Assessment of Employees Perception of Wema Bank Internal Communication Strategies in the Management of COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The study assessed employees' perception of Wema Bank internal communication strategies inthe management of COVID-19. The objectives of the study were to assess the strategies adopted by Wema Bank internal communication before and during COVID-19 pandemic with a view to evaluating the level of workers' satisfaction with the strategies adopted by the bank. The study was premised on Organizational Information Theory. The study adopted survey design with structured questionnaire as instrument of data collection through which two hundred and ninety-four (294) respondents were sampled from one thousand, one hundred and nine staff members of Wema bank branches across three states of Lagos, Ogun and Oyo. Findings showed that 83.1% of the respondents have communication engagement with the management of Wema bank daily, while others indicated less frequently. Prior to the pandemic, they communicated through multiple channels such as face to face (92.2%); individual official mail (96.1%), memo and circular (36.3%), WhatsApp messaging (22.1%), Zoom (18.8%) and notice board (12.3%), heads of departments (94.1%), corporate communication (96.8%) line managers (90.9%). During the COVID-19 pandemic, 47.4% of respondents that they received information from the management daily during 19.5% said weekly, 8.4% said monthly, while 24.7% said as the need arose. At this time, Wema bank management communicated majorly through individual E-mail (98.1%), WhatsApp loop (92.2%), Zoom (98.7%), corporate communication (96%), heads of departments (96.8%). and line managers (98.1%). 97.4% of the respondents indicated Internet/Online based communication as the major form of communication channel during COVID-19 outbreak. So, there was increased reliance on digital channels with pressure on technology infrastructure and resources. It was concluded that strategic communication effectively applied in crises contexts, enlists the employees as corporate brand disciples who are committed to the attainment of organization goals. The study recommended that organizations should build a culture of communication consistently between the management and the staff members, as such culture becomes an asset to leverage on in crises period, also that the use of line managers should be adopted more deeply as communication channels, especially as it adds personal touch and sense of relevance to staff members.

Keywords: COVID-19, Employees Perception, Wema Bank, Communication Strategies

Introduction

In reality, communication is what makes the world go round, a kind of life-giving elixir; the engine that works human activities. This implies that the pattern of communication can either endear people just as well as it can brew hostility, depending on how it is used. Such importance and significance is what communication has assumed over the years as an instrument in securing, building, lubricating and sustaining not just human society but even organizations (Anaeto, Onabajo & Osifeso, 2008; Hargie, 2016).

So, just as communication is essential for human survival, so also is its imperativeness for an organizations survival, since management tasks involve coordinating, organizing, directing, controlling and planning, of which communication constitutes the major driving force. Soola (1998:12), observes that more than 75% of business executives time is spent communicating, while the organization where business activities take place are themselves active processors of information, creating and exchanging messages within a network of interdependent relationships.

Previous research hardly provides a straightforward description of internal crisis communication. In the past decades, researchers focused mainly on the external dimensions of crisis communication, in particular the communication efforts applied by organizations to protect and restore their reputation among external stakeholders (Sturges, 1994; Coombs, & Holladay, 2002; Coombs, 2007). However, practical evidence today have proven that organizations must recognize that effective, integrated and coordinated communication is integral to achieving corporate goals and bring employees closer; by integrating available communication channels including social and online communications, visual communications, and health and emergency risk communications (Bako, 2020).

In essence, engaging the employees during crisis is to develop specific communication strategies that are actionable, accessible, relevant, timely, understandable, and credible; in creating a common pathway for both employees and the management in crisis situations. To this end, Beena (2014) says that building an efficient workforce through strategic communication becomes the building block that can save organizations during crisis. Beena (2014) developed a model based on employee engagement that can facilitate effective crisis management in organizations. This emphasizes that understanding the value of employee engagement during a crisis is half the solution required for suchcrises.

As put by Verčič, Verčič and Sriramesh (2012), one major purpose of internal communication is to align the goals of individual employees to organizational goals thus, helping organizations build strong cultures. Other tasks of internal communication include motivating and engaging employees and distributing information within the organization in the most efficient way possible. In essence, internal communication plays an important role in organizations by serving multiple purposes, at the same timecreating a structure of information flow within the organization by distributing information among different levels and departments. It also serves a broader purpose as effective information flow is necessary to align the organization's goals to individual employee's goals (Verčič, Verčič and Sriramesh, 2012).

Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic paints one recent example of practical communication challenge for organizations, especially banks in Nigeria. It may be recalled that on the 11th of

March2020, the World Health Organization announced the new Corona virus outbreak as a pandemic. The disease that has spread widely all around the world, caused one of the toughest lockdowns ever seen globally. Governments declared a state of emergency, closing all schools, bank halls, theaters, museums, libraries, swimming pools, many airports, and ban gatherings of more than 10 people.The situation pushed leaders and organizations of all sizes into a communication challenge. Governments, public and private sector CEO's, team leaders and small entrepreneurs did not just have to inform their teams about the changes the new situation brought to work life but also, they had to find new ways to engage their employees and team members virtually (Mazzei, 2021).

On this account, events like a pandemic present dramatic consequence for health and safety, as well as business continuity and post-event recovery which could result in lost revenue and damages. That is why it is important for any organization to be prepared and have a strategically planned crisis communication messaging – not only about health and safety related matters but also obtaining to every major aspect of business and organizational functioning that may be affected (Scott, 2020).

Correspondingly in Nigeria, the banking industry is of a peculiar situation in the sense that banks function to handle public money, as individuals have trusted a bank to keep their assets safe. Based on the sensitive nature of such function (Carletti, 2008), it is observed that the bank operation requires extra confidence level and assurances for customers to keep their asset. Danisman (2018) opines that bank runs on panic and systemic risk from the liability side thanthe asset side. So, there is tendency for bank customers to panic at the pronouncement of a pandemic in which state of emergency, curfew and lock downs were introduced.

It is pertinent to note that for banks, there was a severe pressure from customers across various segments i.e. retail, commercial and corporate, there was increased reliance on digital channels with pressure on technology infrastructure and resources; concerns around continuity of processes which have direct touchpoints with the customer; potential changes to board procedures and effectiveness and a significant pressure on financial performance plus a downward slope in stock market (KPMG, 2020).

At this point for Nigerian banks, the role of internal communication is much more significant, due to the dynamic business environment of the banking sector; any change raises suspicions in customer perceptions, hence, special attention is required with regards to the internal communication process (Danisman, 2018). At this stage, internal communication strategies also involve keeping employees connected and informed, and creating a shared understanding of company goals, values, and guidelines.

Like all crises affecting companies, the COVID-19 emergency brought employee communication to the forefront- this time even more than usual. With physical distancing, employee communication became the primary way to promote closeness between people in organizations. Hence, internal communication strategy becomes critical in the banking sector at this pandemic time, in order to keep employees up to date on a company's latest initiatives, establishing a voice of authority and trust to combat rumours, and facilitating streamlined, clear communications among different departments. Timothy (2015) points that when crisis communication is ineffective, so is the crisis management effort, Alao (2016) adds that those

who make effective communication impossible, make crises inevitable.

It is on this premise that the current study seeks to assess the internal communication strategies employed by banks and how such communicative choices impact employees' engagement during the Covid-19 crisis, with focus on the workforce and corporate communication section of Wema Bank PLC.

Statement of the Problem

The COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis unlike any other ever experienced in living memory, affecting almost every business around the globe. Naturally, during a time like this, it's critical for companies to make internal communications a priority, in doing this the organization need to ensure managers have the right tools to keep employees well informed, which gives the business a better chance to stay on course and to keep the workforce safe (Bako, 2020).

The volatility and unprecedented nature of the novel Covid-19 means it's more important now than ever for employers to open the lines of communication with their employees. The COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped the entire world - the future of everything and the working environment, but perhaps the most visible effect of this disruption is most felt in the financial services sector, the markets and the global economy. In this regard, the banking sector is one of the most gravely impacted (KPMG, 2020).

In a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, having effective internal communication systems and processes in place can help to ensure that crisis doesn't get worse. However due to some of the safety measures issues by the NCDC which include physical distancing: floor markings, spacing out of working positions, lower capacity attendance in the meeting rooms and elevators with appropriate signage; this has practically affected the internal communication pattern within the bank (Ozili, 2020).

Many companies are requiring their employees to work from home so their business can continue while they keep their people safe, observe social distancing protocols and government lockdowns. Remote work is a stopgap measure that many companies haven't been prepared for so many of their employees to have to undertake simultaneously. Hence, the COVID-19 crisis has been emotionally challenging for many people, changing day-to-day life in unprecedented ways (Mazzei, 2021).

The role of internal communication has therefore acquired significance as organizations strive to communicate customer needs, organizational values etc. to staff working at every level and, moreover, to encourage staff to maintain a two-way dialogue with management (Kartikawangi and Dahesihsari, 2020). In case of banking sector, the role of Internal communication is much more significant, due to the peculiar banking environment in Nigeria. Nowadays, more and more employees work remotely, are on the road or work with colleagues located in different parts of the world. This may be more challenging for companies with complex organizational structures to make sure that employees get the right information at the right time. Communication is key to how businesses deal with the outbreak, whether they are currently impacted.

Pre covid-19, Wema Bank adopted the traditional means of internal communication which includes; meetings, face-to-face communications, suggestion boxes, email, video conferences,

telephone calls, notice boards, memos, letters etc. The wake of Covid-19 has reshaped the internal communication strategies and have various challenges associated with it. But the concern of this study is how the employees perceive such strategies and their assessment of its effectiveness.

1.3   Objectives of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to assess internal communication strategies adopted by Wema Bank PLC. during the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak, specifically, the study seeks to achieve the following objectives.

1.   To establish communication strategies adopted during COVID-19 pandemic.
2.   To measure the level of workers' satisfaction with the strategies adopted by the Bank.

Conceptual Review

Internal Organization Communication

Indeed, the issue of communication is fundamental to any institution and it is a much-discussed subject. Organization or management communication refers to the practices of generating, conveying and interpreting specific outlook and emotions (Gupta, 2006). Organization communication helps employees to become well informed about their organization and encourage them express their views to management. Folarin (2011), cites Prosser (2009), as saying that organizational communication is the means employed by organizations to solve their various problems and the means they adapt to their external environment.

Apart from ensuring the interconnectivity of all the sub-units, communication serve as interactive tool between supervisors and their subordinates it serves a similar purpose in the policy making process. It is for this reason that top management constantly try to improve communication in their organizations.According to Miller (2016), internal communication does not only refer to those few official channels of communication within organization such as internal letters, notice boards or staff meetings. It is not a process that goes from the top, the chief to the bottom, the intern. Rather internal communication refers to the almost constraint interaction within your organization that convey meaning. Therefore, internal communication encompasses both overt communications like meeting, memos, etc. and more casual's forms of communication such as gossip, pleasantries and body language.

Traditionally, organizations practiced communication culture through printed words.While these methodologies continued to be used and occasionally provide valuable information that helps shape a business, they often do not provide a true snapshot of the pulse of the organization or the feelings of the majority of their employees (Dunni, 2012).

When organizations achieve effective communication the result that of a more satisfied and productive employees, improved achievement of organizational goals, and improved customer community and investor relations.In short, organizations who practice healthy communication culture build employees that become spokespersons for their organization outside of workplace; they interact with organizations stake holders, they have significant positive influence on relations with customer, the community investors, and the media; therefore, when lines of

communication are opened between employers and employees, organizational goals are likely to be achieved (Lattimore, 2014).Employees work in organization with specific cultures, therefore effective organization communication depends on the establishment of positive organizational culture, through clear communication policies, programs and assistance with organizational change (Quirk, 2006).

According to Gregory (2006), internal communication is often overlooked as strategy, yet it is vitally important, in howit relates directly to the foundation of the organization, the people, the staff, management and volunteers that give the organization its ability to function. Hence, developing sound internal communication processes on a regular basis is the same as making sure your engine runs smoothly when it is serviced regularly. In essence, an internal communication strategy is the key to ensuring a cohesive organization focused on achieving its goals and objective (Miller, 2016). So, when an organization is communicating effectively with its stakeholders, whether they are employee's management of volunteers, it develops a cohesive culture where everyone is focused on the same goals, has the same objectives. By working within a cohesive culture your stakeholders can work more effectively together and collaborates more effectively (Miller,2016).

Effective Organization Communication as a form of Employee Relations Strategy

Corporate communication is seeming a set of activities involved in managing and orchestrating all internal and external communication aimed at creating favourable starting point with stakeholders on which the company depends. Corporate communication consists of the dissemination of information by a variety of specialists and generalists in an organization, with the common goal of enhancing the organization's ability to retain its license to operate (Riel, Van and Fombrun, 2007).

According to Balmer and Greyser (2003),corporate communication is a management function having three main overall objectives:

i.   maintaining favourable inter-organizational relationships with groups upon which the company is dependent (Cornelissen, 2011);
ii. evaluating social trends and formulating corporate policies that can help the company innovate and proactively adapt to changes in society (Bernays, 1923);
iii. integrating all communications under one unique strategy so to support marketing activities (Schultz et al., 1993; Caywood, 1997; Kitchen and de Pelsmacker, 2004).

Corporate communications, too, represents the nexus between the corporate identity and corporate reputation (Gray & Balmer, 1998).Particularly, for the internal public or employees, internal corporate communication is employed to engage the employees in order that they become brand evangelists for the organization. WebFinance (2020) defines internal communication as "the sharing of information within an organization for business purposes.

Dimensions of Internal OrganizationCommunication

Information can flow in different directions within organizations. Depending on the positions of the senders and receivers in the organizational chart, there are vertical and horizontal directions

of communication.

Vertical communication: Vertical communication is where the information or messages flow between subordinates and superiors (Bartels, Peters, Jong, Pruyn, Van der Mollen 2010). Vertical communication is divided to two subsections according to the sender-receiver relationship.

Top-down communication: It is the communication of the management to the employees. This type of communication can be used to communicate company vision, strategy and operational instructions to the employees (Bartels et al. 2010).

Bottom-up communication: It is the information sent from employees to the management. This type of communication can be used to create opportunities for employees to participate in decision making. (Bartels et al. 2010)

Horizontal communication: Horizontal communication is the exchange of information between individuals or groups on the same level of hierarchy. This type of communication is often task-related but can be informal and unrelated to work as well (Bartels et al. 2010).

According to a research that studied employee's perceived organizational support as a mediator between relational exchange, employees experience various relationships at the workplace but two of them dominate the employees' professional life: the relationship with their organization and the relationship with their direct supervisor (Sluss, Klimchak, & Holmes 2008).

Significance of Workplace Communication

The essence of communication is to result in mutual understanding, which is an important part of work life. Being able to understand others and make ourselves be understood can help us to do our job effectively and rise productivity. According to Adu-Oppong&Agyin-Birikorang (2014), effective workplace communication is important for the following reasons:

Creates job satisfaction: Organizations that and foster open communication and encourage their employees to communicate their ideas, feedbacks, and concerns, face lesser employee turnover. Effective workplace communication motivates employees to work better and make them feel more valued in the organization.

Lesser conflicts: Workplace conflicts can be easily resolved and/or avoided by open and clear communication and discussions, that can lead to professional and personal growth.

Increases productivity: In an organization, people from different social and professional background come together to work for the same goals and set of visions. In order for employees to be able to deliver to the best of their abilities, it is important that the organization clearly defines and communicates its goals, objectives and vision. It leads to better deliverance of work and increased productivity.

Formation of relationships: Open communication at a workplace leads to the formation of personal and professional relationships, that can make employees feel cared and valued for, making it more likely that they remain loyal to the organization.

Proper utilization of resources: Miscommunication between staff members can cause problems, conflicts or crisis within an organization. This can lead to unnecessary delays of work and ultimately, the wastage of resources. Effective workplace communication is essential to properly utilize resources and increase productivity.

According to Sluss, Kilmchackand Holmes (2008), the employees' relationship with their organization and with their direct supervisor dominates the employees' professional life. Bartels, Peters, Jong, Pruyn, and Van der Mollen (2010) challenged this hypothesis in their study, stating that "dimensions of vertical communication are important predictors of employee's organizational identification whereas dimensions of horizontal communication dominate employees' professional identification." These two studies show that whether it's horizontal or vertical communication, communication is undoubtedly an important element of employees' life as it creates job satisfaction, help employees form relationships and takes part in building employees organizational and professional identification.

Impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Organizations

The World Health Organization (2010) defines pandemic as the worldwide spread of a new disease. An influenza pandemic occurs when a new influenza virus emerges and spreads around the world, and most people do not have immunity.

The COVID-19 pandemic is the worldwide spread of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus. The virus and the outbreak were first identified in Wuhan, China in December 2019. The World Health Organization declared the outbreak to be a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30 January 2020 and recognized it as pandemic on 11 March 2020. As of 31 March 2020, more than 725,000 cases of COVID-19 have been reported in over 190 countries and territories (Oyedokun & Amodu, 2022).

According to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, the virus can be caught mainly during close physical human contact and by respiratory droplets produced when people cough or sneeze. People can also catch COVID-19 by touching contaminated surface and then their face. Recommended preventive measures include frequent hand washing with soap, maintaining distance from other people and self-isolation for people who suspect they are infected (WHO, 2020).

During the pandemic, governments all around the world announced efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19, including for example, travel restrictions, quarantines, event cancellations, facility closures and curfews. This caused disruptions in many industries, such as for example in education, tourism, retail or healthcare (Amodu, Oyedokun&Adeolu-Akande, 2022)

The International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Economic Outlook (2020) refers to the disruptions and the impacts of the Coronavirus pandemic as the Great Lockdown, which is described as "the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression.

As fore-mentioned, crisis comes unexpectedly, has significant impact on the entire organization, disturbs stakeholders' expectations related to safety, health or economic concerns and can cause negative outcomes. In the following, we will look into the banking industry as an example on

how have organizations been affected by the pandemic and how it displays the main characteristics of organizational crises.

One of the affected industries of the pandemic is banking and education. According to the data released by UNESCO (2020) schools and bank closures were implemented nationwide in 184 countries. Including localized closures. Organizations all over the world had to adapt to the closures and take measurements on how to keep operating. For example, many institutions shifted to virtual operation, which required purchasing of new tools, training of staff and implementation of new strategies for continuous operations.

The impacts of the pandemic on the industry manifest several characteristics of crises, as closures around the world have disrupted the expectancies and seriously impacted organization administrations, as unexpected arrangements had to be made in order to guarantee continuous operation. Working parents are more likely to miss work in order to take care of their children in home school, which caused wage losses and a negative impact on productivity (UNESCO, 2020). People with limited access to technology and those with disadvantages experience an interruption in learning and a loss of opportunities for growth and development. The pandemic had numerous other negative outcomeson the society, such as e.g. poor nutrition on those who rely on free or discounted meals, confusion and stress of staff who transited to distance working platforms to ensure their obligations (Bako, 2020).

Alongside with industry specific disruptions, the social distancing measurements have also impacted the place of work life. Many organizations especially banks have switched to remote working and companies across the world have implemented expanded telecommuting arrangements for their employees in order to stop the virus from spreading. According to a survey by Taloustutkimus, more than 75% of employed people in Finland have been working entirely from home as of April 2020. Additionally, more than 8% of the respondents have been working from home more than before (Statista, 2020).

Principally, employee engagement is significant for an organization, because it is related to the longevity of a company as well as the productivity of its employees (Osborne and Hammoud, 2017). This has an impact on the financial outcome of the organization. However, employee engagement is crucial even beyond that: The feeling of proficiency and being needed and valued by the organization are psychological needs that increase individual behavior to maintain psychological health. This leads to a cycle of growth in each individual (Osborne and Hammoud, 2017).

Understanding the value of employee engagement during a crisis situation is important as well. According toBeena (2014), having an efficient staff becomes the building block that can save organizations during crisis. In her research paper, Beena builds a model based on employee engagement that can facilitate effective crisis management in organizations.

Theoretical Framework

The importance of theories in shaping this research cannot be underplayed. Griffin (2012) opines that theories serve as the umbrella for all systematic communication discussions and analyses. Researchers apply them to synthesise data and focus on crucial and central discourse. And

therefore, Organisational Information Theory in this research serves as the theoretical foundation upon which the discussions and analysis will stand.

Organisational information theory is a framework which focuses on how an organisation adopts the information which is fundamental for it to sustain. Karl Edward Weick, an American organisational theorist developed this concept. His studies on organisational studies have been noted for the introduction of concepts such as sense making, loose coupling etc. This broad concept can be applied to reduce equivocality and ambiguousness in communication process within the organisation (Avgerou 2002).

The management of a large amount of information and knowledge is a one of the leading challenges for organizations. The theory states that communication within the organisation regulates the environment which influences the behaviour of the people and thus the productivity. Thus, the main aim is to lessen ambiguity so as to accept only the essential information excluding the excess. The organisational communication must aim at the people's understanding of the objectives more clearly to achieve goals (Weick, 1969). To understand the organisational communication it is important to familiarise with some of these concepts such as information environment, information equivocality, and required selection (Brent 1993).

Weick's concept of organisational information theory is widely applied to understand the aspect of internal communication within Wema bank. The theory elevates the importance of communication within an organization and how communication can be utilized for increasing the productivity of an organization.In the case of Covid-19 crisis, the theory specifies Wema bank must coordinate with departments so as to make use of the information they have and must update the information to understand the requirements of its members and to change goals accordingly.

Review of Empirical Studies

The current study is validated by building its assumptions and evaluations on previous studies. Empirical researches related to Covid-19 disruptions and communication strategies are reviewed here.

Bakó (2020) conducted a study on engaging employees during a pandemic crisis.The study focused on examining organization's internal communication effectiveness during the COVID-19 pandemic and explores how managers and team leaders engaged their employees during the crisis. To support the relevance of the research, quantitative surveys with employees of various public and private sector organizations were conducted and analyzed. The research findings indicate that employees were satisfied with where, and how their organization communicated with them during the pandemic, but they were unsatisfied with the frequency of information delivery. Employees wished that their organization would have informed them faster and more frequently about the changes the pandemic brought to the work life. The results of the survey showed that most employees didn't receive clear directions from their supervisors during the pandemic. The most common communication challenges employees faced with their supervisors were the obscurity of goals and priorities, loss of information and decrease in team spirit. Organizations are recommended to encourage their managers to allow flexibility even more during crisis times. Team leaders and supervisors are recommended to put more effort into

keeping up the team spirit during a crisis as it is highly contributing to employees' engagement.

Kartikawangi and Dahesihsari (2020) conducted a study on how the responses of organizational communication strategies and practices to such a specific crisis: COVID-19 Pandemic, using situational crisis communication theoretical framework. The research applied qualitative approach involving four organizations, two business organizations and two educational organizations which were selected using maximum variation sampling technique. Four people representing each of the organizations were interviewed using inductive method. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings show that organizational communication strategies and practices being used by all participants' organizations are mostly related to the preparation stage and the response stage of the crisis management. Early crisis management planning, forming crisis management teams and preparing supporting communication system, including providing health care facilities and communication protocols for infected employees are salient practices during the preparation stage. In the response stage, leader and horizontal communication intensively used a variety of media and channels. Interestingly, informal communication was minimized, while formal communication was conducted intensively and transparently. Furthermore, sensitivity to employees' needs and conditions as well as emphatic communication expressing positive emotion and support was perceived as positive to help employees understand the information well and to feel understood and appreciated.

Kniffin, Narayanan and Anseel (2020) carried out a study entitled: COVID-19 and the Workplace: Implications, Issues, and Insights for Future Research and Action. It was observed that COVID-19's impacts on workers and workplaces across the globe have been dramatic. Review and preview of relevant literatures focuses on emerging changes in work practices (e.g., working from home, virtual teams); economic and social-psychological impacts (e.g., unemployment, mental well-being). The study revealed that virtual work practices are likely to spread as organizations realize the cost-savings from structuring labour with fewer full-time employees and more contractors connected technologically– and perhaps with less office space in light of the health risks known to be associated with conventional open-plan offices. The challenges for individuals working in this manner are clear: more employees will need to learn to work in ways far different than how people did in previous generations. In this respect, COVID-19 makes clear how vulnerable the business environment is as employees and employers.

In the same vein, Obrenovic, et al (2020) conducted a study entitled "sustaining enterprise operations and productivity during the COVID-19 pandemic: enterprise effectiveness and sustainability model".The study explored key factors impacting enterprise operational sustainability and theability to transcend adversity during different stages of a crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.It drew from the Theory of Crisis Management Teams, the Stakeholder Theory, and the Distributed Cognition Theory to build an Enterprise Effectiveness and Sustainability Model during Pandemic.The researchers conceptualized an innovative approach to COVID-19 from the perspective of organizational characteristics, operations, digital transformation, and financial planning. The findings suggested that enterprises having distributed leadership, workforce and adaptive culture sustained business operations during a pandemic. Furthermore, resilient enterprises allow for more informed and decentralized decision-making. Prosperous organizations leverage Internet and Communication Technology (ICT) and integrate Intranet, social media, and online communication platforms into their daily business routines, as

this helped to establish trust and build bonds with employees, stakeholders, and customers during and post-crisis.Finally, balancing between the stockpiling of resources and resiliency is crucial in anticipation of a crisis. Therefore, it was concluded that enterprises with financial contingency plans sustain their business operations during a pandemic.

The Centre for Employee Relations and Communication (CERC) (2020) conducted a study at Università IULM that analyzed the employee communication strategies used by Italian companies during the pandemic. Two focus groups and 10 interviews with employee communication managers outlined a qualitative picture of the challenges that companies have faced with the help of employee communication. This qualitative analysis was complemented with a survey on a sample of 116 employee communication managers working in Italiancompanies.   The surveyed managers underlined that their role during the COVID-19 crisis became more valuable and strategic. After comparing this study's findings with a similar survey conducted in 2019, the Centre found an increase in the relevance of the employee communication manager's role. Namely, implementing tools and initiatives, managing communication processes, participating in the definition of strategies, listening internally, and counseling managers and other teams regarding communication issues . In particular, employee communication managers perceived that, among all the activities they perform, the strategic component grew most during the 2020 crisis time compared to the 2019 pre-crisis phase.

This crisis experience led to a series of changes in employee communication processes, style, and characteristics that, according to employee communication managers, will remain perceivable in the future. In particular, surveyed managers underlined that, following the emergency, employee communication will increase the attention placed on digital communication, human aspects and people's care, creation of meaning, and the management of concrete and real problems. Additionally, internal communication will become increasingly crucial for effective external communication, will converge more with external communication, more relevant to the business strategy, more oriented towards informality and less self-referential, and more important for selecting and interpreting information from external media.

Methodology

This study adopted the triangulation method. Zohrabi (2013) calls this method a mixed method research approach; it involves the use of two or more methods in a study to check or validate results. Rothbauer (2008) avers that triangulation refers to the application and combination of several research methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon. In other words, methodological triangulation can be employed in both quantitative and qualitative studies. The mixed method research method was adopted as it is more appropriate for gathering data for this study.

The population of this study comprised the entire staff members of Wema Bank in Ogun, Lagos and Oyo States. The choice of the population is determined by the scope and objectives of the study which is examining internal corporate communication especially during crises and disruptions within the banking industry, with focus on Wema Bank.Specifically, Wema Bank has a total staff population of one thousand, one hundred and nine (1, 109) workers across sixty-six (66) branches in Ogun, Lagos and Oyo States. The sixty-six (66) branches are spread across urban and suburban areas of the three states.Of the total sixty-six (66) branches, Ogun State

accounted for 16 branches, Lagos accounted for 48 branches, because of its metropolitan nature and being the business hub of Nigeria, while Oyo state accounted for 24 branches, as distributed in the table below.

Table 1: Wema Bank Branch Units and Staff Strengths across the 3 states of Ogun, Lagos and Oyo

State	Branch Units	Staff Strength
Ogun	16	210
Lagos	48	517
Oyo	24	382
Total	**66**	**1,109**

Source: Wema Bank Corporate Communication Department, 2022

Having determined the population figure, the sample size for the study was estimated using Taro Yamani formula, a probability sampling method.

$$n = \frac{N}{[1 + N(e)^2]}$$

Where: n = Sample size; N = Population; e = Sampling error (0.05)

The sample size is calculated thus:

$$n = \frac{1,109}{[1 + 1,109(0.05)^2]} \quad n = \frac{1,109}{[1 + 1,109\,(0.0025)]}$$

$$n = \frac{1,109}{[1 + 2.7725]} \quad n = \frac{1,109}{3.7725}$$

$$n = 293.96 \simeq 294$$

Proportionate Sampling

Population of staff in each state $\times$ 100
Total Population

Table 2: Proportionate Sample Sizes

States	% to Total Population	Proportionate Sample Size
Ogun	19	56

Lagos	46.6	137
Oyo	34.4	101
Total	**100**	**294**

Source: Wema Bank Corporate Communication Department, 2020

Respondents of the study were selected using purposive sampling technique because of the nature of the work which centres on bank employees; only members of staff who worked with the bank prior to and during the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak in the year 2020 were selected for the study. For indepth interview, the Head of Corporate Communication Unit of the Bank, Mrs. Morolake Phillips was purposively sampled to gather qualitative data on the internal communication strategies employed in managing the Covid-19 pandemic. Hence, purposive sampling afforded the researcher the opportunity to select respondents that met predetermined criteria.

Questionnaire and interview were personally administered on the respondents by the researcher. The questionnaire was administered on respondents The study employed frequency counts, percentages and distribution tables to analyse and present quantitative data. This was done using version 24.0 of IBM's Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) which is a software for analysing quantitative data. The software was used because of its availability, flexibility, and ease of use.

The interview responses were transcribed and reviewed thereafter with the interviewee, to ensure that what was said, was actually what was transcribed. This approach helped eliminate errors of transcription which may arise from channel noise. It also boosted the integrity of the exercise in terms of elimination of likely interpretive bias and other subjective traits associated with qualitative studies.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Out of the total 294 distributed questionnaire, the researcher was able to retrieve 231 copies which represents 79% return rate and considered enough for analysis. Below are the data gathered, presented in frequency counts, percentages and built on understanding. each table carries interpretation of data as presented below

Table 3: Demographic Data

Demography	Male		Female				Total	
	N	%	N	%			N	%
Gender	150	67.3	81	35.7			**231**	**100**
	Married		**Single**					
	N	%	N	%				

Marital Status	156	67.5	75	32.5					231	100
	18-25		**26-33**		**34-41**		**42-49**			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
Age	12	5.2	112	48.7	8938.3		187.8		231	100
	HND/B.Sc.		**M.Sc.**		**Ph.D.**					
	N	%	N	%	N	%				
Educational Level	15466.9		72	31.2	5	1.9			231	100
	Operations		**Marketing**							
	N	%	N	%						
Department	186	80.5	45	19.5					231	100
	1-5 years		**6-10 years**		**11-15years**					
	N	%	N	%	N	%				
Years of working with Wema bank	108	46.8	84	36.4	39	16.9			231	100

Source: Field Survey, 2022

As revealed in Table 3, 64.3% of the respondents are male while 35.7% are female. Also 67.5% of the respondents were married while 32.5% were single. Further, 5.2 % of the respondents were between the ages of 18-25 years, 48.7% of the respondents were between the ages of 25-33, while 38.3% of the respondents were between the ages of 34-41 and 7.8% were between the ages of 42-49 years.66.9% of the respondents had HND/B.Sc., and 31.2% had Master, while 1.9% had Ph.D. certificate.80.5% of the respondents were in operations department while 19.5% were in marketing department.46.8% of the respondents have been working with the Bank between the years of 1-5 years and 36.4% of the respondents were between the years of 6-10 years, while 16.9% of the respondents were between the years of 11-15 years.

Research Question 1:What are the communication strategies adopted during COVID-19 pandemic?

To answer this research question, Tables 4, 5, 6 and 7 are designed to provide relevant answers.

Table 4: **Channel/amount of information received during COVID-19**

Statements on Channels of Information	Very much		Much		Little		Very Little		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%

Channel									Total	
Face to face meeting	8	3.2		62.6	22	9.7	195	84.4	231	100
Individual E-mail	204	88.3	22	9.7	5	1.9	0	0.0	231	100
Memo/Circular	40	17.5	26	11	50	21.4	115	50	231	100
WhatsApp chat/meeting	198	85.7	15	6.5	12	5.2	6	2.6	231	100
Zoom/Teams meeting	217	94.2	11	4.5	3	1.3	0	0.0	231	100
Notice Board	19	8.4	16	6.5	55	24	141	61	231	100
Head of Departments	190	82.5	33	14.3	8	3.2	0	0.0	231	100
Corporate Communications	202	87.6	19	8.4	6	2.6	4	1.3	231	100
Line Managers	199	86.4	27	11.7	5	1.9	0	0.0	231	100
E-Bulletins	46	20.1	117	50.6	60	26	8	3.2	231	100

Source- Field Survey, 2022

Respondents indicated the channels and amount of information with which management communicate with staff during the COVID-19 pandemic. As presented in Table 4 above, 3.2% said they received information very much through face to face, 2.6% said much, 9.7% said little and a majority of 84.4% said very little. As for the use of E-mail, a majority of 88.3% said they received very much information through individual E-mail, 9.7% said much and 1.9% said little.

On information through Memo/Circular,17.5% of the respondents said they received very much information through Memo/Circular, 11% said much, 21.4% said little and a majority of 50% said very little. On WhatsApp, a majority of 85.7% of the respondents said they received very much information through WhatsApp chat, 6.5% said much, 5.2% said little and 2.6% said very little.

Zoom was the most frequently used as majority of 94.2% said they received very much information through Zoom, 4.5% said much, and 1.3% said little. Notice board received very little attention during the pandemic as 8.4% said that they received very much information through notice board, 6.5% said much, 24% said little and majority of 61% said very little. Information through Heads of Department was equally high, 82.5% said they got very much information from the head of department, 14.3% of the respondents said much and 3.2% said little.

Same for corporate communication where a majority of 87.6% said they received very much information through corporate communications, 8.4% said much, while 2.6% said little and 1.3% said very little. Information through line managers was high as86.4% said they got very much information through line managers, 11.7% said much, and 1.9% said little. And finally, only a little percentage of respondents (20.1%) got very much information through E-bulletins, 50.6%

said much, while 26% said little and 3.2% said very little.

Table 5: Frequency of information received during the COVID-19 pandemic

Occurrence	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	as the need arise	Total
Frequency (%)	109(47.4)	45(19.5)	20(8.4)	57(24.7)	**231 (100)**

Source: Field Survey, 2022

Table 5 shows the frequency at which employees receive information from the management during COVID-19, a majority of 47.4% of respondents that they received information from the management daily during the COVID-19, 19.5% said weekly, 8.4% said monthly, 24.7% said as the need arose in deed.

Table 6: Channels of communication with employees during COVID-19 pandemic

Channels	Individual E-mail	WhatsApp Chat/Meeting	Zoom/Teams meeting	HODs	Corporate Communication	Total
Frequency (%)	25(11)	7(3.2)	186(80.5)	5(1.9)	8(3.2)	**231 (100)**

Source: Field Survey, 2022

Table 6 reveals that 11% of the respondents said the bank communicated with them through individual E-mail, 3.2% said through WhatsApp, a majority of 80.5% said through Zoom/Team meeting, 1.9% said through the head of departments and 3.2% said through the corporate communications.

Table 7: Employees' rating of forms of messages during the pandemic

Types of messages	Always		Sometimes		Seldom		Never		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Work related messages	222	96.1	9	3.9	0	0.0	0	0.0	**231**	**100**
Personal safety messages	222	96.1	9	3.9	0	0.0	0	0.0	**231**	**100**

Work-place safety messages	228	98.7	00.0	3	1.3	0	0.0	**231**	**100**
Customer/service related messages	225	97.4	00.0	6	2.6	0	0.00	**231**	**100**

Source: Field Survey, 2022

As revealed in Table 7, during the pandemic, a majority of 96.1% of the respondents said the management communicated work-related messages always and 3.9% said sometimes. Concerning personal safety messages, 96.1% of the respondents said the management communicated personal-safety messages always, 3.9% said sometimes. Regarding work place messages, majority of 98.7% said the management communicated work-place-safety messages always, while 1.3% said seldom. In addition, 97.4% of the respondents said the management communicated customer/ service-related messages always, and 2.6% said seldom.

Research Question 2: What is the level of workers' satisfaction with the strategies adopted by the Bank?

To answer this research question, Table 8are designed to provide relevant data.

Table 8: Degree of satisfaction with information received during the lockdown through Different Channels of Communication

Channels of Communication	Very satisfied		Satisfied		indifference		Not satisfied		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Face to face meeting	6	3.2	9	3.9	18	7.8	198	85	**231**	**100**
Individual E-mail	213	92.2	15	6.5	3	1.3			**231**	**100**
Memo/Circular	26	11.7	22	9.7	31	13.6	150	64.9	**231**	**100**
WhatsApp chat/meeting	189	81.8	31	13.6	3	1.3	6	3.2	**231**	**100**
Zoom/Teams meeting	218	95.2	13	5.8					**231**	**100**
Notice Board	11	4.5	12	5.2	29	16.9	169	73.4	**231**	**100**
Head of Departments	186	80.5	93	40.3	12	5.2	00.0		**231**	**100**
Corporate Communications	201	87	19	8.4	6	3.2	3	1.3	**231**	**100**

| Line Managers | 19584.4 | 2711.7 | 62.6 | 31.3 | **231** | **100** |
| E-Bulletins | 3314.3 | 10846.8 | 6025.9 | 3012.9 | **231** | **100** |

Source: Field Survey, 2022

Respondents rated the degree of satisfaction with information staff received through various channels during the COVID-19 pandemic. Table 8 shows that 3.2% said they were very satisfied with information received through face to face, 3.9% were satisfied, 7.8% indifferent and 85% were not satisfied. Regarding the use of individual email, a majority of 92.2% said they were very satisfied with information received information through individual, 6.5% were merely satisfied and 1.3% were indifferent. Concerning the use of memo/circular, 11.7% of the respondents said they were very satisfied with received information through Memo/Circular, 9.7% were satisfied, 13.6% indifferent and a majority of 64.9% were not satisfied.

On the use of WhatsApp Group chat, a majority of 81.8% of the respondents said they were very satisfied with information through WhatsApp chat, 13.6% were satisfied, 1.3% were indifferent and the remaining 3.2% were not satisfied. Regarding the use of Zoom, a majority of 95.2% said they were very satisfied with information they received through Zoom very much and the remaining 5.8 % said they were satisfied. Concerning the use of notice board, 4.5 % said that they were very satisfied with information they received through notice board, 5.2% were satisfied, 16.9 % were indifferent and the remaining 73.4% were not satisfied.

Further, a majority of 80.5% said they were very satisfied with information they received from head of department, 40.3% of the respondents were satisfied and the remaining 5.2% were indifferent. Regarding the use of corporate communication, majority of 87% said they were very satisfied with information received information, 8.4% were satisfied, 3.2% were indifferent and the remaining 1.3% were not satisfied. Also, 84.4% said they were very satisfied with information received through line managers, 11.7% were satisfied, 2.6% were indifferent and the remaining 1.3% were not satisfied.

Concerning the use of E-bulletins, 14.3% of the respondents said they were very satisfied with information they received through E-bulletins, 46.8% were satisfied, 25.9% were indifferent and the remaining 12.9% were not satisfied. The study complemented the quantitative information with summary of interview held with Mrs. Phillips, Head, Corporate Communication, Wema Bank. According to her, the COVID 19 lockdown influenced adoption of electronic channels of communication by the management in its communication with staff. She noted that there were no limitations with the use of electronic communication channels as they are faster, cost efficient and more reliable.

Discussion of Findings

Communication strategies adopted during COVID-19 pandemic

The focal point of this study is establishing the communication strategies adopted during COVID-19 outbreak and especially during the period of lockdown and later, during the partial opening of banking sector in year 2020 to early 2021, even before vaccines became available. The importance of communication at this critical time in Wema bank, like any other bank or

organization for that matter was emphasized by Coombs (2007), Coombs, & Holladay, (2002) who advocated as a symbolic approach to crisis communication, to match crisis situation and crisis response strategies that are appropriate to the characteristics of the situation. So, during the COVID-19 outbreak, the study inquired on the communication strategies employed by the management of Wema bank and the intensity at which the strategies were deployed.

A total of**8** 47.4% of respondents that they received information from the management daily during the COVID-19, while others are of different opinions. This shows a sharp drop in the frequency of management communication to staff members. Which means that various staff members based on their level received information at various frequency, there was a time during the COVID-lock down where only senior staff members or a selected chunk of the staff were allowed at the work place, as part of measurement for COVID-19 safety. This may have well accounted for the variation in frequency of management communication to staff members during the virus outbreak. But then, all the staff members indicated that the management communicated with them during the outbreak.

As for the channels of communication adopted by Wema bank management, the analysis shows that the management communicated through individual E-mail, WhatsApp, Zoom/Team meeting, head of departments and corporate communications. A further discussion on the channels adopted as indicated that face to face communication was barely used during the outbreak (5.8%). Channels of communication heavily adopted by the management were individual E-mail (98.1%), WhatsApp loop (92.2%), Zoom (98.7%), corporate communication (96%), heads of departments (96.8%), line managers (98.1%) (necessarily through phone calls, as face to face interaction was minimal), Men (2014) supports this that Phone and/or voice messaging is the third most preferred channel by employees when it comes to communicating with their direct managers/supervisors.   There is a collective characteristic to all the major communication channels adopted by the management of Wema bank during the COVID-19, they are majorly ICT-oriented channels- electronic mail, WhatsApp, zoom, phone calls, electronic bulletin and corporate communication. Corporate communication unit is behind the official social media pages of the bank e.g., Wema bank on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram etc. the corporate communication also sponsor the information on electronic bulletins as well as online news media, when necessary. In essence the communication strategy of the bank was further digitalized during the COVID-outbreak.

This was further buttressed in data analysed as 97.4% of the respondents indicated Internet/Online based communication as the major form of communication channel. Paper-based communication was very low at 11%; face to face was also very low at 13.6%. So, there was increased reliance on digital channels with pressure on technology infrastructure and resources. The use of digital tools in organization communication has been well established by Men(2014), that e-mail has become a preferred communication channel by employees as it allows quick information exchange; phone allows immediate feedback; social media channels promote employee engagement and facilitate conversation between employees and the organization and encourage employees to give voice to their opinions (Men, 2014).

In the COVID-19 situation, Bako (2020) established that organizations must recognize that effective, integrated and coordinated communication is integral to achieving corporate goals and bring employees closer; by integrating available communication channels including social and

online communications, visual communications, and health and emergency risk communications.But then, in establishing the communication strategy deployed there is also a need to identify the subject of the messages, the intentions and objectives of the messages, in order to adequately measure the effectiveness of such communication strategy.

Discussing the subject of the Wema bank messages to staff members during the COVID-19 outbreak,the management communicated work related messages (96.1%); personal-safety messages (96.1%); work-place-safety messages (98.7%) and customer/service-related messages (97.4%). Indeed, work-related messages were necessary as staff members were mandated to work from home, hence job instructions were disseminated virtually to staff members, in order to manage official time that needed to be dedicated to work-related activities. Personal safety messages during the lockdown were essential to make the staff members feel loved, remembered and regarded during the times of global health crisis. Work-place-safety messages was rated highest in frequency, and more importantly as the banking hall were later reopened to the customers- the need to remind staff members to always use nose mask, enforce hand washing, sanitizer, and physical distancing in the work place was important. Considering the nature of sensitive nature of banking industry (Carletti, 2008), in Nigeria, an outbreak in any branch of Wema or any other bank may mud up the image of the bank, and cause panic withdrawal by customers. About this, Danisman (2018) noted that bank runs on panic and systemic risk from the liability side; from the asset side. So, there is tendency for bank customers to panic at the pronouncement of a pandemic outbreak and lockdown were effected in any branch.

To further identify the level of staff welfare elements packaged in Wema bank communication activities, concerning the major items that reflected mostly in the messages they received. 77.3% said all of the above (work-related messages, personal-safety messages, work-place safety messages and customer/service-related messages) equally reflected in the communication strategy of the Wema bank management, during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This finding emphasizes the position of Scott (2020) that it is important for any organization to be prepared and have a strategically planned crisis communication messaging about health and safety related matters and every major aspect of business and organizational functioning that may be affected.

Level of workers' satisfaction with the strategies adopted by the Bank

The goal of communication strategies is to meet the target audience at their point to communication needs. Not only that, the organization management equally benefits from communication engagement that is effectively and efficiently executed, as such organization comes of crises situation, unhurt, stronger and more visibly, with a work force of loyal and committed employees. From the point ofVerčič, Verčič and Sriramesh (2012), one major purpose of internal communication is to align the goals of individual employees to organizational goals thus, helping organizations build strong cultures. Other tasks of internal communication include motivating and engaging employees and distributing information within the organization in the most efficient way possible. In table **16,**all the respondents (100%) of the respondents rated the level of management performance in communicating with staff members during the pandemic as very effective. With this, all the staff respondents expressed satisfaction with the communication strategies adopted by Wema bank management during the COVID-19 crisis/lock down, as revealed in table 19.The findings of Kartikawangi and Dahesihsari (2020) is in line

with this finding, that sensitivity to employees' needs and conditions as well as emphatic communication expressing positive emotion and support was perceived as positive to help employees understand the information well and to feel understood and appreciated.

Conclusions

The study assessed employees' perception of Wema Bank internal communication strategies in the management of COVID-19. The objectives of the study were to assess the strategies adopted by Wema Bank internal communication, establish communication strategies adopted during COVID-19 pandemic, assess if there is any difference in the communication strategies adopted before and during COVID-19 pandemic, measure the level of workers' satisfaction with the strategies adopted by the Bank.

This study reaffirms the importance of communication in organizational sustenance, and most especially the need to apply communication strategies in reducing tension and organization stressors in crises period. COVID-19 presented an example of organization crisis in which the communication capacity of Wema bank was challenged. In the case of this study, it is concluded that strategic communication effectively applied in crises contexts enlists the employees as corporate brand disciples who are committed to the attainment of organization goals.

Meanwhile, crises situations will always arise, internal or external- and how organizations deal with such crises situations determines to a larger extent how they come out of the situation.

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that

i. Organizations should build a culture of communication consistently between the management and the staff members, as such culture becomes an asset to leverage on in crises period.
ii. Besides financial motivations, employees can be better motivated when corporate environment is constantly in communication, especially among units, departments, subordinates and managers.
iii. The use of line managers should be adopted more deeply as communication channel, especially as it adds personal touch and sense of relevance to staff members.
iv. There should be periodic interactive conferences, online or offline, depending on the situation in order to keep the staff members in touch with top managers, while managers are also able to sample the feelings of the staff members about the organization.
v. Banks and other organizations should further strengthened their ICT facility to advance their online communication capacity, as the COVID-19 situation has proven the need to be prepared for such health emergencies or any other emergencies.

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