of Communications	Lufthansa Group	Aviation
9	Head of Internal Communications & Director Internal Communications	Volkswagen AG	Automotive
10	Senior Manager Corporate Communications & PR	Puma SE	Sporting Goods
11	Senior PR Specialist	BMW Group	Automotive
12	Global Corporate Affairs	SAP SE	Software

For all the interviews, the researchers used a semi-structured interview guide based on a category system to foster the dialogues in the direction of the study's objectives (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The guide consists of three sections corresponding to the three research questions. The first section focuses on exploring the internal communication practices of the interviewee's company, including measures already in place to reduce communication overload among employees. In addition, the interviewees were asked to discuss a possible definition of 'communication pause'. The subsequent section examined the impact of digital transformation in the workplace on communication pauses and asked about the reasons behind the establishment of communication pauses within the company. The third section of the guide, aligned with research question three, explores the opportunities and risks associated with the implementation of communication pauses.

The interviews were transcribed using the transcription software *Trint*, reviewed individually, and then analyzed again within the research group to compare narratives across all transcripts. With the help of MAXQDA, the appropriate statements from the transcripts were then assigned to the respective categories. After several rounds of coding and analyzing the data according to the categories for each research question, the researchers collectively identified the most significant and recurring themes for the research investigations, as outlined in the findings. This process of analyst triangulation aimed to mitigate potential individual biases and eliminated blind spots, thereby enhancing the reliability and validity of the analyses and findings (Patton, 1990).

Findings

The final sample of nine interviews was coded and classified into eight categories of an inductively augmented category system. Five categories were derived directly from the three research questions. Another three categories were derived from the interviews and the interview guide. An overview can be found in table 2 'Overview of all categories'.

Table 2*Overview of all categories*

Research Question	Top Category
RQ 1	Definition of communication pauses + Implementation of communication pauses
RQ 2	The meaning of communication pauses changing through digital transformation.
RQ 3	Challenges of communication pauses as an Internal corporate communication strategy + Potentials of communication pauses as a strategy of internal corporate communication
Other	Reasons for communication pauses + Structure of internal corporate communication + Digital transformation in the workplace

Classified according to these eight categories, the key findings of the study are presented below.

Reasons for Communication Pauses

Before discussing the definition and implementation of communication pauses, it is important to consider why the need for communicative relief measures has evolved in companies. This serves as a fundamental basis for evaluating the implementation of such pauses. Understanding the specific needs within a company helps to understand the diverse nature of the implementation of communication pauses and the potential variations in the definitions of the term. In summary, it can be stated that employee surveys and employee feedback in particular have provided initial clues for addressing communication pauses. Particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic and the spread of telecommuting, not only did the number of channels increase, but also the frequency of how often communication

took place through those channels. Noteworthy in this context is the overarching description of "too much", "so much" or "very much" in relation to communication streams and channels. This persistent and uncontrolled overflow of channels and information created a desire for "more structure [...], a clearer understanding and use of individual channels, less information overload, and above all, more prioritization and clustering in terms of what is really relevant to individual employee groups" (Mars Pet Nutrition).

Also signaled was the need for "a reduction and better clarity" (DKB AG). Consequently, the seamless communication among employees and the absence of interruptions caused by constantly being online in the digital realm have resulted in excessive demands, overload and disorientation. As a result, the introduction of communication pauses has become necessary in many cases.

Structure of Internal Corporate Communication

In order to understand the individual implementation of communication pauses within a company, an examination was conducted on communication flows, channels and the individuals responsible within the surveyed companies. The top category 'internal corporate communication' has been divided into three subcategories: Tools, Responsible Parties as well as Wishes and Potentials for Internal Communication. The most frequently mentioned internal tools and channels among the interviewees were emails, the intranet and applications of the Office 365 package. The responsibility for internal communication differs within the interviewed companies. Teams often work in separate communication departments and are responsible for editing and disseminating information to employees and maintaining communication channels. Other structural approaches such as the deployment of communication officers in the respective departments or communications as a subsection of the corporate affairs department were also identified. Some companies also worked with external agencies that provide support in the creation of content. Referring to internal corporate

communication, one interviewee further stated that "every employee [...] can share something at any time from any location" (Hermes Germany GmbH).

The subcategory 'Wishes/Potentials' captured the interviewees' desires concerning their internal communication structures, as well as the potentials that could facilitate the introduction of communication pauses. One notable factor that emerged was the role of managers as role models. Their behavior sets an example and carries significant importance. Additionally, there is a recognized need for communication leaders to firmly embed communicative changes within the company, such as planning and implementing communication pauses in a deliberate manner. Merely allowing measures to occur sporadically and self-determined is deemed insufficient. One interviewee was convinced that "communication as a whole in the company must develop towards working in a much more integrated way" (Hermes Germany GmbH). One of the interviewees recognized the responsibility for advancing personalized information in internal communication and expressed a desire to enhance opportunities within the intranet. This includes the aspiration to personalize the individual start page more extensively, allowing for a tailored user experience.

The balance between delivering company-relevant and identity-building information to employees was also considered important, while also allowing for autonomous selection of relevant messages. In particular, the authors of messages on internal platforms should first think about for whom the message is relevant before publishing it, thereby assigning responsibility to community managers.

Definition of Communication Pauses

During the study implementation, it became clear that there is still no unified definition and implementation of the communication pause phenomenon. Thus, this paper aims to provide the first ever definition of communication pauses in a corporate context, based on the findings of the

interviews. For this purpose, an initial definition was first approached theoretically at the beginning of this paper. Following the interviews, it became evident that certain companies generally agreed with the initial working definition of communication pauses as an intended interruption of a communication process. Other interview partners enriched it with further aspects. These included the communication pause as a deliberate and strategic process as well as support for employees in their daily work. This top-down approach is extended by bottom-up offers to support employees in taking breaks and resting in a self-determined manner. A general overview can be found in Table 3 ‘Overview statements on the definition of communication pauses’.

Table 3

Overview statements on the definition of communication pauses

Definition for communication pauses	Interviewee
We actually also call it a content freeze.	BMW Group
Possibility that a specific topic can simply shine because everything else stands still.	BMW Group
Is something that affects everyone for me.	DKB AG
I can work for myself and am not in communication with my colleagues.	HDI Group
Consciously accompanied and moderated processes in communication, resulting in interruptions in the communication flow.	Hermes Germany GmbH
Actually there are no communication pauses at all.	Hermes Germany GmbH
Strategic tool to make corporate communication more effective.	Mars Pet Nutrition
Period or measure that results in the work process being suspended.	Puma SE
We empower our employees to allocate their time freely.	SAP SE
Results from the nature of the thing. For example, if you don't send anything out in the summer months.	Siemens AG
Helping employees take their own breaks.	Siemens AG

Based on the findings from the interviews, the first proposal of the definition can be concretized as follows:

The term 'communication pause' is understood as an umbrella term for all deliberate measures aimed at temporarily relieving employees' communicative burden. These measures are controlled both top-down and bottom-up in the hierarchy of companies.

Implementation of Communication Pauses

The category 'Implementation of communication pauses' names different practical application possibilities for the implementation of communicative pauses in the company. A total of 19 subcategories were inductively derived from the interviews. Most companies rely on measures such as the bundling of information in order to make it consumable and to avoid a flood of information. Time limits for meetings or meetings not taking place at all, for example, on days when there are no meetings, are mentioned remarkably frequently. Several interviewees also said that they have fixed release times for intranet messages, emails or news. This is particularly useful for balancing.

Selecting the communication channel represents another way of implementing communicative breaks. Other ways of implementing communication pauses include training managers, focusing on main messages or not having fixed response times. Seven of the interviewees used measures such as clustering information in order to "make information as consumable as possible" (Siemens AG). Topics and news on the intranet as well as the sending of emails were mentioned here. The reasons given for this measure are the excessive demands due to a permanent flow of information and the risks of information overload.

In contrast to the previously presented measures, which can all be described as planned and strategic, other measures have emerged that relate to the individual and self-determined actions of employees. These include the view that each employee is responsible for their own breaks. At the same time, companies support their employees in this regard by

offering health services or access to psychologists for instance. For example, through "a health team that covers everything from work-life balance, to sitting properly, burnout, the whole spectrum. We have a wide range of measures to support our employees to be well" (SAP SE). Another example is a news feed compiled by employees, which adds to the supportive initiatives.

Digital Transformation in the Workplace

The category 'Digital transformation in the workplace' centers around aspects that allow conclusions to be drawn about the changes occurring in the interviewees' respective companies as a result of the ongoing digital transformation. What is notable within the described category is the frequency with which the COVID-19 pandemic was mentioned as a catalyst for digital communication. Nearly half of the interviewees said the pandemic had spurred the development or evolution of digital tools and processes in the company related to corporate communications.

"And the main focus [and especially now] also during the pandemic period was the introduction of a new internal content and collaboration hub. So basically an intranet. But I always refer to it as a content and collaboration hub, because it no longer has much to do with this intranet as a preliminary stage, but is actually a new evolutionary stage towards a digital workplace where everything is really integrated" (Hermes Germany GmbH).

Overall, a trend towards more digital communication in the workplace was observed among the surveyed companies. This trend is accompanied by enhanced flexibility and speed in communication. However, it also entails a reduction in face-to-face interaction between employees.

The Influence of Digital Transformation

In order to be able to make statements about the connection between digital transformation and communication pauses, sections were also marked in the transcripts where indications of the influence of digital transformation on the implementation of communication pauses could be

identified. In general, the impact of digital transformation on the implementation of communication pauses can be viewed from two perspectives: On the one hand, the new opportunities and advantages brought by certain digital applications, such as digital meetings, were recognized and praised. On the other hand, the effects such as increased speed and flexibility but also more stress and the need for pauses are also perceived. Various opinions have emerged on this matter.

"For one thing, we also keep hearing that there are just too many channels or too many options" (Siemens AG).

Based on the findings from the interviews, it can be concluded that the significance of communication pauses has evolved due to the digital transformation of the working world. The need for measures to alleviate the communication burden on employees has intensified as a result of the shift towards digital channels for communication activities. In addition, the volume of communication has intensified due to new channels and formats, which in turn has led to more stress and excessive demands on employees.

Potentials of Communication Pauses

The category 'Potentials of communication pauses' captures the various benefits that interviewees see in communication pauses and their implementation. Communication pauses can assist in alleviating the workload of communication departments and enhance the overall effectiveness of corporate communication. Continuous messaging can overwhelm communication professionals and the reduction in information flow ensures that pertinent messages are not overshadowed by numerous, less relevant messages.

Furthermore, a major future advance through the introduction of communication pauses is seen in the independent setting of priorities and the rethinking of meeting culture. Not every meeting is of equal relevance and the introduction of such communicative relief measures can help to eliminate particularly inefficient, rather routine arrangements to gain a

new focus. It is also noticeable that the implementation of communication pauses is basically seen as a competitive advantage in the employee market, "because a company that does not offer these breaks will sooner or later, I believe, stagnate in employee satisfaction" (Vonovia SE). In addition, employee satisfaction increased shortly after they were introduced to companies.

Challenges of Communication Pauses

The category 'Challenges of communication pauses' brought together all statements that expressed concerns, challenges, difficulties and problems regarding the implementation of communication pauses. What is remarkable here is the diversity of challenges mentioned in the interviews. In summary, three major challenges related to communication pauses can be identified: Firstly, the overall global situation, particularly during crisis scenarios, necessitates communication within and on behalf of the company. Secondly, the workplace has a considerable influence on the implementation of communication pauses. Distinctions must be made between in-office work and remote work, as both face their own set of challenges. In the office, both formal and informal exchanges occur among employees, leading to uncontrolled information flows. Above all, the blurring of boundaries between personal and professional communication is a significant risk, which may result in breaks being used for private conversations rather than for communicative relief. In addition, rigid corporate cultures are a particular obstacle to the implementation of communication pauses, as they require a complete re-evaluation of standardized processes and structures.

In addition to these most frequently mentioned challenges, a wide range of other obstacles to the implementation of communication pauses could be identified. These include the industry structure in which the company operates, the feedback culture within a company, the personal resilience of employees and the lack of support from management: "If you are a board member, you have consciously taken this position that you are just

always available" (SAP SE). More challenges can be found in Table 4 'Overview of all challenges'.

Table 4

Overview challenges for communication pauses

Challenges for communication pauses	Interviewee
So many different job profiles that you can't lump them all together.	DKB AG
Everything that external influences are with regard to digitalization, naturally also have a major influence.	DKB AG
Then they don't get it because they don't claim it.	DKB AG
There are always issues that take priority because they need to be solved.	HDI AG
For this to happen, everyone must first be trained to understand.	HDI AG
It can be endangered by the fact that perhaps management changes and is no longer behind it.	HDI AG
At our company, umpteen channels have been added.	Hermes Germany GmbH
That there is not somehow an intention of control behind.	Hermes Germany GmbH
People have to get used to it first and you have to move people from the mindset.	Mars Pet Nutrition
There was no clear channel strategy and these channels did not interlocked in such a way that they functioned in an optimized way.	Mars Pet Nutrition
Push meetings to another time, where a little meeting congestion might build up.	Puma SE

Especially in internal communication, you also have to have a certain visibility.	Puma SE
If you are a board member, you have consciously taken on this position. that you are always available.	SAP SE
It is then often somehow lacking in self-discipline.	Siemens AG
This feeling that they are missing out.	Siemens AG
Private and professional become even more blurred.	Vonovia SE
This also has a lot to do with a cultural change in the company.	Vonovia SE

Finally, it should be noted that not all respondents can report specific changes since the introduction of communication pauses, as further surveys and research are needed to be able to measure clear effects. This suggests that companies should carefully consider whether the potential outweighs the current challenges before introducing communication pauses. Nevertheless, there are also ways to overcome these challenges and reap the benefits of communication pauses within the company. Open and clear communication, targeted employee training and clear management support can help ensure that the introduction of communication pauses is successful and sustainable.

Recommendations for Practical Implementation

Since the topic of communication pauses in internal corporate communication was approached exploratively for the first time, the results do not allow for representative statements about the importance of communication pauses for a multitude of companies in general. Nonetheless, the qualitative results from the interviews with experts have already revealed challenges and opportunities in the implementation of communication pauses, which allow initial assumptions to be made about

recommendations regarding practical implementation for internal corporate communications.

Clear Strategy:

A look at the results of the present study shows that communication pauses are often not used consciously, but rather unconsciously. This kind of arbitrary implementation and the lack of strategic planning behind it jeopardize the optimal implementation of breaks in everyday work and can be the cause of further barriers for a consistent implementation. The results also show that the desire to be constantly available or the "Fear of Missing Out" prevents employees and managers from integrating communication pauses into their daily work routine. To counteract these fears, it is important for employees that the implementation of communication pauses is clearly regulated within the company. Trust in the internal communications department also plays an important role here. To increase employees' self-discipline in the practical implementation of communication pauses and to reduce their need to be constantly reachable, it is important for them that the communication department accompanies and manages these processes well. The implementation of communication pauses in the strategic planning and especially a clear communication about breaks towards employees can help to create this trust. The possibility to show employees spaces for communication pauses should therefore also be considered when choosing tools and communicative measures.

Support of the Management:

The results of the study also show that a lack of support from management can be the reason why the implementation of communication pauses fails in practice. On the one hand, it is important that managers can trust their employees to actually implement the pauses. On the other hand, this self-discipline of employees is negated if it is not exemplified by their managers. Managers should therefore actively and consistently implement the strategically selected form of communication pauses themselves as far as possible in order to set a good example.

Create Understanding:

Further results have shown that, in addition to self-discipline, the personal resilience of employees also plays a major role in the implementation success of communication pauses. The introduction of new and existing communication pause measures can cause resistance to change. This can be the result of a firmly anchored corporate culture. It is therefore important to create a uniform understanding of the problem of communicative relief and the need for breaks. Thus, it is advisable to actively approach employees and offer appropriate learning opportunities, seminars, information materials or training courses in order to specifically draw attention to the topic and show employees their options for action. In addition, it may be necessary to offer employees a familiarization phase in which they are given the time to reorganize themselves and their work and clear up any uncertainties. Those responsible must also provide information about the changes in advance and communicate clearly about the changes.

Regular Employee Surveys:

The novelty of the communication pause phenomenon meant that interviewees sometimes found it difficult to make statements about the implementation success. Some companies interviewed, perceived their employees' need for pauses due to increasing digital communications during the pandemic. The results have thus highlighted the importance of regular employee surveys. When redesigning internal communication processes, for example by adding or deleting channels or formats, attention should always be paid to the acceptance by the employees. Regular employee surveys can and should be used to find out about aspects such as overload or the need for communicative relief.

Limitations

Because of the following limitations, this study is not able to clarify the existence, application and role of communication pauses in the internal communication of large German companies in an all-encompassing way. It should be noted that the qualitative study design means that no generally

valid statements can be made. However, the study is able to reveal initial interpretations and patterns that can form the basis for future research projects. Furthermore, the truth of the statements made in the interviews cannot be completely confirmed. Especially the clear naming of the companies in which the interview partners are active limits the study. The purpose of naming these companies is to enable the statements to be traced back to the respective industry. With this approach, recommendations for action can also be made in compliance with the industry. However, this carries the risk that answers were given in such a way that a particular company is portrayed as positively as possible.

Regarding the method of this study, two significant limitations should be mentioned. Due to the subjectivity of the individuals, both in the interview discussions and in the subsequent evaluation and interpretation of the results, the reliability can be considered as weakened. Interviewer effects may also occur, influencing the interviewees in their answers through factors of social desirability (Brosius et al., 2016, p. 127-128). In the course of conducting the interviews, three acquired cases did not actually meet the requirements for participating in the interviews, which were the use of communication pauses in internal corporate communication. Despite sending a briefing on the content, background and requirements after contacting the companies, they agreed to an interview. It only became clear during the interviews that these companies were not qualified for contributing to the research interest. For this reason, these three companies and interviews were not considered in answering the research questions.

Conclusion

This study is the first to examine communication pauses in the internal communication of large German companies. In order to answer the research question "What role do communication pauses play in the internal communication of large German companies?", communication managers from various companies were surveyed by means of semi-standardized interviews. Another focus lied on the definition and

implementation of communication pauses as well as on internal corporate communications and the influence of the digital transformation. Regarding the central findings of this research, it becomes clear that communication pauses are implemented in internal corporate communications in very different ways. Due to a variety of reasons, the implementation measures are controlled both top-down and bottom-up.

A major goal of this study was to generate a definition for the term communication pauses. With the help of a working definition and the findings from the interviews, the following definition was formulated:

The term 'communication pause' can be understood as an umbrella term for all deliberate measures that are aimed at temporarily relieving the stress of employees, caused by communication. These measures are controlled both top-down and bottom-up in the hierarchy of companies.

The definition is the first scientific attempt at a description of the phenomenon of communication pauses in companies and can consequently be enriched and improved by future studies. Further scientific projects should follow up on analyzing the implementation of communication pauses in internal corporate communication between different industries. Due to the limitations mentioned above, further research in the field of communication pauses is necessary. It remains to be explored how the implementation and use of communicative pauses differ from industry to industry. During the interview with the Lufthansa Group, which is part of the negative examples, it became clear that service companies cannot have any pauses in their communication due to the absence of breaks in the business process. Due to the non-fulfillment of the requirements, Lufthansa Group, among other companies, is not considered part of the sample. Such industry-dependent differences, as well as criteria that determine the implementation, should be highlighted in future research. In addition, it is necessary to specify the patterns and methods identified in this work and to test them using quantitative research methods. It would also be of interest to examine how the strategic use of communication pauses in the large companies examined in this

study varies when compared to medium-sized and smaller companies (such as start-ups), especially regarding their differing numbers of employees and organization of internal communication. Furthermore, the focus could be placed on the implementation of communicative pauses. The question of how such pauses are integrated into the daily work routine could be examined regarding different work and time models (such as shift work, working in different time zones, etc.). Additionally, employees themselves should be asked about the introduction and implementation of communication pauses. It becomes clear that a close cooperation between science and practice is necessary to fully understand, analyze and concretize the concept.

In addition to this theoretical achievement, practical recommendations for the implementation of communication pauses in the corporate context could be established. These can be summarized into four points: 1) clear strategy, 2) management support, 3) creating understanding and 4) regular employee surveys. With the help of these findings, practitioners from internal corporate communications can be enabled to appropriately evaluate the topic of communication pauses and its value for their company as well as effectively implement it, if necessary. Showing communication professionals the relevance of communication pauses in internal corporate communication is therefore an important concern of this study and at the same time justifies its contribution in communication science. The analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that the reasons for implementing communication pauses in everyday professional life are primarily due to the growing number of communication channels and the increasing mass of communicated information. According to the interviews, this leads to a desire for a reduction and clear structuring of internal communication activities. So far, the companies surveyed have implemented measures such as regular days without meetings, shortened meetings, shortened messages, flexible scheduling of meetings or even health offers to train mindfulness.

Since these measures vary greatly among the surveyed companies, it is important to differentiate between the mentioned measures in terms of challenges and potentials. The interviewees see positive effects of communication pauses primarily in employee satisfaction through communicative relief and thus a more targeted effect of communication. Additionally, several challenges were mentioned, which can certainly be explained by the lack of discussion regarding communication pauses in research and practice. The negative examples clearly show which arguments speak against the implementation of communication pauses and that certain industries such as aviation are inhibited from the implementation due to the specifics of the industry. In addition to the industry, corporate culture seems to play a decisive role in determining whether measures to reduce the stress of communication can be implemented and are accepted by the members of the companies.

In addition to fixed communication pauses, some of the companies surveyed are increasingly relying on self-determination of their employees. With many communication channels available, employees need to decide for themselves which ones they want to use. A catalyst for the importance of communication pauses undoubtedly is the digital transformation in the workplace, which has been enormously accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost all interviewees stated that they have clearly felt this development in their company. As a result, some companies have derived measures like communication pauses, to limit excessive internal communication activities.

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