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Impact of COVID-19 on Communication

Aybike Serttaş[1]

1- İstinye University-Turkey

Corresponding Author: Aybike Serttaş

The Corona virus disease, or pandemic, as we often use, has changed our entire daily life, professional life, and both personal and social routines. This change also caused the communication codes to change. None of us could have predicted that this rapid transformation would take place in just a few months, as we would be able to adapt so quickly. While social distance, masks, the anxiety caused by the virus and various prohibitions in interpersonal communication have reshaped our communication habits, meetings, interviews and corporate routines have been added to these issues in organizational communication.

Keywords: COVID-19, communication, social distance, communication management

The importance of communication ecology has emerged with the change of our personal communication area in every layer of society (family, work, social environment). Communication ecologies are the networks of communication connections that groups or individuals depend upon to achieve a goal (Broad et al., 2013). If we need to define interpersonal communication, we can say that it is a broad concept that includes all kinds of interaction, sharing and transformation. This sharing in our ecology can include feelings, thoughts, ideology, information, all kinds of verbal, written and non-verbal messages, and the transformation it creates can be superficial or qualified and comprehensive. One of the developments that the pandemic made imperative was to minimize face-to-face communication. Besides, as organizational communication continues at full speed, it has become necessary to use new communication channels. This has enabled channels such as Zoom and Webex to become organizational communication platforms known and used by all employees. While face-to-face meetings and public space were abandoned for a while, our private spaces, our homes, turned into offices and office life was adapted to home conditions. At this point, computer mediated communication came into play. Previously, it was thought to be face-to-face communication, and it is now possible for interpersonal communication to take place without face-to-face contacts,

such as when using Webex or Zoom (Back et al., 2020).

According to Petric et al. (2011) the fact that technology is the main actor in the communication process it has eliminated gestures in interpersonal communication. Written digital communication channels have reduced the effects of body language to zero. When masks are added on top of these, it has become difficult to carry out healthy interpersonal communication (Stephens, 2011). Identifying the issues and challenges that affect healthy communication while wearing face masks is critical in order to better adapt to the resulting norm (Mheidly et al.,2020). Curşeu et al. (2021) conducted a study on how the frequency of using information and opinions about COVID-19 in interpersonal communication will increase anxiety and negative feelings for people.

Some researches claimed that gender may play a role in digital communication use during the lockdown. Previous research has shown that men use the Internet more for informational purposes, and women more for social and expressive purposes (Jackson et al., 2001). Therefore, these studies also conclude that during restrictions, people can use the internet to socialize and feel normal.

Research shows that although social distance is the focus concept in combating the pandemic, some negative side effects will occur in the long term (Abd-Alrazaq et al., 2020). Also, another interesting point highlighted in these other studies is that the less we interact with people, the more suspicious we become of them (Mheidly et al. 2020). These results become even more interesting when considered in conjunction with Gerbner and Gross's (1976) concept of the mean world syndrome. Gerbner's cultivation theory deals with representation on television and reproduction of reality. According to the mean world syndrome defined in this theory, people who are exposed to negative content in the media for a long time begin to perceive the world as a worse and wild place than it really is.

Is organizational communication caught unprepared for the pandemic period? We will evaluate the answer to this question as employee-focused studies on the subject are concluded. During the pandemic, employees may experience many problems such as lack of concentration, anxiety disorder, stress, concerns about themselves and their relatives, inability to separate home life from work life, and home conditions not being suitable for remote work. In this period, organizational managers need to maintain uninterrupted communication for the organization, while determining strategies to prevent digital communication channels such as mail, Zoom meetings, WhatsApp groups from turning into message confusion.

At this point, the concept of interpersonal trust emphasized by Fell (2020) should be mentioned. In this period when excessive message congestion causes confusion, Fell states that trust is the key concept. The pandemic, whose effects are experienced in different areas of life, has caused us to question our trust in people, our colleagues, the media, the government, and health authorities, at which point the concept of infodemia has been frequently used in the communication literature.

Although many opportunities offered by video conferences and remote work make our lives easier and are vital to protect our health, when we evaluate it in terms of organizational communication, many issues such as lack of eye contact, not being in the same physical environment, not being able to read the body language, not being able to convey the message clearly in written communication, not using humor sufficiently, the inability of organizational culture to be adapted to current conditions cause disadvantageous situations in organizational communication.

Effective use of technology by every employee is important in dealing with organizational communication problems during the pandemic period. Under these conditions, the focus of managers is to share effective and clear messages with each department. The pandemic has shown us that we can quickly adapt to new conditions both in our private and business life and create new worlds for ourselves even in limited physical space. This great pandemic experience shared by modern people has enabled digital media to be at the center of our lives and the rapid adoption of new normals. Face-to-face communication will never lose its importance in terms of employee psychology, adaptation, reducing conflicts, increasing productivity, motivating employees, transferring corporate culture and values, and maintaining internal and external communication. On the other hand, the fight against the pandemic and the survival motive of the human will enable the development of alternatives to all these.

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