

What did COVID-19 do to Communication Skills?

An Exploration of Swedish High-Growth Firms

by

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Abstract

Purpose: The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic affected the internal communication within organizations of different sizes, including high-growth firms. Therefore, this research examines how the CEOs recognition of the importance of communication skills –within informal interactions– may have implications for the overall development of the growing firm. Furthermore, it analyzes how face-to-face interactions have been replaced by web conferencing tools in the case of remote work.

Methodology: The study was conducted according to an inductive qualitative research method. It was operationalized through six semi-structured remote interviews with CEOs of Swedish high-growth firms. The in-depth interviews incorporated gamification elements, which arguably increased the engagement of the participants. Accordingly, some parts of the interviews were driven by the tool Mentimeter.com. Additionally, the data was processed, structured and presented following the Gioia methodology.

Findings: As the shift from traditional office to remote work settings increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the internal communication dynamics happening within growing firms adapted to the work environment change. CEOs consider that clarity is the most important skill for successfully dealing with informal communication under web conferencing tools. In contrast, they ranked listening as the pivotal skill to have in physical work settings.

Discussion: The informal communication between employees gets affected by the work environment (in-office or remote). Additionally, the paper elaborates on how CEOs drive their organization through this adaptation process and how electronic-based communication channels are transforming the way communication skills are expressed.

Contribution: This paper specifically aimed to add new knowledge streams in the context of high-growth and its interplay within the new research field of internal communication concerning COVID-19

Keywords: COVID-19, high-growth firms, internal communication, communication skills, CEO.

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Introduction

Communication is an inner ability of the human condition. People communicate with each other in many different ways: verbal, nonverbal, formal, informal, in different languages and through different channels. Moreover, every medium where information is exchanged possesses different characteristics (Melcher & Beller, 1967). As an example, conversations have distinct attributes whether they are carried out face-to-face (in-person) or in a digital format, for instance, via online conferences. On the other hand, external and unexpected circumstances often pose a threat to businesses and entrepreneurs, creating the need for change. These external conditions have the influence to alter structural aspects of the communication process and even modify the way we communicate in the context of organizations. The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic is one extraordinary example of how changes can happen at an extremely fast pace, with worldwide repercussions. When the COVID-19 outbreak started –in late 2019, beginning of 2020– everybody was caught by surprise. Businesses had to adapt rapidly to the current situation. More than ever, Chief Executive Officers (henceforth CEOs) were in demand to lead and guide their businesses through this difficult time of changes. Under disadvantageous circumstances like these, the firm may rely on the top-management human capital to overcome the adversity (Jin et al., 2017). In these terms, *human capital* is a broad concept that summarizes the cumulated competencies of an individual, including intangible personal attributes or soft skills, for instance, communication skills (Malmelin, 2007; Schultz, 1961). Moreover, the Upper Echelon Theory describes the importance of the background characteristics of those leading the company and how there's a direct link between their capacities and the overall organizational development (Jin et al., 2017).

Communication within the venture team is highly relevant for companies of all sizes and specifically, soft skills are extremely significant for “success in today’s workplace” (Mitchell, Skinner & White, 2010, p.43). First, while recruiting good-fitting candidates, employers highly value those who exhibit well-developed soft skills as the most predominant factor within the hiring process (Wilhelm, 2004). Secondly, Chen & Chung (2016, p. 306) argue that “a CEO’s behavior influences employee performance and business relationships” and Duchesneau & Gartner (1990) include strong communication skills as a determinant characteristic of a successful lead entrepreneur. Finally, it can be argued that both for the general employees and the top-management

side, the importance of communication skills is acknowledged by researchers (Chen & Chung, 2016; Duchesneau & Gartner, 1990). Additionally, under the current situation derived by the pandemic, the effectiveness of communication skills continues to be increasingly important while working remotely, as it also contributes to team dynamics (Camilleri, 2021). Consequently, this thesis aims to explore which communication skills are persistent during times of change, particularly under the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is plenty of scholarly research available regarding communication within organizations (Clegg, Hardy & Nord, 1999). However, this thesis analyzes explicitly the internal communication happening inside-in high-growth firms (henceforth HGFs), which are defined as companies that grow “at or above a particular pace, measured either in terms of growth between a start and end year, or as annualized growth over a specific number of years” (Demir, Wennberg & McKelvie, 2017, p.3). Although there are distinct views among scholars about how to measure this growth, Demir, Wennberg & McKelvie, (2017) observed some commonalities across multiple definitions, including variables like the increase of the number of employees (Davidsson, Delmar & Wiklund, 2006; Shepherd & Wiklund, 2009) and productivity growth (Jun Du & Yama Temouri, 2015). The contrasting views on what determines a company to be considered an HGFs or not will be further elaborated in the Theoretical Framework section. In any case, the decision to examine internal communication in the context of HGFs is encompassed with the emergence of outperforming startups in diverse sectors of the economy. Noticeable, Demir, Wennberg & McKelvie (2017)’s extensive analysis of high-growth firms over the last three decades suggests human capital as one of the main five drivers of HGFs growth. Accordingly, this thesis aims to contribute to the HGF’s literature by examining possible changes that may affect their internal communication under the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ1. Which communication skills did CEOs of HGFs consider the most important in informal interactions at work (prior and after COVID-19)?

RQ2. What are the implications of the most important communication skills for the internal communication of the company?

Therefore, the research aims to (1) identify which are the most predominant communications skills, in the context of informal interactions within Swedish HGFs and under the perception of CEOs; (2) find out if the predominant communication skills diverge based on the channel used (face-to-face or web conferencing tools) and (3) what the implications of the communication skills for the internal communication of growing firms are. In addition, since a company's hierarchy can contemplate the figure of Managing Director (MD) rather than the CEO, and for the purpose of simplifying the terminologies, this paper will refer to the firm's leader as the CEO.

Due to the limited scope of this thesis, the authors follow an exploratory approach rather than a deterministic one. It implies that, through a clear methodology, a homogenous sample of companies was selected, aiming to identify any contrast in the perception of predominant communication skills before and after the COVID-19 pandemic started and subsequently, examining its implications for internal communication. This research focuses on face-to-face interactions and long-distance video meetings within less-structured contexts happening in the workplace, such as one-on-one sessions, informal meetings, casual conversations, etc. To further narrow down this study, the sample will be based on Swedish HGFs in the Health-Technology (henceforth Healthtech) & IT industry, as they tend to be considered –in general terms– to be more innovative (Daunfeldt, Elert & Johansson, 2016) and hereby, adaptive to changes. It is important to highlight that this research will solely focus on the managerial perception about communication skills. Therefore, a qualitative study is performed through individual semi-structured interviews with the CEOs of the participants' companies, leading to answers around communication skills in the workplace that subsequently can be processed and analyzed (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). The aim is to obtain first-person informed opinions from “retrospective and real-time accounts by those ... experiencing the phenomenon of theoretical interest” (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2013, p.19). In this case, CEOs become a reliable source of data, as they have to work closely with different levels of the organizational hierarchy (Singh, 2013). Additionally, the literature points out that across the world, the importance of good communication skills is largely acknowledged by managers to solidify their leadership within the firm (Barrett, 2006). Lastly, the analysis of findings will shed light on which skills are predominant and whether the COVID-19 and by extension, the forced transition to telework may have affected the CEO's views on this matter. The

results will possibly draw some insights that can contribute to the design of better corporate communication strategies during times of change.

After performing a comprehensive literature review on communication skills in the context of organizations, five of them were isolated from different research papers. Therefore, they were selected for being considered as predominant and as a way of narrowing down the research scope. Namely, the skills selected for modeling the study were: (1) *Listening*, (2) *Oral speaking*, (3) *Clarity*, (4) *Assertiveness*, and (5) *Self-awareness*. Finally, the next section intends to be exhaustive and inclusive. This paper will examine established research theory and contrast findings across interrelated knowledge streams. Accordingly, Gioia, Corley & Hamilton (2013, p. 23) propose that “such an approach to a literature review confers a welcome license to write more interestingly, trying to cover everything that has gone before”.

Theoretical Framework

The thesis will discuss and synthesize the most important concepts and theories that apply to the aforementioned research questions.

High Growth Firms

Although the extant literature has already extensively analyzed underlying performance variables amongst startups in general (Duchesneau & Gartner, 1990), there may be specific dynamics that make the *growing firms* unique and worth to be analyzed. Hart, Prashar & Ri (2021) observed that the study of the growth of small firms has been the subject of academic inquiry over the past four decades. Additionally, in the field of entrepreneurship, multiple approaches can be seen to describe the growth phenomena. Hence, the definitions of *growing firms* vary amongst scholars. However, a common feature is its scalability potential. Monteiro (2019) summarized that scalability is the firm's ability to transition at a rapid pace, regarding its structural limitations. In relation to this topic, academics and policymakers have demonstrated an increasing interest in determining the importance of high-growth firms (Post, 2020). Although high-growth firms generally make up a comparatively small number of businesses when compared with other types of firms based on their size (e.g. established firms or early-stage startups), they add a disproportionately large share of employment growth to the economy (OECD, 2019). Research also suggests that HGFs are crucial in improving productivity and spreading technological inventions to the market (Jun Du & Yama Temouri, 2015). Interestingly, only a small portion of startups transition scale up and maintain this status steadily in the long term (Jansen & Roelofsen, 2018; Josefy et al., 2015 cited in Post, 2020). Despite their intriguing nature, HGFs are usually not a primary focus of discussion in the academic arena (Post, 2020). Hence, the reasons that made them more successful compared to other companies in the same situation are largely overlooked. Moreover, one of the interesting factors of these firms is their ability to overtake unconventional methods to transition from small ideas to solid projects. Beckman & Burton (2008) argue that founding teams with both experience and structure grow more rapidly. Besides, by digging deeper into the matter of intangible human capital factors of HGFs' top-management teams, Duchesneau & Gartner (1990) observe that in the

context of organizations, there is a link between financial success and the lead entrepreneur's personal characteristics, for instance, communication skills.

When it comes to determining what qualifies a startup to be considered as a HGFs, there are profound differences amongst scholars (Monteiro, 2019; Davidsson, Delmar & Wiklund, 2006; Demir, Wennberg & McKelvie, 2017). The disagreement mainly resides on how to measure the firm's growth. According to Demir, Wennberg & McKelvie (2017), some consider relative inter-annual growth rates to determine the magnitude of the firm expansion –in comparison to the population of businesses in its industry and geographical area. By contrast, others take absolute growth rates, for example, the increase in the number of employees or sales within a given period of time. Therefore, in order to continue this analysis, it is necessary to define what implies to be a *growing company* in general. According to OECD (2019), HGF's "growth is measured by turnover or employment, with the turnover definition giving higher numbers than the employment definition". Monteiro (2019, p.97) adds that HGF can "be defined as the firms growing at or above a certain rate for an intensive, observable period – e.g. companies that have grown at least 10 percent per year for two consecutive years". In contrast, Hart, Prashar & Ri (2021) consider, in order to define a HGF as such, the firm has to hold an annual average growth of 20% in employment over a three-year period. Due to the unclear nature of HGFs, it is important to set a consistent definition for the purpose of this thesis. Based on the commonalities found in the literature, this paper mainly assumes three measurement factors: (1) number of employees (OECD, 2019; Shepherd & Wiklund, 2009) and at least 3 years since the company was founded (Shepherd & Wiklund, 2009). Hence, a HGF will be defined as follows:

A HGF is an existing firm in the process of expansion, with more than 8 employees, at least 3 years of continuous operations, and which exhibit scalability potential.

Human Capital Theory and its Connection with Communication Skills

Shultz (1961 cited in Nafukho, Hairston & Brooks, 2004, p.547) defines *human capital* as the “knowledge and skills that people acquire through education and training being a form of capital, and that this capital is a product of deliberate investment that yields returns”. Remarkably, the literature compiles several facets or derivations from the original concept of *capital*. Over time, it has been extended to include other dimensions, resulting in new terms like “financial capital, organizational capital, intellectual capital, human capital, structural capital, relational capital, customer capital, social capital, innovation capital, and process capital” (Edvinsson & Malone, 1997, p. 52). Noticeably, the social capital concept derives from the evolution of capital as a generator of value. Baron & Markman (2003) summarizes the definition of *social capital* as the sum of what individuals gain from their interactions with others. They argue that the good domain over these competencies is not only crucial in determining their outcomes but also can determine whether they attract employees or get funding. Furthermore, the authors concluded that “certain aspects of entrepreneurs’ behavior — specifically, their effectiveness in interacting with others on a face-to-face basis — may play a role” in their success (Baron & Markman, 2003, p. 54).

The Theory of Human Capital is a “complex, multifaceted phenomenon with various intangible dimensions that are not directly observable and cannot be measured with precision by a single attribute, a set of attributes, or their combined sum on individuals or households” (Folloni & Vittadini, 2010, p.267). In the field of organizational studies, there’s a need to further understand how the domain of human capital theory affects startups, leading to the emergence of several knowledge gaps in the existing literature (Post, 2020). Furthermore, Skawińska & Zalewski (2020) observed that gap when examining factors influencing the appearance and development of startups. They notice the importance of human capital as a relevant variable that may determine the new venture’s success by examining a data set of companies from 13 European countries and Israel, resulting in a measurement model that analyzes the more impactful dimensions of their competitive advantages. Overall, these intangible resources were mapped and divided into the following categories: (1) Resources and Competencies; (2) Information; (3) Intellectual Capital (human, social, structural and relational capital); (4) Innovation; (5) Entrepreneurship; (6) Sustainable Development; (7) Relational and; (8) Value Management. Skawińska & Zalewski’s

(2020) research also describes five success factors criteria amongst the data analyzed, namely: (1) Access to Human Capital; (2) Quality and Outcomes of Institutions and Business Relations; (3) Focus on the Market Situation; (4) Business Experience and (5) Development Potential. It can be noticed that the majority of the cited competitive advantage's sources of the previous model correspond to intangible elements of the human capital, for instance, communication skills (Wasserman, 2008). It can be argued that being such an important intangible asset of a company, human capital is highly relevant for the firm's success. Furthermore, Jin et al. (2017) observed that, overall, in terms of human capital, the more education, experience, knowledge, and skills an entrepreneur has, the better.

Particularly, in the context of startups, *human capital* refers to skills, knowledge, and expertise accumulated by founders through their careers, including more intangible skills like leadership abilities, writing and speaking skills (Wasserman, 2008). It is to be noticed that *communication* is considered a *soft skill*. Soft skills are defined as personal qualities, attributes, or the level of commitment of a person that set him or her apart from other individuals who may have similar skills and experience, and includes dimensions like “team skills, communication skills, ethics, time-management skills, and an appreciation for diversity” (Perreault, 2004 cited in (Mitchell, Skinner & White, 2010, p. 44). In other words, *soft skills* “is an umbrella term covering various survival skills such as communication and interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, leadership qualities, team skills, negotiation skills, time and stress management and business etiquettes” (Deepa & Seth, 2013).

Furthermore, researchers suggest that soft skills proficiency is important to potential employers (Mitchell, Skinner & White, 2010; Deepa & Seth, 2013; Robles, 2012). Businesses are faced with a rapidly changing environment, as well as the growing complexity of business practices. Employers are in a constant search for ways to foster the development of human capital and, arguably, soft skills can be a useful vehicle towards achieving this (Remedios, 2012). As evidence, a study developed in India inquiring top-level executives from diverse sectors of the economy drew intriguing results. As it can be expected, 86% acknowledged the importance of soft skills within the workspace and more interestingly, among the pre-selected variables “Interpersonal Skills”, “Teamwork”, “Leadership Qualities”, “Time Management”, “Conflict Management”,

“Communication Skills”, the latter received the highest rating (Deepa & Seth, 2013). Similarly, Robles (2012) conducted another study aiming to rank the ten most important soft skills in the workplace, from the perspective of business executives. The overwhelming totality of the interviewees indicated that *communication* and *integrity* are either very important or extremely important. As might be expected, the global business environment of today’s world demands strong interpersonal skills, including the capability of communicating effectively (John, 2009).

Communication Skills

Communication skills are a set of abilities or behaviors that ultimately enable to give an effective public performance. Across industries, countries, cultures, and regardless of educational levels, it is common knowledge that good communication skills are the key to communicate well with one another. Okoro & Washington (2012, p.57) consider that effective communication enhances human capital performance and productivity, allowing business organizations to expand their markets. On the other hand, Zerfass, Verčič & Wiesenberg (2016, p.4) identified the importance of CEO communications, emphasizing that team leaders can succeed “if they always behave appropriately, professionally and intelligently in social interaction[s]”. Additionally, Robles (2012) remarked that courtesy, responsibility, and interpersonal skills were other extremely important needed skills to have in the workplace. The first step in exploring various communication skills is to clearly define categories. The term *communication skills* itself incorporates different variables such as “oral, speaking capability, written, presenting, listening” as Robles (2012, p.455) describes it. Accordingly, the findings from Zerfass, Verčič & Wiesenberg (2016), Robles (2012), and Mitchell, Skinner & White (2010) lead the focus of this thesis research on measurable communication variables. According to Tkalac Verčič, Verčič & Sriramesh (2012, p.225) designing and presenting communication skills are considered the most important skills in practice in internal communication, as shown in Figure 1 in the Appendix.

The literature on internal communication compiles several relevant communication skills. Accordingly, after comprehensive research on the topic, the authors identified five skills that were considered as the most predominant. Therefore, the study used them to guide the research and narrow its findings:

1. **Listening:** Listening is understood to be a process of physical perception through which “intellectual and emotional processes” are affected (Pfeiffer & Jones, 1974, cited in Jahromi et al., 2016, p. 2123). On the other hand, the term “Active Listening (AL)” indicates to carefully give full attention to the speaker, to the transmitted message and the willingness to understand it (Manktelow, 2005 cited in Gonzales, 2009, p. 20), showing unconditional interest (Weger, Castle & Emmett, 2010, p. 35).
2. **Oral speaking:** “To maintain oral communication, speaking is the key aspect which is described as the natural use of language” (Richards, 2006 cited in Ounis, 2017, p. 95) which nurtures the “social intercourse” (Yule, 1989, p. 169 cited in Ounis, 2017, p. 95), promotes “emotional intelligence (Bora, 2012 cited in Ounis, 2017, p. 95) and helps “to fulfill certain goals ... ideas, intentions, desires, preferences, or opinions” (Ounis, 2017, p. 95). Additionally, Barrett (2006, p.387) argue that managers “need to be able to create and deliver oral presentations confidently and persuasively, using graphics that contribute to delivering your messages. These are the capabilities at the core of all business communication. Success in managerial and corporate communication depends on mastering these core capabilities.”
3. **Clarity:** In the internal communication field, according to Vos & Schoemaker (2004), clarity is a competence that determines an accessible, precise, and clear use of the language in the communication function. They emphasize that it can be operationalized in different ways. For instance: by providing unambiguous information to the staff, providing a clear outline of the vision of the company, the appropriate usage of user-friendly internal communication tools (e.g. intranets), and making procedures and work instructions timely available.
4. **Assertiveness:** Assertiveness is the ability to speak and act in a manner that respects and considers the opinions and rights of others while also upholding your own rights, needs, and personal limits (Pipaş & Jaradat, 2010). The authors observe that this communication skill

improves open communication, tolerance for different viewpoints, and increases the chance of reaching agreements. Additionally, they argue that assertiveness can also relieve tension caused by conflicts and strengthen relationships.

5. **Self-awareness:** Self-awareness is a comprehensive skill highly rooted in the physiological capacity to connect with one's own emotions while being empathetic with others. In other words, managers that are self-aware can solicit, provide and deal with honest feedback and also bring a more accurate judge and recognition to body language cues and the impact of their own actions (Barrett, 2006, p.386). Self-awareness allows to “suggest confidence to an audience, they can use eye contact, establish a rapport, and speak easily about a subject without notes when presenting. By using language effectively to capture the meaning and inspire trust, they can create believers in their message” (Barrett, 2006, p.386).

Extensive communication skills enable the establishment of trust which, at the same time, facilitates employees to respect and follow their leader and also, “helping leaders to motivate team members” (Zerfass & Franke, 2013, p.119). The ability to effectively communicate has been proven to bring a manager into a leadership position and support them to “get things done with and through people” (Barrett, 2006, p. 386). According to a Harvard Business School study which was mentioned by Bowman et al. (1964 cited in Barrett, 2006, p. 386) the “person who is able to communicate, to make sound decisions, and to get things done with and through people” is the successful person who gets promoted.

Internal Communication (IC)

There is a whole world of communication activities in an organization that goes well beyond making announcements, striving to deliver clear messages, or conducting public relations initiatives (Zerfass & Franke, 2013). Thus, *communication* is a transversal phenomenon within internal organizational functions. Subsequently, the necessity for constant exchange of information or knowledge sharing exists between co-workers, at all levels of the firm (Bock et al., 2005). Hence, the term *internal communication* will be used in its broadest sense to refer to all kinds of

communication within a company, and as a synonym with “employee communication”, which is seen as a “technical function” (Tkalac Verčič, Verčič & Sriramesh, 2012, p. 225), and can be held by different mediums of exchange of information.

As shown in Figure 2 below, the “communication triangle” (Barrett, 2006, p. 386) describes the communication process from a high-level scenario without misunderstandings, containing a sender, a receiver, the message, and its dependency on the context. All of this happens through a medium that was previously chosen by the sender, who understands the context and the audience, hence the receiver could easily understand the intended message.

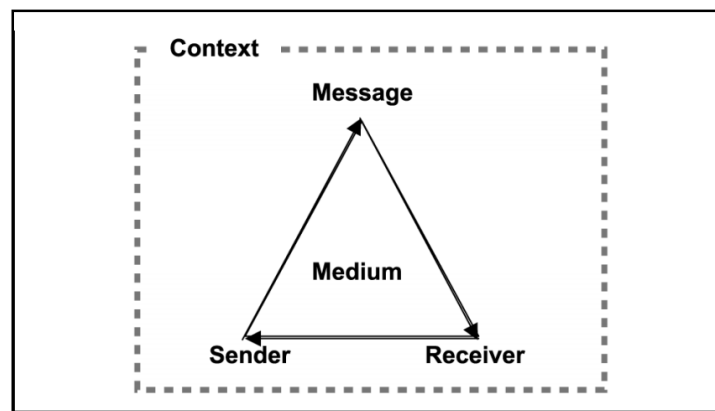


Figure 2. The Communication Triangle (adapted from Barrett, 2006, p. 386)

This *medium* is described as the communication channel, the manner or method through which an intended message is sent to a receiver. Communication channels “range from no technology (i.e. face-to-face communication) to traditional technologies, such as telephone and e-mail, to more contemporary technologies, such as wikis and blogs” (Snyder & Eng Lee-Partridge, 2013, p.418).

On the other hand, depending on the tone and purpose of communication, channels can be alternatively classified as formal and informal. Decades ago, Melcher & Beller (1967) acknowledged that both of them coexist dynamically within the organization, suggesting that managers often face the problem of selecting the more effective channel according to the situation and context. According Kandlousi, Ali & Abdollahi (2010), official or formal channels are those

where the organizational hierarchy determines the methods for communicating. They further suggest that unofficial or informal communication allows the employees to establish closer links amongst peers, allowing them to talk about personal situations. In addition, informal communication speeds up the access to knowledge or coordination when information flow through channels is stagnant or laggard (Gray & Laidlaw, 2002).

COVID-19 and the Substitution of Communication Channels

According to Hacker et al. (2020), in recent years, there has been an increasing number of companies adopting web conferencing systems (WCS) to facilitate one-to-one or group virtual meetings regardless of geographical constraints. WCS typically supports audio and video calls plus additional features like screen-sharing and recordings (Fasciani et al., 2020). Interestingly, the adaptation curve of these technologies seems unstoppable. A Gartner report of 2019 estimates that by 2024, only 25% of meetings will take place face-to-face (Fasciani et al., 2020).

Arguably, WCS can be used both for formal or informal purposes. Ultimately, “communication is the transmission of meaning from one person to another or to many people, whether verbally or nonverbally” (Barrett, 2006, p.386) and the tool can indistinctly be used for different purposes. In the information age, it is taken for granted that this exchange of information can happen through digital channels. With the rising development of communication tools, the leadership of companies changes and has to adapt accordingly. Regardless of that, research from Braun et al. (2019, p. 76) shows that the most appropriate and preferred communication channel of employees is face-to-face communication. This research assumes that it is also the preferred way for leaders, in this case for CEOs. In contrast, just in some situations when employees are in an uncomfortable situation “triggered by emotional arousal or difficulties in responding directly with eloquence” (Braun et al., 2019, p.74-75) the e-mail as a communication channel is preferred. Hargie, Dickson & Tourish (2004, p. 252) show a visualization and summary of communication channels and their social presence, as shown below in Figure 3.

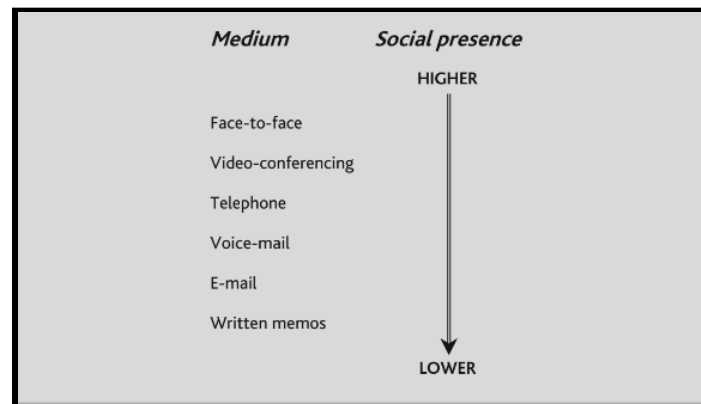


Figure 3. Social Presence (adapted from Hargie, Dickson & Tourish, 2004, p. 252)

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered changes in work procedures that are still emerging. It demanded –and made it mandatory in some cases– to work from home through virtual settings (Kniffin et al., n.d.). Under those circumstances, WCS tools such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or Google Meet, replaced daily face-to-face interactions between coworkers. Moreover, long before working from home became the new norm, Heide & Simonsson (2011) performed research, noting that some managers highlighted the importance of blurring the division between them and coworkers by performing a more natural approach in their daily interactions. Accordingly, the authors stated that the interviewed managers considered that increasing their listening skills, chatting, or transmitting cheerfulness was an essential duty of their role. They contrasted this new approach in comparison with the traditional view on corporate leadership, which situated the managerial team in a distant place from their fellow coworkers. Paradoxically, during the pandemic, physical distance could open the doors to a new wave of exploring daily informal interactions among peers (Hacker et al., 2020).

The global pandemic raises the question of how COVID-19 affects communication in general (Camilleri, 2021). Accordingly, Marra et al. (2020) mention that COVID-19 changed not only our communication with families, it also led to the fact that people are losing non-verbal cues. The authors specifically relate to the healthcare sector and found out that information is increasingly forwarded in digital ways via telephone, video calls, or e-mails. Physicians, for example, have to

bridge “communication gaps through other nonverbal tools such as the tone of our voice, pause, and inflection” (Marra et al., 2020, p.1).

Despite the evident negative effects of the coronavirus pandemic across the board, organizations of all sizes were already familiar with the usage of digital communication technologies. More than two decades ago, companies started becoming familiar with embracing electronic communication technologies (Melewar & Navalekar, 2002). Due to the sudden COVID-19 pandemic appearance, the transition to remote work has been established at a faster pace and seems to be the new common way of working for millions of employees across industries. It is possible that due to the highly adaptive nature of HGFs, they could be even more proactive than traditional enterprises to set up the necessary technological infrastructure in the post-COVID era. For instance, by supporting ad hoc remote working places at home in the most appropriate way possible. This includes the supply of required software and hardware tools for fulfilling the work tasks.

Research Methodology Section

This section will elaborate on the chosen research methodology followed. It will incorporate dissertations regarding the sub-sections: *Research Approach, Research Design, Data Collection Method, Sample Selection, Sample Strategy, Regional Context, Interview Guide, Data Analysis.*

Research Approach

The purpose of this paper is to assess perceptions of predominant communication skills in Swedish HGFs before and after COVID-19, and its implications for its internal communication. Furthermore, the authors conducted a qualitative research method that was operationalized through semi-structured interviews (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019, p. 436) with six CEOs of HGFs in Sweden, within the Healthtech and IT industry. Moreover, the study followed inductive logic. It aimed to formulate propositions about an existing phenomenon (prevalence of communications skills under growing organizations) but under an intriguing and unprecedented context: the COVID-19 pandemic and the affectation to HGFs. Due to the lack of previous related research, this inductive study also aimed to contribute to the existing internal communication field by performing in-depth exploratory research rather than claiming absolute truth (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2013b). Therefore, the sample size was selected in accordance with the research method to enable in-depth analysis of participants rather than rely on large quantities of superficial data. Accordingly, McGrath, Palmgren & Liljedahl (2019, p.1002) argue that “qualitative research interviews are preferable when the researcher strives to understand the interviewee's subjective perspective of a phenomenon rather than generating generalizable understandings of large groups of people.”

A questionnaire for interviews was designed and established. In order to reduce the interviewers' variability, these conversations were video recorded. According to Bell, Bryman & Harley (2019, p. 208), this ensures that interviews are properly conducted. Additionally, to prepare for the interviews, a meeting with Johannes Gartner supported the establishment of the interview guide. He is a post-doctoral researcher at Lund University's Department of Business Administration, specifically focusing on the topic of technological entrepreneurship and novel methods of data

collection. Gartner considered an expert in his field, provided supporting information about how to specifically get clear data with the support of a gamified interview approach, avoiding risky techniques that may lead to biased answers. These concepts will be elaborated on in the Interview Guide sub-section.

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research methodology that is highly suitable for analyzing meaning, context, process, and unusual phenomena, and for offering explanations while obtaining in-depth insights (Maxwell, 2012). As this paper follows an exploratory approach, it aims to examine the communication skills that are prevalent in the workspace before and during the COVID-19 pandemic (from the individual perspective of CEOs). This exploration will be made by examining in-depth the perception of six CEOs of HGFs in Sweden within the Healthtech & IT sector.

The authors will explore what communication skills are more predominant under the context of interpersonal face-to-face informal interactions, under the eyes of the company's leaders. More specifically, semi-structured interviews were performed to guide the conversations with the study participants. For that purpose, an interview guide was compiled with a set of related questions, covering topics that focus on a range of topics related to the workplace, the participants' functions within the company, and their relationships with the employees (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Additionally, these interviews may provide insights into the firm's communication strategy, its internal communication dynamics, and general implications of how the COVID-19 pandemic may affect certain aspects of its informal communication.

Due to the mobility limitations and governmental regulations imposed on the ongoing pandemic, these one-on-one interviews took place over the internet. That format is similar to telephone interviews, but they can be conducted using webcams (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Finally, a consent form was sent out to the interviewees to ensure data protection (which all participants signed).

Data Collection Method

The purpose of this section is to clarify why certain data collection methods were used. First, in-depth research about internal communication led to the selection of predominant communication skills within organizations. Furthermore, the guiding questions used for the interviews (see Appendix: Interview guide) were crafted following Bell, Bryman & Harley's (2019) recommendations for semi-structured interviews. This method allows the interviewee to expand on its reasoning in contrast with a structured approach and reduces the variability of the small sample size of interviews. With this in place, the interview questionnaire was established. Moreover, semi-structured interviews provided the authors with enough flexibility to explore in-depth CEO views while establishing a connection with the research questions. The authors preselected 6 HGFs in the Healthtech & IT industry in Sweden and organized the interviews with its CEOs accordingly.

All the interviews were conducted in English and video recorded for further analysis and coding. In this regard, researchers have acknowledged the validity of synchronous online interviewing methods, as a valid option for performing qualitative analysis (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019, p.452). Furthermore, an online questionnaire and presentation tool, Mentimeter.com, was used to guide the interview. Some interview questions were incorporated into Mentimeter.com to give the interviewee the chance to receive their specific rating on certain questions. Therefore, this tool was included as a method to dynamically gather specific measurements about clear topics highly related to the research questions. Through Mentimeter, participants could interact through their web browsers and fill polls using their smart devices, thus enhancing the engagement with the interviewers. This alternative approach is consistent with the research methodology that guided this study and may be seen as an adaptive resort due to the limitations of non-physical interviews. Also, it may be a contribution towards the effective execution of interviews that are bound by the constraints of WCS. In retrospect, the authors found that combining semi-structured interviews with the Mentimeter tool, permitted more engaging participation and the collection of valuable quantifiable measurements.

Finally, the data collection took place in the timeframe as shown in the table below:

Table 1. Data Collection Timeline

Start: Data collection	Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3	Interview 4	Interview 5	Interview 6
19-04-21	23-04-21	03-05-21	05-05-21	10-05-21	17-05-21	18-05-21

Sample Selection

To avoid discrepancies in the gathered data, a homogenous sample was selected. All the participant companies met the following criteria:

- Company has 8+ employees
- Company was founded in 2018 or before
- Company operates in Sweden
- Company operates in the Healthtech or IT sector

Sample Strategy

For the selection of the companies, the authors perform research on open companies databases, specifically on Crunchbase.com. Resulting from the search, a pre-filtered data set of 15 companies meeting the above criteria was found. Additionally, this work also involved contacting individuals with broad networks within the target industries and posting on LinkedIn an invitation for the research (which received more than 2000 views).

Following that, the CEO contact information from a final selection of 6 companies was identified and subsequently, contacted directly with the request to participate in the study.

Table 2. Contacted Companies & People

Company/ People contacted	Founding year	Location	External funding/ publicly available
Kind App	2007	Sweden	n.a.
Doktor.se	2016	Sweden	€45 M.
Mindler.se	2018	Sweden	€ 8 M.
KRY.se	2014	Sweden	n.a.
Doctrin	2016	Sweden	USD \$11.8 M.
TFS Health Science	1996	Sweden	n.a.
Coala	2014	Sweden	USD \$ 20 M.
Nectarine Health AB	2015	Sweden	USD \$ 12.6 M.
Grace Health	2017	Sweden	USD \$ 2.4 M.
Remente	2011	Sweden	USD \$ 1.1 M.
Healo	2017	Sweden	USD \$ 2 M.
10XGenomics	2016	Sweden	USD \$ 2 M.
Medpeople	2016	Sweden	USD \$ 1.6 M.
Ahum	2015	Sweden	SEK 6.8 M.
Byon8	2015	Sweden	USD \$ 822,000
Empe Diagnostics	2015	Sweden	SEK 19.2 M.
Skinfo	2019	Sweden	n.a
Vinnova	2001	Sweden	n.a
SlashData	2005	Sweden	n.a.

Johan Olson	-	Sweden	-
Olle Hydbom	-	Sweden	-
Innovation Skane	-	Sweden	-
HealthTech Nordic/ Investinskane.com	-	Sweden	-
Tim Washington	-	Sweden	-
Edgar Leon	-	Mexico	-

Finally, after extensive scouting, six participants agreed to participate. They were not included in Table 3 below, due to the legal bindings derived from the participant's consent form, and their company names, full names and raised capital figures cannot be disclosed either. Therefore, they will be anonymized under the title of CEO, followed by their participant company assigned number. For instance, CEO I, refers to Company I.

Table 3. Overview Of The Interviewed Companies & CEOs

Company					CEO information		
Company	Description/ Industry	# of workers	Founding year	Raised capital	Location	Gender	Age
Company 1	HealthTech	17	2015	X	Sweden	Male	35
Company 2	IT	40	2012	X	Sweden	Male	45
Company 3	IT	16	2005	X	Sweden	Male	28
Company 4	HealthTech	8	2018	X	Sweden	Female	42
Company 5	IT	8	2013	X	Sweden	Male	44
Company 6	Healthtech	60	1994	X	Sweden	Male	48

Regional context: Sweden in the Context of Technological Innovation

According to Arjona & Ravet (2020, p. 157), the author of the *Science, Research and Innovation Performance report of the EU from 2020*, “France, Germany and Sweden represent half of all technology-based scaleups in the EU,” with Sweden as the third leading country. The technological development and cutting-edge levels in Scandinavian countries are foremost in Europe and internationally. Especially, Sweden is well-known for being an innovative country, with notable entrepreneurial activities happening around Stockholm and Skane, the southernmost province of Sweden. Specifically in that region, Lund University is surrounded by an extensive entrepreneurial network, and it is also a noteworthy hub for research and development. Additionally, given the fast-changing environment in which Swedish companies operate, it may be the case that the ongoing COVID-19-related effects on internal communication are more apparent than in other entrepreneurial ecosystems. As a result, the researchers found this geographical area of Sweden ideal for sampling, thus keeping it relevant, homogenous and consistent.

Interview Guide

This study was performed by conducting and gathering insights of CEOs of high-growth firms. They were interviewed on a one-on-one basis following the qualitative research’s interviewing process, specifically, through a semi-structured interview approach (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). According to Eisenhardt & Graebner (2007), under certain contexts, interviews can be regarded as the main source of data.

Furthermore, the authors acknowledge that the limitation to six interviews is due to the nature of qualitative inductive research, which usually relies on small sample size. It is characterized by in-depth research, dense and compact data. Thus, to improve the quality of the retrieved data, the authors applied gamification techniques in the interview design. Accordingly, “gamification is a set of activities and processes to solve problems by using or applying the characteristics of game elements” (Kim et al., 2018). The purpose of gamification is to increase a positive attitude towards given tasks, and thus, enhancing the quantity and quality of the results. A number of studies in different contexts suggest that gamification is a powerful way to motivate and engage users or

participants in a given activity. (Morschheuser et al., 2017). For the purpose of further understanding how to implement gamification, the authors interviewed Ph.D. Johannes Gartner, an expert in the area of gamification. In addition to giving insightful information, he also offered practical ideas that were fully implemented by introducing question cards as part of the interview process. Therefore, at certain stages of the interview, the participants interacted with a series of questions prompts via their web browser. For this purpose, the Mentimeter.com tool was used. Participants were instructed to access a website containing a series of questions. This aimed to create an expectation from their side. Experts in gamification highlight the importance of “support the expectation management” as part of the gamification design (Morschheuser et al., 2017, p.1309).

The interview was divided into four parts. In part number one, researchers dedicated around five minutes to frame the objective of the study and clarify the scope of the term “informal interactions” happening in the workplace, avoiding further misinterpretation that may lead to corrupted answers. In the second part, they had to rank in their web browser –via Mentimeter.com–, “communication skill,” within a list of ten soft skills (Robles, 2012); part three aimed to collect their impression about the most important communication skills, from the study’s pre-selected list, namely: *Listening, Oral Speaking, Clarity, Assertiveness, Self-Awareness*. Three questions were given, proposing three different scenarios to evaluate: (1) overall, which communication skills are more important for employees to have; (2) which communication skills are more important for employees to have, during face-to-face interactions happening in the office and (3) which communication skills are more important for employees to have, during interpersonal communication happening over WCS. For the previous three questions, a rating scale from zero to five was established and used as shown and described below:

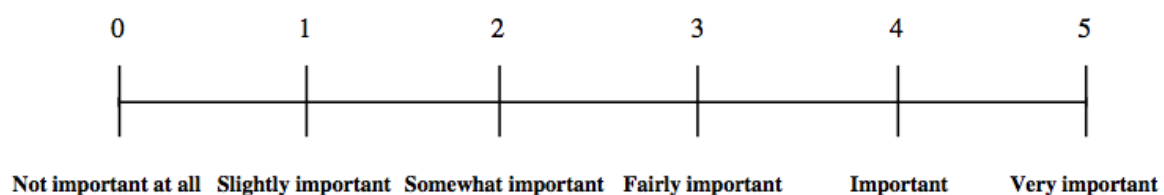


Figure 4. Rating Scale

The interview guide with the complete questionnaire can be found in the Appendix section (Table 4). Furthermore, the questionnaire included questions regarding the interviewees' background and functions in the company. Additionally, questions related to internal communication (under informal context), followed by company-specific questions about communication strategy. It included specific closed questions regarding the perception of communication skills, which were measured with the rating scale mentioned before. Lastly, their views for improving communication through video conferencing tools were solicited.

Data Analysis

As the main source of data proceeds from qualitative methods and primarily semi-structured interviews, a theoretical sampling strategy was followed. This is a recommended approach to follow to avoid preconceptions that may affect the analysis process (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). In general, "the data analysis stage is fundamentally about data reduction—that is, reducing the large corpus of information gathered to make sense of it" (Bell et al., 2019, p.12). The original scope was four to six interviews. Precisely, after performing the sixth interview, repetitive answers and commonalities among the participant's insights were found. Thus, it was interpreted as a sign of reaching a saturation point in the data analysis. Therefore, the researchers concluded that their data was sufficient for meaningful analysis and conclusion. Nevertheless, it can be advisable to widen the sample number for further research, thus validating whether this saturation point is replicated. Additionally, subsequent similar research may include CEOs from a broader geographical region, such as the Nordics region.

This study followed Gioia, Corley & Hamilton's (2013) method for interpreting qualitative data in Inductive research. This process consisted of interpreting empirical results and began by transcribing each of the interviews and then coding them through an open coding approach (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Linneberg & Korsgaard (2019) state that coding enables the analysis of data that identifies the most important words or paragraphs while also leaving room for further adjustment, hence the "open" coding approach. Furthermore, the coding process is also central to

qualitative analysis and allows easy accessibility of data while also increasing the quality of analysis and findings (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019, p.3). Subsequently, the researchers identified commonalities in the words, phrases, and general ideas contained in the interviews and Theoretical Background. Therefore, to ensure that the analyzed data was consistent, the collected information was labeled into common themes and patterns. The results provided second-order codes as the basis for extra dimensions. This process relies on inductive theory testing to make sure the collected data is used to validate existing theories (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

Additionally, after the interviews were recorded, the tool *Trint.com* was used to transcribe, label, and code them. Trint allows the user to upload the recorded video material and transcribe it into the output language. In addition to reviewing the transcribed text, the user can also listen to each specific video section repeatedly and make color notes and highlights, which makes the data analysis process more convenient and efficient.

Findings

In the following section, the results of the interviews are presented and arranged in an ordered manner. Moreover, the objective of this chapter is also to elaborate on the main findings by establishing connections, contrasts, and general commonalities between the participants' collected insights. Thus, an integrated approach is adopted in which the results and their analysis are discussed in the same subsections. Furthermore, the qualitative inductive approach followed by this research permitted the collection of intriguing and comprehensive information related to the research questions. Therefore, and as described in the Research Methodology section, the performed interviews were themed and coded following Gioia's Methodology.

Data Structure

The Gioia's framework is particularly useful for framing exploratory research and proposes a way of forming new concepts and articulating grounded theories. The findings lead this research to a noticeable data construct, which can be dissected into First Order Concepts, Second Order Themes and Aggregate Dimensions (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2013c). Accordingly, First Order Concepts reflect many logical aspects associated with the shift from in-office work to remote work, which was maximized by the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, the internal communication dynamic happening within firms adapted to the change of work environment. This included aspects such as the way of informal communication between employees and the usage of tools that make the communication for decentralized teams possible. A full list of all the identified First Order concepts will be presented in the appendix section. The graphic below shows the overall findings in a summarized format that includes the Second Order Themes leading to the final chosen Aggregate Dimensions.

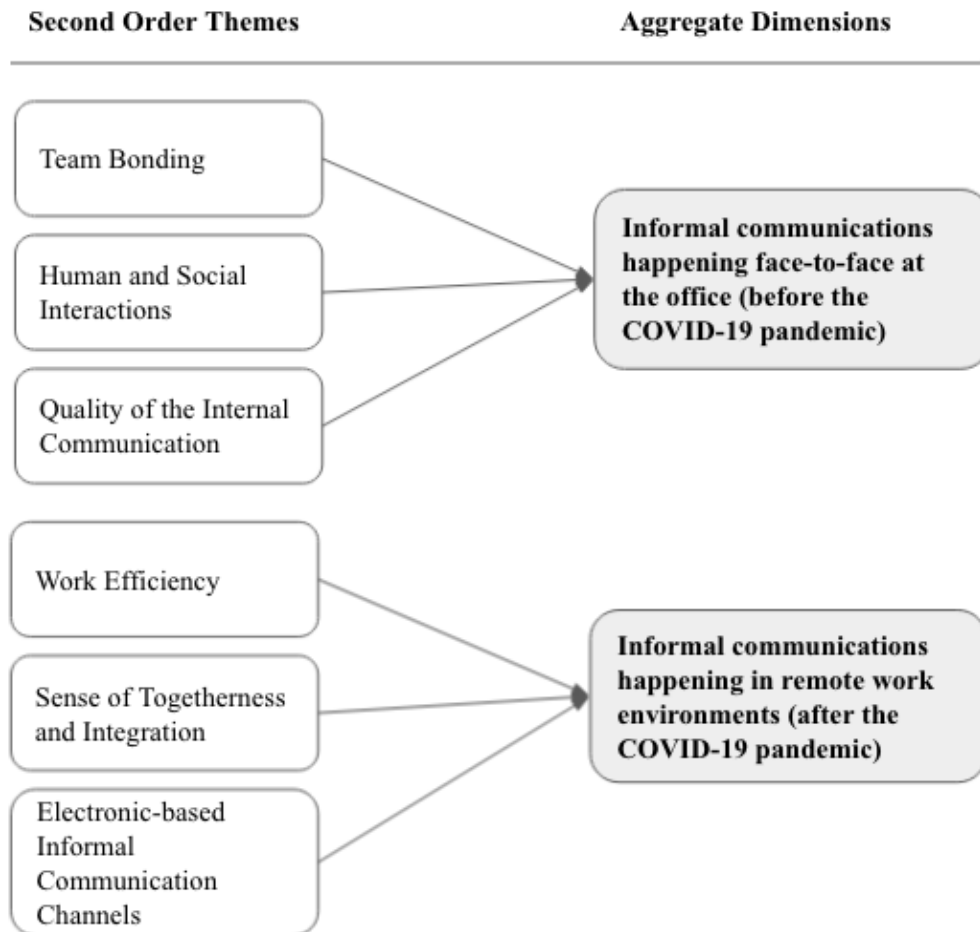


Figure 5. Second Order Themes & Aggregate Dimensions

Furthermore, the participants also provided quantifiable and explicit answers related to the communication skills that are more relevant depending on the used communication channel. This data point relates directly to the first research question. Therefore, given the importance of these results, they will be presented in a separate sub-section.

Informal Communications Happening face-to-face at the Office (before the COVID-19 pandemic)

Team Bonding

All the participants mentioned that their companies are working fully or partially remotely to date. They related intriguing aspects of how the transition to remote work –due to the coronavirus pandemics outbreak– happened and, specifically, how it affected the informal communication of the firm. When they resemble the experience of having all –or the majority– of their staff in the same facility, they appeared to agree that working physically together creates a more spontaneous atmosphere.

CEO II: “When you are in the same workspace you don't need to plan your communication. You can just talk. That is the biggest difference [with remote work]”.

This perception of augmented spontaneity when talking face-to-face seems to be shared by CEO IV, who stated that:

“Zoom is more straightforward, bureaucratic. It feels like you have to say something very stringently and almost as if you have to report it in advance. It's more difficult to be spontaneous or to express a hunch about something. It doesn't go well with Zoom, in my opinion.”

CEO II believes that working in the same office fosters a more natural integration process than remote settings. Furthermore, he pointed out that “trust” is an essential part of establishing human rapport and added:

“I think video calling is very difficult because you need to gain trust with the other person you're talking to and [in a first contact] that is very difficult in a video calling.”

On the other hand, CEO I emphasized that there are essential personal characteristics that contribute to a more cohesive team. When asked about the most important skills an employee should possess to be a successful communicator, he replied:

“I would say that [everything departs from] radical transparency. So, honesty and then empathy. [Also, showing] curiosity or interest in understanding each other’.

As discussed in chapter II, conversations related to personal matters within the workplace usually fall into the category of informal communication. When sharing more than eight hours a day with the same people, it is natural that friendships are developed. For CEO III, becoming friends with colleagues is something desirable. According to him, deepening the bonds between employees can positively affect the firm:

“[It is important] to actually communicate with each other and be friends or whatever you would call them. Having fun together”.

Human and Social Interactions

The authors identified that a common concern for distributed teams was maintaining the quality of human interactions, something that occurs more naturally face-to-face. Furthermore, body language was acknowledged as a consistent aspect that facilitates informal interactions. Accordingly, CEO I, III, and IV agreed that in face-to-face interactions, the counterparty could get a more comprehensive picture of the message’s intentionality –in comparison to conversations over WCS:

CEO I: “Face to face has the pro of being a more human communication channel. It is the body language, it's easier to interact with a group of people”.

CEO III: “[In the office] You can see each other's body language, and you can feel the other a little bit better. Whereas online, it's like this when we don't really feel the vibe of each other when we're just looking into a screen”.

CEO IV: “Well, if you meet face to face, of course, there's more body language. You can achieve a sense of urgency if you go to someone's office, of course. (...) you have in your body language, in your drive forward, some kind of direction, whereas Zoom is a fixed format”.

Conversely, CEO II holds a contrasting opinion in this matter. He thinks that despite the natural limitations of WCS –thus, discarding a broader set of non-verbal cues–, the channel selection does not weigh that much:

“It depends on what the subject is, of course, but, if you want something informal and fast, then, I don't think I have any issue with getting others to understand what I mean. I don't think there is a problem with it all”.

Additionally, CEO VI holds the position that WCS can also help and supplement certain cues of body language working remotely:

“The camera helps. You can actually have a feeling about the person's body language and their facial expressions (...), but for me personally, there is still some kind of element missing, in terms of the interpersonal interaction sitting in the same room together. It's difficult for me to put a finger on exactly what it is, but I think it's the three dimensional versus the two dimensional, probably”.

During informal one-to-one interactions, all parties implicitly understand that it is allowed to deliver messages under a less structured approach. Nevertheless, this may come at a cost. Not being clear enough can affect the interpretation of the message.

CEO IV: “I think there's also sometimes a mismatch between what people see and what you are saying. I feel like I have to be what I'm saying in order for the message to come across in Zoom, whereas if we were to meet in person, everybody would kind of understand that, oh, she's looking like that because she's concentrated, or (...) because she's in a rush. So, meeting face to face, (...) is more forgiving, in my opinion”.

Additionally, there was another common sentiment between all the participants. They reported missing the times of working in the office. For instance, CEO IV said:

“I think everybody misses the face-to-face meeting. I don't think it is specific to our company. I think it is a general thing”.

Similarly, CEO III mentioned:

“I still love to meet face to face and not over WCS. Mostly, we do that when people are here [at the office]. We have one member working at home for the last 6 months. When he comes to the office, I go to his place. It is easier ... the body language You need to see people (...)”

Quality of the Internal Communication

There are different interpretations of whether the quality of informal communication improves or diminishes when being in the office. Although, at first, he stated that the channel “does not matter that much”, CEO II apparently rectified his view and said:

“They are two different types of communications, either physical or online. Remote doesn't work so efficiently, of course.”

Conversely, CEO I believes that written formats, such as text-based apps (Slack, Teams, WhatsApp) positively improves the quality of the messages:

“[Written communication] increases the quality of asynchronous messaging. It might increase synchronicity. It's much more dependent on the capability, the communication skills of the ones using it; It can be more time-efficient for information spreading if you have a pretty narrow scope for meetings”.

Nevertheless, it may be a challenge for hybrid teams (partially remote) to find a balance between convenience and keeping a quality flow of information. Particularly, Company III portrayed an example of this situation. According to its CEO (III):

“It's a bit weird, sometimes, that you do something in writing, instead of just looking over the screen, right? But, again, it's more effective sometimes instead of having meetings all the time ... and then, if the guy's not at the office, we just call him on Slack, just to see [him]”.

The research found that CEOs are aware of their responsibility of setting up the necessary means to generate better communication outcomes. To the question “Can you tell us how internal communication with your staff functions within your firm?”, they replied:

CEO I: “We introduce some routines, like a morning stand-up, where we get a little bit of social interaction and we can do it also remotely”.

CEO II: “[informal communication] It's basically phone calls, video. We sometimes text message each other through SMS”.

CEO IV: “We have an overarching waterfall approach. We all know where we're headed, we all agree on the general direction. But if something else is proposed or comes up or a new option appears, maybe then that is usually done in email form or in the telephone conversation”.

CEO VI: “For day to day matters, we have the ambition to make sure that our intranet is an active and live place for information sharing, big and small, (...) we acquired access to a platform, which allows me and other people in the organization to record a short video (...) or sort of a town hall meeting”.

In the last response, it can be seen how CEO IV's perception about informal communication was slightly mixed with formal matters. This pattern was partially experienced in the other interviews.

Subsequently, CEO IV, added up how working remote demands more efforts:

“When you meet informally, face to face, there are already social skills in place, and you don't have to be so precise. I think we can read from each other someone's feeling on a topic or someone's enthusiasm for something. And there's not so much need to be very assertive, or it's not really where you drive through a change by the water cooler. It's more of check-in, but in Zoom, you have to listen harder, and you have to speak more clearly, and you have to be more assertive at the same time”.

Informal Communications happening in Remote Work Environments (after the COVID-19 pandemic)

Work Efficiency

Working remotely leads unavoidably to having meetings via WCS. Half of the participants consider that meetings under digital channels can be long and tiring than face-to-face. However, the other fifty percent are of the view that using WCS can make them faster. Hence, increasing the efficiency. In addition, not having the geographical constraints to make an encounter possible, WCS allows for having a greater number of contacts per day.

CEO I: "Face to face has the pro of being a more human communication channel. It is the body language, it's easier to interact with a group of people. Less fatigue, more and more engaging. ... In Face-To-Face meetings you might have a conversation where you get exposed to other people in a more relaxed and spontaneous way. We introduce it anyway with some routines, like a morning stand up, where we get a little bit of social interaction and we can do it also remotely".

CEO III: "The good thing about it is that you can keep it really short, you can do a meeting fast and to the point. Whereas if you're sitting in a face-to-face meeting, you have to talk for a long time, you have to go there, you have to do all those things. Whereas online, we don't really feel the vibe of each other, when we're just looking into a screen, but we actually love it because the effectiveness of the workforce is getting better".

The interview results from CEO I & II showed a trend and shift towards written formats such as integrated chat functions in Slack for example, for reporting or communicating with coworkers which seem to be more efficient than face-to-face communication in the workplace.

CEO I: Pros of Slack: it's less time-intensive, you can work in a remote team, so you can access a talent pool everywhere in the world, and you can work with a shorter time span. In Slack you usually will have a lot of the DM's or channel messaging where you write things you reflect on. It is a little more asynchronous. It's more like chat tools.

CEO II: "We only use slack or call each other".

However, on the other side of the informal communication process with written formats, there still appears to be an interest in ordinary telephone calls as shown by the following responses:

CEO II: "It depends what the subject is, of course, but I mean, if you want something informal and fast, then we call each other".

CEO IV: "I think we all feel, I haven't actually checked in with the others, but my sense is that we all feel, that those chat messages can catch you at other times when you're not in the mode for exactly what the topic is. And you will get strange replies. So the best thing is to actually call someone and make sure that they are with you in that direct moment".

Working remotely is furthermore cutting off verbal cues and body language signals, which affect the listening perception. Due to the missing natural communication signals that guide the perception, there is a communication shift to so-called *virtual nudging* and *active probing* which includes the usage of digital tools such as "zoom - reactions" for example as a replacement to amplify certain cues that are missing when communicating from a remote setting.

CEO III: "The message is always delivered more precisely when you interact face to face, because of the verbal cues and the body language".

CEO IV: "Zoom is more straightforward, bureaucratic, if you will, it feels like you have to say something very stringently and almost as if you have to report it in advance. It's more difficult to be spontaneous ... In a way, you know these reactions here and you can do a heart or you can do a fire-work and things like this. Those are useful if the leader of the group is asking a question: Is everybody OK with that? Fireworks or thumbs up like this, but at the same time, it also takes away something. How do I get rid of this thing now?".

Overall, working remotely requires tools where employees communicate with one another, and the results show a centralization of internal communication tools which avoid fatigue in the workforce. As shown in the previous quotations of the interviewees, CEOs use different tools in their

companies such as Slack, Microsoft Teams, or Whereby (CEO III) to have a centralized communication platform.

CEO III: “We use Slack internally to talk with someone working from home and to communicate with someone external from the company we use Whereby.com for video conferences”.

Sense of Togetherness and Integration

The surveyed individuals are leaders of relatively small/medium firms but with growth potential. Hence, it may not be surprising to find that “becoming one” with their team is a priority for them. This feeling was described as togetherness by CEO I:

CEO I: “Also, in a group conversation, you lose a bit of the group dynamic so you don't see faces, it is a bit less engaging and it's a little bit less hard to get the feeling of togetherness. You work for it, but it's not the same thing”.

To create a sense of togetherness and to encourage internal communication of teams while working remotely, some company routines were established. Those included fixed online gatherings to generate personal connections or the importance to always have the camera on during web conferences. Some of these established internal “company policies” are presented below:

CEO I: “Always camera on. All the time. I want to see human interactions, looking into the face as if I was always around to have engagement and direct feedback loops”.

CEO III: “ We have a Monday morning stand up where we talk about the last week and what we're going to do this week”.

CEO III: “Always, always, always have the camera on. It's weird not to have it on. Also, if I have a meeting with a client and they don't have the camera on, my bookkeeper for example keeps doing it and I tell him, put the camera on when I'm talking to, otherwise call me on the phone if you don't want to have it on”.

Furthermore, it was mentioned that WCS is used for social interactiveness besides work matters.

This was mentioned by CEO III:

“We started doing like two calls, three calls a day. But everybody was just sitting while we were eating lunch together through slack right, it's like trying to have this social interactiveness”.

Additionally, it may be the case that the current WCS tools will develop further in the directions of virtual avatar-based tools in order to be used as informal, omnipresent communication channels. Regarding the question of how a company can improve the internal communication between employees, CEO I mentioned the following:

“I cannot foresee exactly which solution would solve the need right now, but I'm pretty sure we will have a lot of innovation to fill. For example, gathers.town came up. So, there is a lot of things everyone would give it a go right now. I haven't seen anything that has been radically impressive so far, but there is a lot of innovation”.

“I think that the need for human interaction still is to stay strong”.

Additionally, CEO V mentioned:

“It's really about to give the people the ownership that they feel that they are earning what they are doing and they love the work and those things”.

Electronic-based Informal Communication Channels

It was mentioned by 50% of the interviewees that *Slack* is used as a channel for internal communication but also for informal communication among employees. Consequently, it can be said that *Slack* can be seen as an ecosystem for internal and informal communication within companies. Furthermore, it serves as a replacement tool for short informal messages.

Moreover, companies are open to testing new internal communication tools. This was compiled in the answers provided by three CEOs as a consequence of the rapid changes due to COVID-19 and the answers to the question of whether internal communication in the workplace tends to be more or less flexible in the future. It can be extracted that communication channels have

interchangeability in usage for different purposes. Additionally, project management tools will serve as dual communication channels depending on formal or informal communication.

CEO I: "It just will change the way we see the world. For example, for one single business meeting, you may need a two days trip, or four hours flight for one-hour meeting like we were doing it before. So that is not going to happen, but most probably we are going to bunch more meetings together. When you meet, you meet for real, right. So I think that would be a bit more quality and more focus and experience in the real life and everything will otherwise just transition to remote".

CEO I: "I think it's going to be more skillful. So there is no way I think there is no way we're getting back to 2019. There's gonna be remote work, that's gonna be different shifts, you might work three days home, two days at home or we probably will fly all the company somewhere once every second quarter to have a get-together and do our debrief and do a lot of the work and be together".

CEO IV: "I think there will be more channels and the thing I mentioned about us not communicating with text messages because we catch each other at different strange times, I think people will be more used to that. Again, maybe a younger team or in the future. The workplace already looks different from what it did 20 or 50 years ago, and of course, it will look different also in the future and we will act differently, but I think, in my personal opinion, at some kind of cost, some things cost more, some things cost less".

As mentioned earlier by CEO I & III, Slack & MS Teams (even though it is mainly considered a project management service), for example, serve as internal and versatile tools for informal communication. Consequently, this shows integration and convergence of company tools, which are initially used for professional work and are then also used as digital channels for informal communication.

Top Communication Skills in the Workplace

As it was described in Chapter II, this qualitative research included the collection of certain quantitative measurements. This data allowed to create of clear visualization of the CEOs'

perception about predominant communication skills in an informal context related to work. First, they were prompted to evaluate these skills in a supposed scenario where the interactions were held under a face-to-face channel. Second, a similar question was provided, this time, evaluating the interactions over WCS. Finally, the interviewees provided some reflections about the consistency or discrepancies of their own evaluations.

Interestingly, it was found that the predominant communication skills perception broadly differs depending on the channel. In the case of face-to-face informal interactions, the CEOs rated in the following order: (1) *listening*, (2) *self-awareness*, (3) *clarity*, (4-5) *oral speaking & assertiveness* (both received the same score). On the other hand, under WCS, the perceived top communication skills were: (1) *clarity*, (2) *listening*, (3) *assertiveness*, (4) *oral speaking*, and (5) *self-awareness*. The results suggest that the channel of communication employed has a direct influence on communication skills. Considering the experimental evidence, a compilation of the main highlights from the interview will be presented below.

Overall ranking of the most important communication skills employees should have to be more effective in their informal interactions over face-to-face (overall results according to the participants)

From 0 - 5 (least important - highly important)

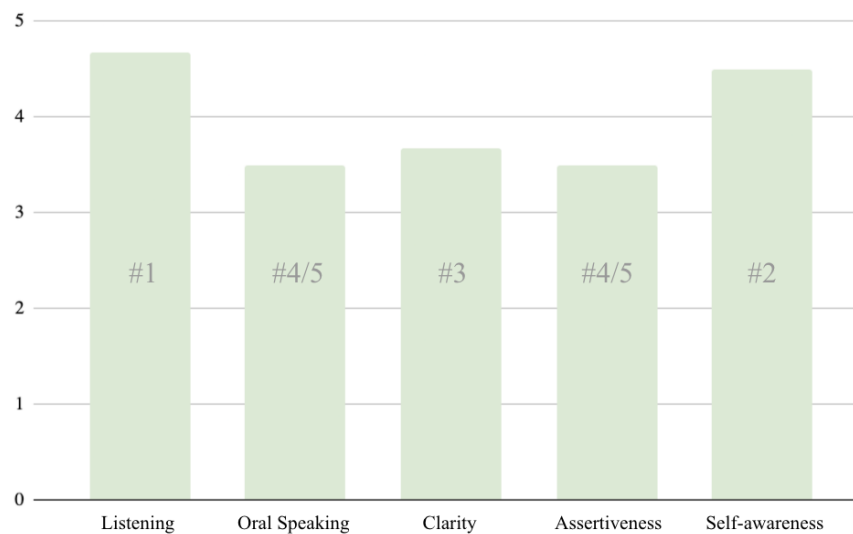


Figure 6. Overall Ranking Of The Most Important Communication Skills Employees Should Have To Be More Effective In Their Informal Interactions Over Face-To-Face (overall results according to the participants)

Overall ranking of the most important communication skills employees should have to be more effective in their informal interactions over web conferencing tools (overall results according to the participants)
From 0 - 5 (least important - highly important)

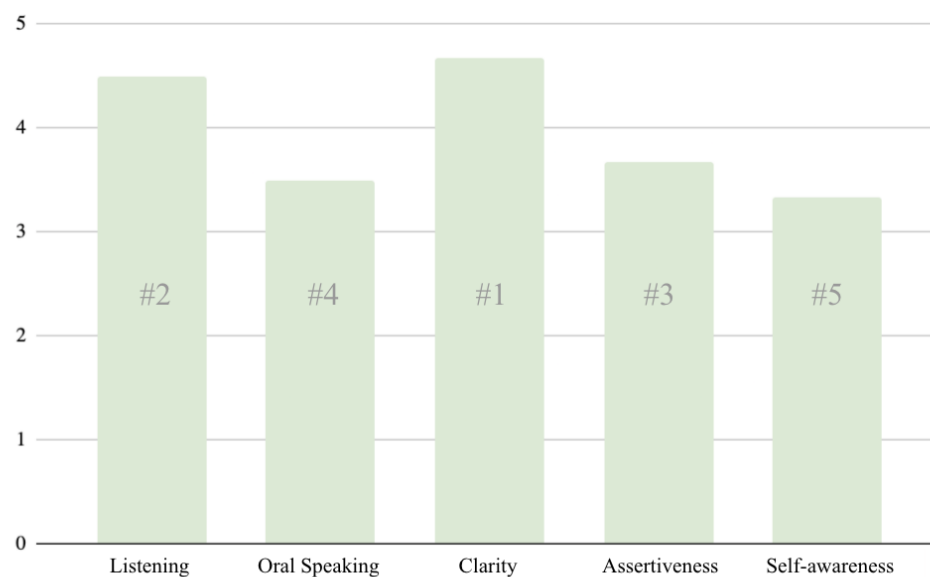


Figure 7. Overall Ranking Of The Most Important Communication Skills Employees Should Have To Be More Effective In Their Informal Interactions Over WCSs (overall results according to the participants)

Listening

According to the results, in cases where employees share the same physical space, listening was deemed to be the most valuable communication skill for informal interactions. Interestingly, listening was highlighted too as the second most important skill in remote settings communications. Following are some related observations made by the participants:

CEO IV: “The other day I spoke via Zoom to an old friend. She had an extreme presence in her Zoom image. [Although] I felt there was no eye-to-eye contact, I felt that she was actively listening, really trying and succeeding to be present in the meeting. And that was just an informal meeting amongst us, catching up”.

Moreover, CEO III provided another interesting revelation. He discussed why a leader should be a good listener to signal an open leadership style and provide a supportive environment to its employees.

CEO III: “It is important to listen and understand what they're saying. If they need something, help them. If they want something, listen and understand why they want it. Otherwise, they won't say anything at all.”

CEO V mentioned that a supportive and understanding environment, where employees feel comfortable to express themselves with honesty, allow for an active listening approach:

“I think we are actively listening to each other, I think so. We know each other, so when someone is distracted, we say, hey, I am not focussing and I'm busy with something, but I think this is, because we are that open and honest with each other”.

Subsequently, CEO III added up that in personal settings, you can sometimes allow yourself to be a less active listener. Alternatively, in a growing company, where members are frequently integrated and working together on the same projects, it becomes more evident when your attention wanders while someone else is speaking.

Oral Speaking

Oral speaking skill refers to the ability to express ideas adequately and effectively. Furthermore, there are evident differences in how this ability plays whether a conversation is held in-person or over WCS. For instance, the only thing you need to communicate verbally face-to-face is your voice. Under electronic-based channels, there are minimum essentials needed:

CEO I: "It starts with the basics. Everyone has to have headphones and a microphone. So make sure that you can be seen. It can be hard and you can listen to everyone. And then that's the main obstacle if it is not there".

CEO III noted that there are situations where oral speaking makes the information spread more reliable and accurate. He believes that written formats are simply not made for communicating certain types of information. Time-wise, verbal communication can be more effective under certain scenarios, as the one described below:

"[there are often misunderstandings], especially if you only do the writing. So we still have people working fully remote. So, we still need to call them up and elaborate on what they have to do. Because, if you just write "fix this", then, there are so many ways to misunderstand it".

CEO II argued that the personal values and intentions of a leader are important factors in determining its ability to communicate effectively. Thus, obtaining a positive perception of its employees. That, in his words, surpass any limitation given by the channel:

"I think that the intentions are important. If you are honest and clear about your message, that affects the employees more. And I mean, you can be that despite the channel, you can be that on an email, for example".

Self-awareness

Self-awareness means connecting with one's own emotions while showing empathy for others. It is also related to personal values. The results show that before COVID-19, *self-awareness* was ranked much higher than now, where growing firms turned remote. Regarding the question if "employees have more understanding for other people's situations using video conferencing tools or when communicating face-to-face", the CEO's answers justified the dropped ranking of this skill.

CEO I: "So if you normally don't know if people have kids or what they've been doing, it's so hard to feel empathy for another, right? So you need to be personal. That gets a bit more

personal to get to know people. And in that sense, it's a bit more effortless in real life because it's something that mankind has been doing forever”.

CEO II: “I would say less”.

CEO III: “That was better before. Again, due to the body language”.

CEO IV: “I think it's now easier to mention difficulties, and sometimes they are truly Zoom's fault, sometimes I think the digital era gets blamed for some things. Again, I think we're all experiencing a lack of energy at some points because we're not seeing each other”.

CEO V: “That was better before”.

CEO VI: “I would say that was better in face-to-face communication”.

Furthermore, CEO IV gave a positive insight on how a CEO can increase the confidence with their employees through communication:

“ I sometimes send happy emails (‘we're almost there’ and ‘thank you so much for your commitment’ and ‘I know this is tough for everyone’). But I have to say, I don't really get a clear confirmation that they are well perceived. But, (...) I do it anyway, so I'm not waiting for them to say thank you or say: you know, oh, that's positive”.

Clarity

Clarity is the use of clear and precise language to convey a message or to provide unambiguous information. Interestingly, it has been found that clarity, when communicating in a face-to-face setting, was ranked in the last position, alongside assertiveness. However, considering informal communication over WCS, clarity earned a much higher rank and recognition of CEOs. Thus, its ranking moved up toward becoming the most predominant communications skill. Regarding the question if “using a clear and precise language is important and why” the CEOs answered the following:

CEO I: "In a face to face meeting, it's easier to have a lot of balances and checkpoints. If someone is speaking too much, or if someone is speaking less sharply, you can see it on people's faces. You can see it in other things there are a lot of balances and checkpoints. [However], on online meetings it's a bit tougher".

CEO IV: "Yes, because the mind works, no matter if you are clear or unclear, the mind of the listener will create an image. If you are unclear, they will answer a question you haven't asked, or they will paint you a picture you didn't order, or they will do work that you didn't ask for. So, yes, a clear and precise language is necessary".

CEO VI: "So clarity is one very important element in terms of understanding what the person means and what is expected to come out of our conversation".

These findings may imply that under the current situation, where internal communication mostly happens via electronic channels, like WCS, clarity becomes vital. The ranking results above show its importance and suggest a perception change in the communication process per se. In addition, CEO IV stated that communication issues could arise due to unclear messages attributed to the communication channel. However, being an interviewee gave CEO IV the chance to reflect on this topic with the following result:

"I think one kind of sad result is that people come to a meeting and have an idea of what's going to happen, then we communicate and, perhaps, make informal decisions. Then, when you go away from the meeting, people revert to the same idea they had before the meeting, meaning the meeting didn't change anybody's opinion. (...) It's very difficult to change someone's mind about something via Zoom."

Assertiveness

In spite of the ability to speak and act in a manner that respects and considers the opinions and rights of others while also upholding your own rights, needs, and personal limits (Pipaş & Jaradat, 2010), *assertiveness*, is the skill that showed the second-lowest change in the ranking above. The majority of the CEOs answered that the personal limits are respected discussing work-related tasks while others are assertive. Despite showing little changes considering a shift from face-to-face meetings to WCS, the CEOs provided the following answers:

CEO I: *"It can be more laid back and less interactive in [Microsoft] Teams. So, in that sense, if you don't want to be assertive, you have more tools to not do that... If you are dominant, most probably there are fewer checkpoints and balances, so it can spiral more on virtual meetings than in real life meetings".*

CEO II: *"I think in video, no... I think it's the same, but maybe in text, if you write an email, I think it's easier to be more aggressive in the communication, but video... I think it's too near to physical meetings".*

Secondary Findings

Communication Skill As The Top Priority Soft Skill, According To CEOs

Researchers preselected Robles' (2012) list of top 10 soft skills in the workplace. Those skills were then taken into account for the interviews for this research. As shown in the graphic below, the interviewees (CEOs) had to rank the most important soft skills in the workplace. Accordingly, the totalized final results are shown below.

"Rank from 1 to 10 the most important soft skills in the workplace" [based on Robles (2012) top 10 soft skills in the workplace]

Position	Soft Skill
1	Communication
2	Positive Attitude
3	Integrity
4	Teamwork
5	Work Ethic
6	Responsibility
7	Flexibility
8	Professionalism
9	Interpersonal Skills
10	Courtesy

Figure 8. Ranking Of The 10 Most Important Soft Skills In The Workplace (according to the participants)

The results show that *Communication*, *Professionalism*, and a *Positive attitude* are ranked in the first three places, followed by *Integrity* and *Teamwork*. Surprisingly, *Responsibility* and *Work Ethic* were ranked on places six and seven. It became obvious that among the interviewees, *Flexibility*, *Courtesy*, and *Interpersonal Skills* –as they were ranked in the last three places– are not as important as the researchers assumed. It can be concluded that interpersonal skills (ranked last) are close to communication. However, they greatly diverged in the ranking from the first to the last place.

These findings illustrate the optimal work environment from the CEO's point of view where communication is handled as a vital part of the workplace, paired with professionalism and a positive attitude. Overall, it creates an environment with drive and direction. Interestingly, the aforementioned findings go in hand with the answer to the question of “what the most important communication skill is that a CEO should have in order to be effective in dealing personally with employees”. For instance, CEO IV confirmed with the following words:

“It's difficult to say just one but I would like to say empathy is one. Maybe it's not the most important, but I want to say that drive and direction are the most important. But they should be delivered with empathy. So not just one-way communication, but also with your ears in mode, so we're also listening.”

A Must-Have Skill For Remote Workers

The data shows that since the WCS communication channel often limits or restricts a worker's verbal cues and body language expressiveness, clear communication may become even more important than before in remote work settings. In this regard, CEO I pointed out that it may be necessary to be verbally oriented as well as to have well-developed communication skills in light of COVID-19 and its rapid changes.

CEO I: “I would say that making it remote will make it much more evident and much more clear if you have mastered the skill or not. There will be an evolutionary pressure into developing these skills. I think there is a lot to gain for good communication skills and there is even more to gain for good communication skills virtually”.

Generational Shift

The findings suggest that there is not a one-size-fits-all solution to effectively transition internal communication to remote settings. Even within the homogeneity of the sampled companies, every interviewed CEO seems to be strategically adapting to the ongoing COVID-19 situation in different ways. Nevertheless, there is an apparent difference between the chosen approaches, based on the CEO's age. For instance,

CEO III (28 years): "We had Slack way before Corona. So we had it implemented for the past six or seven years or something".

CEO IV: "What if I had a younger team in their 20s and maybe Zoom would be more close to what we are all experiencing? I'm 42. I think all of us have lived our lives through face-to-face meetings. So we are always comparing what would happen if I had a younger team around me where I was the oldest, would zoom and slack, etc, be more natural".

However, a correlation between the willingness to innovate on ways of improving informal communications and the CEOs' age has not been determined with a sufficient degree of certainty.

Remote Work Perceived As An Irreversible Trend

As the current ongoing pandemic is not under control yet, it seems that the trend towards remote work is on rising. While remote work has its advantages and disadvantages, the adaptations and changes made by companies to accommodate this situation leave room for alternate solutions.

CEO II: "I think video calling is going to be more common now in the future because it's much cheaper to communicate with video instead of traveling, for example".

CEO III: "People are talking about fully remote and stuff like that. Then, I think it will be less flexible if you still go to the office, and you still see people next to each other. That would be the same, but not more flexible. I don't think so due to this".

CEO VI: " I think that the ways of communicating by the help with different tools and platforms etc., will increase in a way, because if we look at what we believe about our future workplace (...) We actually had a survey in our team in terms of what the employees think about the current situation and how they want it to be in the future, (...) the majority

of people want to be in the office about three days a week and have the flexibility of working from home two days a week.”.

Discussion

Research Aim & Discussion

This research aimed to explore the implications of predominant communication skills before and after COVID-19, in the context of Swedish HGFs, and into the eyes of their CEOs. The importance hereby of those leading the company was given by the Upper Echelon Theory (Jin et al., 2017), which bridges the gap between their accumulated human and social capital and their ability to successfully lead the firm. Arguably, this theory was challenged by the appearance of COVID-19, as the top executives abruptly had to face an unprecedented event that impacted key areas of the companies, including the internal communication structures.

Identifying the Most Important Communication Skills in the Context of Informal Communication

First, this study departed by trying to validate to what degree communications skills are a predominant soft skill in HGFs. Precisely, Robles (2012) suggests that amongst the top ten soft skills in business environments, *communication* topped the rank according to top executives. Consequently, this research replicated Robles (2012) results and confirmed that they are applicable in the context of Swedish HGFs. Furthermore, soft skills are needed in today's global marketplace (John, 2009). Therefore, if CEOs give them the appropriate importance, soft skills can be a useful vehicle to the development of human capital, fostering the capacity to adapt to the complexity and fast-changing environment of businesses (Remedios, 2012). Nonetheless, due to the rapid adoption of remote work as a common practice (Fasciani et al., 2020), this situation unveils a series of considerations for HGFs: (1) will they provide their employees with related training to improve their soft skills? Or, (2) being already a broadly acknowledged topic, in the practice, what would be the level of commitment that CEOs will assume in creating more supportive environments for employees to develop soft skills? The supervened rush brought by the pandemic accelerated certain changes and altered its prioritization and implementation. It is still too soon to understand how the development of soft skills would adapt to the increasing demand for digital

communication. And, what's more, how electronic mediums of exchange -such as WCS- will reshape the way executives think of communication skills, as the current number one ranked soft skills in the workplace.

Second, and very tied to the *RQ 1*, the study found that CEOs of growing firms held divergent opinions about the importance of specific communications skills in the context of informal interactions. According to them, they can vary depending on the type of communication channel used.

Ranking of the most important communication skills employees should have to be more effective in their informal interactions (according to CEOs)

Position	Over face-to-face interaction	Over WCSs interaction
1	Listening	Clarity
2	Self-awareness	Listening
3	Clarity	Assertiveness
4	Oral Speaking &	Oral Speaking
5	Assertiveness (same score)	Self-awareness

Figure 9. Ranking Of The Most Important Communication Skills Employees Should Have To Be More Effective In Their Informal Interactions (according to CEOs)

As it can be seen in the previous chart, there is a clear redefinition of what communication abilities matter the most. *Listening* is appreciated as a paramount skill that fosters much more than the quality of communication. The sensation of being heard was consistently ranked as the number one priority for face-to-face communication, and second over WCS. In contrast, the perceived importance of *clarity* diverged whereas the recipient is in front of a screen, or in front of you. The

constraints attributed to the channels may shed some light on this. For instance, although in video calls both parties can exchange non-verbal cues, indisputably its rate is lower than face-to-face (Hargie, Dickson & Tourish, 2004). Therefore, there is a need to be more explicit and elaborate on more constructed messages over WCS.

Lastly, it might be the case that the CEOs' perceived top communication skills may remain consistent regardless of the industry. At least, having analyzed IT and Healthtech companies, the sentiment of the participants is that regardless of the industry, the changes imposed by COVID-19 affect the overall worldwide business environment. Of course, this suggestion would require broader transversal research to validate its accuracy.

The Implications Of The Most Important Communication Skills For HGFs

In relation to the *RQ 2*, it was found that communication skills have broad implications for the internal communication of HGFs. In terms of communication channels, the researchers initially assumed that the post-COVID-19 natural transition of face-to-face (as an informal communication channel) was the web conferencing tool. The rationale behind that assumption was that WCS's emulate certain characteristics of face-to-face. In contrast, it was found that the range of mediums of exchanges over the internet is vast and CEOs demonstrated a willingness to explore these solutions. The written communication was assumed by the company leaders as the *de facto* medium for hosting informal conversations. This, due to several reasons: (1) it is more suitable for an asynchronous team, as it does not always require the live presence of the counterparty to deliver the message, (2) information can be organized by categories or topics. For instance, organizations that use the Slack software, create Slack's channels for grouping specific thematic conversations, and (3) if the sender possesses good communication abilities, the written format may result in a more systematic way of spreading specific information, instructions or guidelines. Nevertheless, the study found that WCS is, indeed, employed by certain companies as a primary medium of non-structured communications. Some firms reported having implemented routines to share common daily activities, like lunchtime or stand-up meetings, as a way of fostering social interaction between employees, regardless of the distance imposed by the actual circumstances.

This demonstrated that the sense of togetherness and the need of reestablishing human connections seems to be fueled by remoteness. Moreover, the literature on Communication Skills highlights how social presence may affect the selection of the channel (Hargie, Dickson & Tourish, 2004). In other words, what Hargie, Dickson & Tourish (2004) suggest is that the closer the social presence is, the less impersonal channel would be chosen. Arguably, this may be explained by the facilities that face-to-face communication provides to the parties. First, in-person talks allow one to read between the lines and leverage the expectations of what degree of formality is expected by the counterparty. Second, over video conferences the social dimension is somehow lost, relating to the “cuelessness theory”, which “refers to a reduction in social cues (visual contact, physical presence), which increases the psychological distance between the inter-actors” (Hargie, Dickson & Tourish, 2004, p.251). Finally, another variable that plays out in the selection of the channel relates to “the degree of psychological distance between sender and receiver”, or what is called “Social Immediacy” (Hargie, Dickson & Tourish, 2004, p.252). Therefore, a medium with a greater capability of transmitting information will enhance its intimacy. For instance, if the receiver is located in a distant cubicle (or even working remote), he or she is more likely to be phoned rather than receiving a “brief visit”. Moreover, it was found that the size and financial capabilities of the firm impact the selection of the electronic-based communication channel. That is because, in some cases, these tools (such as MS Teams, Zoom and WebEx) require the payment of licenses for commercial usages or may demand complex training sessions which ideally would be avoided in smaller teams.

Furthermore, there was found divergence on opinions based on the participant’s age. This apparent generational shift in mindsets can be seen in the example of younger teams, which are likely to adapt faster to technological changes. Encompassed with this argument, CEO IV (28 years old) was not hesitant to replace face-to-face communication (for informal interactions) with the use of written informal ways of communication using tools such as Slack, MS Teams or Emails, as they were perceived to improve communication efficiency. This indicates a shift towards electronic-based informal communication channels, which was precisely identified as one of the Second Order Themes of the study. On the contrary, teams led by older individuals tend to stick to ordinary phone calls, in case of upcoming important tasks that need to be quickly discussed

verbally. Those teams also prefer the usage of WCS as the main communication channel while working remotely.

Curiously, communication skills, rather than only being a fundamental part of human capital, represent key opportunities for the growing firms. The human capital and its ability to clearly communicate can avoid misunderstandings and, in a broader sense, save time and financial resources as work tasks can be fulfilled faster. Subsequently, the influence of communication skills on the competitiveness and the scalability of HGFs has been acknowledged previously by scholars (Monteiro, 2019; Skawińska & Zalewski, 2020). Therefore, they deserve to be taken as a pivotal aspect tied to the firm's success.

Lastly, the participants perceived that the future of remote work is arguably transitioning into a hybrid version, with a mix of office days and the opportunity to stay in the remote environment (home office), as a flexible option. However, this mixed modality would depend on the job, the industry, and ultimately, on the individual company policies, jurisdiction, and regulations. Overall, it can be said that the remote informal way of communicating can be expected to be further developed. So far, tools and communication channels are observed to be efficient and effective for informal interactions. But, there is room for improvements, perhaps by finding more stable balances between human connection, interactivity, and efficiency.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to determine the importance of communication skills in the workplace and discover which of them have a greater impact on informal communication within HGFs. This became relevant in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, a period where companies had to abruptly reshape and adapt, in order to subsist. Additionally, this study not only categorized the predominant skills but also contextualized their implications for entrepreneurs who lead growing firms. Further, the limited previous literature on HGFs in the context of COVID-19 (Post, 2020), as well as the desire to add knowledge applicable to the field of internal communication in the Entrepreneurial field prompted this research.

This study followed a qualitative (inductive) research methodology, using semi-structured interviews as the main vehicle of data collection. Paradoxically, since the COVID-19 regulations disallow the authors to conduct in-person interviews, the remote conversations with the participants were seasoned with gamified elements, aiming for improved quality data collection. For instance, the usage of the Mentimeter.com tool enabled a dynamic atmosphere with the interviewees and allowed the gathering of quantifiable data sets that provided direct insights for answering the *RQ 1*. Thus, a novel approach to conducting remote, but also interactive interviews, was developed, which may be seen as an alternative approach and as an extension for qualitative research conducted online.

Initial results were consistent with Robles (2012), indicating that *communication skills* are the highest-ranked soft skill in the workplace (according to company leaders). Subsequently, the findings also showed that the perceived predominant communication skills strongly differ whether one refers to face-to-face or WCS interactions. In this sense, the selection of the communication channel not only matters but completely makes CEOs aware of different aspects. First, it was found that *listening* was the most important communication skill to nurture for successful day-to-day exchanges during informal in-person interactions. Second, *clarity* was perceived by the CEOs as the top ability for outperforming on video conferencing casual conversations.

Furthermore, the participants highlighted that during these times of change and in the context of home office, the capacity of being specific and unambiguous in the delivery of the messages enables productivity and is well-perceived by employees. Nevertheless, all the participants were willing to explore formulas that encourage productivity without sacrificing more natural ways and spontaneous human connection. Web conferencing tools –and overall, electronic channels– were found to restrict the human component of the communication. Therefore, the completeness of face-to-face interactions has not found a parallel equivalent in the digital world yet.

Additionally, in connection to the second research question, the results revealed other implications of the dominant communication skills for informal interactions in the workplace. First, CEOs perceived the usage of written communication channels (e.g. Slack) as a medium that enhances *clarity* –for discussing those informal matters that once were debated in front of the water cooler or just by hopping into the cubicle of a colleague. Second, the *listening* skill topped the rank when the participants were asked about communication skills in face-to-face informal interactions. However, it was still very relevant too for WCS communications. It was found that, if the receiver has good listening abilities, the conversations become more spontaneous and both parties are more likely to engage. Interestingly, having the camera on during a conversation is an indicator that signals interest thus generating in the counterparty a better disposition to engage in active listening. Third, the limited non-verbal cues that can be transmitted over WCS may affect the quality of the communication. Finally, most of the CEOs demonstrated to be aware of the challenges imposed by the COVID-19 and are taking actions to adapt their internal communication structures accordingly. This includes training and education to employees about communication channels and remote work practices.

For entrepreneurs, the results of this study represent an opportunity to rethink the magnitude and importance that informal communication portrays for their business. No matter the size of the firm, being aware of the predominant communication elements may set for better strategy designs and enabling healthier workplace environments, regardless of the setting (in-office or remote).

Remarkably, all the findings contrasted two periods of time: before the pandemic (when teams

were mostly in-office) and after COVID-19, which has been an ongoing worldwide game-changer. It is, therefore, very difficult to predict if the current dynamics and perception of communication skills will persist in the future. Nevertheless, based on the study results, it can be argued that if remote work succeeds in replacing the traditional office environment (or at least partially), the repercussions outlined in this master's thesis may remain and become relevant for the future of work and the internal communication field.

Limitations & Suggestions For Future Research

The study specifically collected and analyzed the CEOs' perception about transversal aspects of the informal communication happening in the workplace since they are the key decision-makers and main strategists of their organizations. However, there were certain limitations. First, this study was clearly not framed to include interviews with employees or stakeholders. Undoubtedly, the authors recognised that such a broader approach may provide an extensive view on the matter. Second, the research intended to examine the perception of CEOs' predominant communication skills in-depth during times of changes among HGFs operating in the Healthtech and IT industry in Sweden. The reason for directing the focus on these industries lies in the happening of COVID-19. During times of change, company leaders are responsible for guiding the firm through tough times. Firms had to adapt to the current environment and set new guidelines that affected all employees. In growing firms, where the workforce is limited and the responsibilities and tasks assigned often overlap between departments, CEOs may play an important role in setting up internal communication directions, or at least, they can clearly recognize and interpret the development and transition of intangible human capital aspects, such as communication skills of themselves and employees. Third, this research is limited to the geographical area of Sweden and does not contemplate the cultural background of the participant as a variable of the study. Fourth, this paper did not investigate if the current remote work situation will remain perpetually or if this situation will continue for a couple more months from now on. Therefore, this research does not include findings or implications on how COVID-19 is impacting the organizational structure in the future. However, the beliefs of the interviewed CEOs on how the future of remote work and internal communication will look like were compiled in the Findings and Discussions.

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Appendix



Figure 1. Knowledge And Skills For Internal Communication
(adapted from Tkalac Verčič, Verčič & Sriramesh, 2012, p.225)

First Orders ideas and concepts	Second Order Themes
Creating engagement; being friends at work; personal values; honesty; being aware; perception of being heard; share feelings; seeing the face of the counterparty; gaining trust; group dynamic	Team Bonding
Face-to-face can be more spontaneous; reading cues and body language signals; WCS diminish the human connection dimension; interpretation of the message; being present	Human and Social Interactions
Differences of skills' importance depending on the channel; differences of skills' importance depending on the team or department; employees satisfaction rates in terms of IC; IC policies and predefined tools; asynchronous work but fixed labour time; balances and checkpoints during conversations	Quality of the Internal Communication
Meetings can be tiring and long; cues that affect the listening perceptions; centralization of IC tools to avoid fatigue; virtual nudging and active probing; meetings tends to be shorter when using WCS; the written format is efficient; friction created by the necessity of having to coordinate informal interactions when being remote	Work Efficiency
Challenges of the IC without previous knowledge of the counterparty; using WCS for social interactiveness, besides work matters (e.g. lunch and remote social gathering); virtual avatar-based tools as informal as an omnipresent communication channels; company routines to encourage internal communication of teams; "camera on" as a company policy to encourage better communication; fixed online gatherings to generate personal connections	Sense of togetherness and Integration
Slack, Teams and Trello as internal and versatile tools for informal communication; tools as dual communication channels: formal and informal; replacement of short informal messages; phone, chats and sms as alternative remote work communication channels; companies open for testing new internal communication tools; interchangeability of channels	Electronic-based Informal Communication Channels

Figure 10. First Order Ideas And Concepts

Top communication skills employees should have to be more effective in their informal interactions over face-to-face interactions (according to CEOs)

From 0 - 5 (least important - highly important)

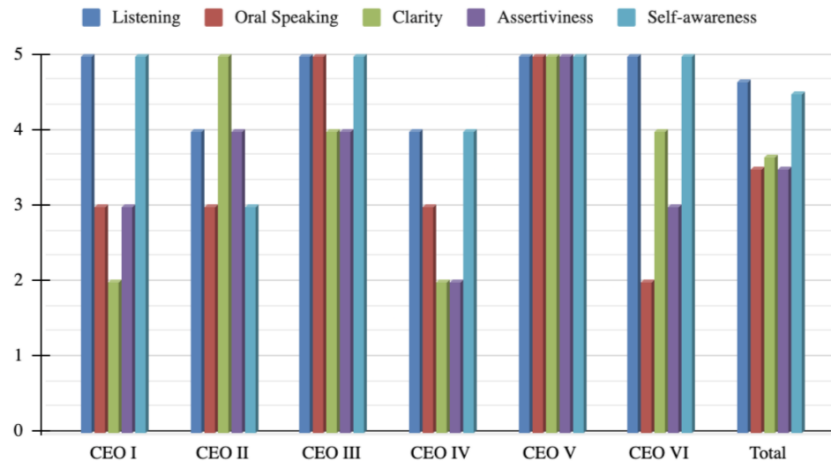


Figure 11. Top Communication Skills Employees Should Have To Be More Effective In Their Informal Interactions Over Face-To-Face Interactions (according to CEOs)

Top communication skills employees should have to be more effective in their informal interactions over web conferencing tools (according to CEOs)

From 0 - 5 (least important - highly important)

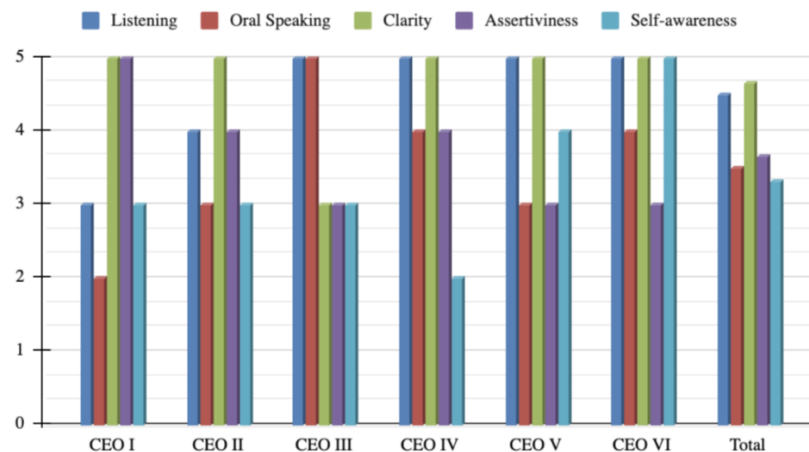


Figure 12. Top Communication Skills Employees Should Have To Be More Effective In Their Informal Interactions Over Web Conferencing Interactions (according to CEOs)

Table 4. Interview Guide

PART 1: Communication skills in the workplace	
Main question	Sub-question / follow up - sub-topics
From these 10 soft skills in the workplace, how would you rank communication skill in order of importance? (Mentimeter.com card)	
Is your company working remotely now due to COVID-19?	<p>What web conferencing tool do your employees utilize to discuss informal matters related to work?</p> <p>When you have to discuss informal matters, do you use a different web conferencing tools than (WCS used by the company)?</p> <p>In terms of communication effectiveness, what is the difference of talking through a WCS instead of having face-to-face interaction?</p>
Can you tell us how internal communication with your staff functions within your firm?	<p>Do you think the quality of communication between coworkers decreases when your team has to work remotely? Why?</p> <p>Can you summarize the pros and cons of informal communication over web conferencing tools?</p>
PART 2: Communication skills in the workplace	
Tell us what is the most important communication skill in your opinion a CEO should have in order to be effective in dealing personally with employees?	In what ways does the applicability of this skill is affected when you are talking through web conferencing tools?

<p>In your opinion, what is the most valuable communication skill employees should have in the workplace? “This question is about the employees, in your opinion”</p>	<p>Tell us why you consider this skill the most important an employee should have?</p> <p>Describe in what ways the applicability of this skill is affected when you are working remotely?</p> <p>How can the company help to improve the internal communication between employees?</p> <p>Did you offer educational workshops for your employees on how to better communicate during Covid-19 times? - > What type of educational workshops did you offer your employees on how to communicate better during Covid-19 times?</p> <p>How did the employee satisfaction rate in terms of internal communication has changed after switching to virtual tools?</p>
<p>PART 3: Communication skills in the workplace - specific measurements</p>	
<p>Rate from 1 to 5 the following communication skills employees should have to be more effective in their informal interactions? (Mentimeter.com card)</p> <p>Rate from 1 to 5 the following communication skills employees should have to be more effective in their informal interactions happening face-to-face? (Mentimeter.com card)</p> <p>Rate from 1 to 5 the following communication skills employees should have to be more effective in their informal interactions happening over web conferencing tools? (Mentimeter.com card)</p>	<p>Have you found any differences in why some skills are more important than others depending on the communication channel? Describe it</p>
<p>PART 4: Exploring every communication skill / last questions</p>	
<p>When you are talking with an employee and he or she has the camera off, does it affect your perception of being heard?</p>	<p>Do you generally perceive that your employees practice an active listening approach in your company?</p>

Are there any obstacles to communicate your ideas verbally, over web conferencing tools, during one-to-one meetings with employees?	
Do you think that using a clear and precise language is important? Why? Under what communication channel is it easier to provide “unambiguous information” or instructions to employees? Face-to-face or over web conferencing tools.	<p>Have you had any communication problem due to unclear messages that you can attribute to the communication channel?</p> <p>Do you experience many misunderstandings now, working remote?</p> <p>Do you think the message is always delivered precisely through web conferencing tools?</p> <p>Do you think the message is always delivered precisely through face to face?</p>
Do you think people push through their opinions more thoroughly with video conferencing tools or before COVID communicating face-to-face?	In your view, are opinions and rights generally respected while others are pushing through their own views, and personal limits, when they discuss?
Do you perceive your employees have more understanding for other people's situations using video conferencing tools or when you were communicating face-to-face?	How can a CEO increase the confidence with their employees through communication?
In your opinion what are suggestions to better communicate through online video conferencing tools?	
Do you think internal communication in the workplace tends to be more or less flexible in the future?	
Do you think internal communication improved or worsened using video conferencing tools?	
Do you have any proposed questions we should have asked during the interview?	