THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERNAL COMMUNICATION IN POLISH ENTERPRISES IN THE LIGHT OF THE STUDIES CARRIED OUT

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Abstract

Main purpose of an article is diagnosing of meaning of internal communication in functioning enterprises in Poland. Article consists of two parts. The first part describes the place of internal communication in business communication system structure characterizing the two planes of communication activities: internal and external. This section presents the steps of the communication audit properly. The second part of the article presents the results of studies on the subject of internal communication in Polish enterprises. Included 119 surveyed companies varied in terms of: number of employees and sector in which the enterprise operates. The aim of this study was to obtain answers to questions concerning the identification of problems related to internal communication, the importance of communication in organizations, an indication of the implemented and planned solutions and tools for internal communication. The authors of this article basing on the results of empirical studies carried out by market research company named GFMP Management Consultants, there were realized in November 2010 in polish enterprises.

The analysis of the studies carried out clearly demonstrates the increasing role of communication in an organization. More and more company managers look for sources that allow building their competitive advantage basing on the organizational culture and people. Persons responsible for communication processes in an organization have an important role — to strengthen such awareness continuously. The main task of activities taken in the area of communication is to support the implementation of company's strategy. Such activities should be coordinated under a strategy of communication, which is still absent in many companies, and linked with the company's strategy. The condition for developing an effective strategy is to make a right diagnosis of the initial situation and measure the effects of the implementation of this strategy. Showing the managing staff the valuable data, which prove the correctness of the activities taken, contributes actually to increasing the importance of communication in an organization.

Key words: internal communication, external communication, communication audit, internal communication tools.

Classification JEL: M12 – Personnel Management

1   Introduction

In recent years, communication is a very trendy word which electrifies many circles — and not only business ones. At present, there is no need to remind anyone that the importance of effective communication in enterprises is increasing every year. This is best proved by the fact that American companies currently devote more attention to internal communication than ever before. The people who manage companies have understood how important communication with employees is – especially in the period of changes *(Zajkowska, 2008)*. Now, when the economic situation starts improving, a special emphasis is put on internal communication in order to prevent a situation, where valuable employees are leaving the organization. As Barbara Fagan-Smith, the founder and CEO of ROI Communication, quotes one of her colleagues at a conference in Las Vegas: "Internal communication rules at this moment," *(Kurda, 2011)*. Is the growing importance of internal communication also visible among Polish companies? Do organizations in Poland notice the importance of internal communication for the overall success of corporate communication and, what's more important, does this translate into practical actions? The authors of this paper are looking for answers to such research problems basing on the results of empirical studies accomplished in November 2010 in enterprises located in Poland.

The research was realized by market research company named GFMP Management Consultants *(GFMP Management Consultants, 2010).*

2   Place of internal communication in communication system of a company

Communication implicitly transmits information, knowledge, and skills from the sender to end users through a chain of processes that involve message generation, description, and encoding. Messages are transmitted over a channel of interest, often determined by the sender. The end user then has to effectively decode, reproduce, and re-create the original message, with a potential degradation in quality and meaning *(Haykin, 2001; Shannon, Weaver, 1949).*

There are two planes of communication activities in the structure of company's communication system *(Zajkowska, 2009):*
- internal communication,
- external communication.

Both areas should remain in close relationships with each other, and elimination or inefficiency of either of them will result in disturbances in the entire system.

External communication is addressed to the company's customers and other participants in the market, while internal communication is a process that takes place inside an institution between all its members. Internal communication is based on relationships between employees and is an integral part of corporate communication — it takes various forms of interaction: verbal and written, personal and virtual, individual and group *(Gavlas 2008).* Regardless of the type of organization, it is the basis for integration of individual elements of a company. As it is proved by communication audits, well-informed employees work much more efficiently — even by 30% according to some auditors. When making an attempt to develop effective communication with the market, each organization should consider not only its market situation, but first of all should take a look inside the organization. Effective internal communication can enhance corporate reputation and credibility, because employees are viewed as particularly credible sources by external stakeholders *(Dawkins, 2004; Hannegan, 2004).*

Up to now, communication inside an organization has been treated as a minor activity in the company's communication system *(Fernandez, Joe, 2009)* and it has used communication techniques and instruments directed towards external recipients. Thinking in terms of the effectiveness of internal communication should begin with focusing on internal target groups, which requires different expertise and experience. Nowadays, the skill of proper communication becomes more and more often a required trait of a good employee. Smooth flow of information is a foundation for the existence of an organization and thus also the clarity and transparency of all matters concerning the internal functioning of the company. Regardless of their place in the organizational structure, all employees should create an efficient system of mutual communication. Effective, multidirectional and multilateral exchange of information is possible only then.

Internal communication has been recognized as a strategic focus for business communication, second only to leadership concerns *(Barnfield, 2003).* Jo and Shim noted that „given the emerging paradigm of public relations by relationship management, the terms of internal communication need to be redefined as part of building favorable relationships between management and employees," *(2005, p. 278).* Managers within organizations are in a role of personal influence in their relationships with employees. Numerous studies have linked internal communication and the degree to which employees are informed to job satisfaction and performance *(Gray, Laidlaw, 2002; Bartoo, Sias, 2004; Rosenfeld, Richman, May, 2004; Zucker, 2002).*

Recognition of employees as internal customers of a company requires from the employer to carry out the research on the needs and expectations of the employees. Based on internal marketing research, the company's management determines, among other things, the efficiency of the information flow between departments and quality of internal services, as well as particularizes the goals of the planned projects.

3   Communication audit as main tool for building communication strategy

An organization, which wants to take seriously the area of internal communication, should first demonstrate how the actions taken in the area of communication support the implementation of its strategy *(Cal, Allyson, 2004)*. It is a necessary condition to measure the effects of the strategy by conducting surveys concerning communication which allow providing a proof that the actions are effective and simultaneously enable accurate identification of the needs of the employees. Showing the managing staff whose internal communication has a positive impact and that it contributes to achieving the goals of the organization increases the importance of the corporate communication in a real manner.

Ideally, internal communication strikes a balance between extremes. Communicating too little creates a vacuum that causes distrust and speculation. However, too much information can result in information overload or the paradox of plenty in which an overabundance of information is ignored. Bartoo and Sias *(2004)* noted that receiving a large amount of information is not necessarily the same as getting the right amount of information.

Furthermore, employees can receive the right amount of information that does not contain the right information for them. The right amount, however, is hard to determine. Effective internal communication strives for information adequacy, which is a measure of the relationship between information needed and information received *(Rosenfeld et al., 2004)*.

A communication audit consists in a systematic and complete survey of internal and/or external communication activities. The purpose of such an audit is to document the needs, policies, practices and possibilities in the scope of communication, as well as to present the necessary data that allow the management board to take effective decisions regarding future goals of communication in the organization *(Szymańska, 2005)*. Thanks to surveys of internal communication it can be checked which of its areas function properly, and which not. Such surveys also allow obtaining quantitative data on the information needs of employees, their knowledge, the subjects about which they expect more information, and the level of their interest and commitment *(Dutton, Dukerich, Harquail, 1994)*. Internal communication surveys constitute an essential tool that allows developing a strategy of actions in the scope of communication. They also help to convince senior managerial staff that such a strategy is necessary, and as well as inform them which investments are specifically needed. In order to make the results of an internal communication survey actually useful, the survey should be carried out in accordance with the accepted standards, and no attempts should be made to develop the questions independently. Detailed knowledge, skills, and intuition are required to carry out internal communication surveys therefore access to proven solutions is very important.

Research on member identification suggests that the strength of identification determines some critical beliefs and behaviours. Among them are employees. Feelings of interpersonal trust, goal-setting processes, internalisation of organizational norms and practices, desire to remain with the organization, and willingness to cooperate with others *(Dutton, Dukerich, Harquail, 1994)*. Employees who identify strongly with their organization are more likely to show a supportive attitude toward it *(Ashforth, Mael, 1989),* and to make decisions that are consistent with organizational objectives *(Simon, 1997)*. Mael and Tetrick *(1992)* assert that organizational identification is a promising contribution to the measurement of loyalty and attachment to an organization.

Thanks to a communication audit, it is possible to identify missing communication links, bottlenecks and interferences in the information flow, cases of information overloading, as well as excessive communication noises, misunderstandings and conflict situations. Such an audit clearly describes what is happening now and prepares the grounds for making decisions on what changes should be initiated. It allows determining the standards, on the basis of which future communication programmes can be subject to implementation and evaluation.

A properly conducted communication audit should consist of four stages *(Jones 1975):*

1. *Survey of the management board and managerial staff* – interviews conducted among the senior executives and middle-level managers in order to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the organization, its key audience groups, and the issues subject to verification.

2. *Survey of employees* – conducted among different internal audience groups in an organization in order to determine the conformity of their views with the opinions of the management Board.

3. *Assessment of discrepancies* – performed on the basis of an analysis of differences in the survey results at the stage 1 and 2.

4. *Recommendations* – planning a comprehensive communication programme which would fill the gaps between the stage 1 and 2 that were identified in the report for the stage 3.

The practice proves that regularly repeated surveys provide concrete and difficult to challenge proofs determining whether the implemented projects make it closer to achieve the goals or whether the adopted action plan requires a correction *(Downs, Hazen, 1977; Downs, 1990).* Managing staff as well as managers of individual organisational levels can find out to what extent they fulfil their communication role and to what extent their competences in this area need improvement. The leader of an organization is automatically the designated chief communication officer, and successful internal communication is impossible without CEO support because „successful companies lead through effective top-down communication," *(Van Nostran, 2004).* An initiative to carry out a survey is also a signal for the employees that the decision-makers care about their opinions and want to satisfy their information needs. A communication audit performs five important functions in the communication management process inside an organization *(Bruhn, 2009):*

1. *Informational function* – it is the starting point in development of a communication strategy and it examines the degree of conformity with the strategy of the company's operations; in particular it can show organizational irregularities in communication activities (determination of the audience group, selection of appropriate communication channels and tools); it diagnoses how the information flow is functioning in three basic dimensions: from the management staff downwards in the organizational hierarchy, from employees to senior managerial staff, as well as between departments and inside teams.

2. *Control function* – it shows the effectiveness of internal communication in the process of realization of company's strategic goals.

3. *Persuasive function* – it stimulates the awareness and responsibility of the executive staff and involves in communication activities, which constitute an example to follow at lower levels of the organizational structure.

4. *Motivational function* – it gives a signal to employees that their opinion is important and that their suggestions and proposals for improvements will be considered.

5. *Educational function* – it strengthens the awareness of everyone's own role in the organization, promotes proper organizational behaviours, as well as defines the responsibilities and communication roles in the organization.

It is recommended that an audit be conducted by external auditors in order to maintain objectivity. Alternatively, a special team consisting of company's employees who have relevant experience and skills can be appointed for conducting an audit. However there is a problem that in Poland there is a shortage of professionals who deal with communication audits at an appropriate level. This is connected with the fact that even very wealthy Polish companies rarely commission performance of such an audit, considering it as a superfluous expense. And companies those have decided to conduct it frequently consider a study presented to them as a material containing the obviousness – they are unable or unwilling to implement the recommendations of the auditor and think that they made a mistake by commissioning such an assessment.

4   Internal communication in Poland against the background of empirical research

The questionnaire survey covered 119 companies, diversified in terms of the number of employees (Table 1) and the sector in which a given enterprise operates (Table 2). The questionnaires were addressed to the people responsible for internal communication in given organizations. Public Relations agencies were excluded from the survey.

Table 1. The number of companies participating in the survey broken down by the number of employees

Number of employees	Number of companies participating in the survey	Percentage share of the companies surveyed
Up to 100 employees	20	16.8
101-500	30	25.2
501-1000	14	11.8
1001-2000	20	16.8
Over 2000	33	27.7
No data	2	1.7
TOTAL	**119**	**100**

Source: Own study based on surveys of GFMP Management Consultants

The aim of the survey conducted at the turn of September and October 2010 was to obtain answers to questions concerning: identification of problems related to internal communication, importance of communication in an organization, indication of implemented and planned solutions and tools in the scope of internal communication.

In the survey, respondents pointed out specific problems concerning internal communication in their companies (Figure 1). The most frequently mentioned problems were as follows: barriers in communication between departments – so called *horizontal communication* (63%), barriers in the information flow from the bottom to the top (58.8%), employees uninformed about subjects important from the company's point of view (57.1%), unpunctual provision of information necessary for employees in their daily work (37%). As it appears from the surveys, the basic problems in internal communication are related to all three areas of employee communication.

Another group of problems is so-called managerial communication, namely the low quality of communication on the part of managers (49.6%) and also blocking of information by managers (48.7%).

Table 2. The number of companies participating in the survey broken down by the sector, in which a given company operates

Companies participating in the survey broken down by sector	Number of companies participating in the survey	Percentage share of the companies surveyed
Finance	16	13.4
Trade, entertainment, services	13	10.9
Public administration and other public interest establishments	13	10.9
Fast Moving Consumer Goods	11	9.2
Power industry and fuels	9	7.6
Pharmaceuticals	9	7.6
Computers and IT	9	7.6
Industry	9	7.6
Construction sector	8	6.7
Automotive sector	7	5.9
No data	4	3.4
Transport and logistics	3	2.5
Education and training	3	2.5
Other	3	2.5
Telecommunications	2	1.7
TOTAL	**119**	**100**

Source: Own study based on surveys of GFMP Management Consultants

Other indicated problems include: lack of clear segregation of responsibilities for internal communication (34.5%), overloading the employees with information (26.9%), lack of appropriate communication tools (23.5%), and inefficient use of the communication tools existing in the company (16%).

The fact that a frequent answer among the respondents was indication of the presence of gossips in the organization is alarming. As much as 47.9% of the respondents gave such answers.

The fact is that more than half of the respondents (51.3%) notice the growing importance of internal communication in their company (Figure 2) is optimistic. This is due to economic and social changes such as globalisation, the growing importance of knowledge, and individualization. More and more managers notice that the people and organizational culture constitute a source for building a competitive advantage. However, this noticeable increase in the role of communication unfortunately does not translate into an increase in the amount of the funds assigned for communication activities. As many as 47.9% of the respondents are not satisfied with the funds that their company assigns for the internal communication (27.4% have no opinion on this issue).
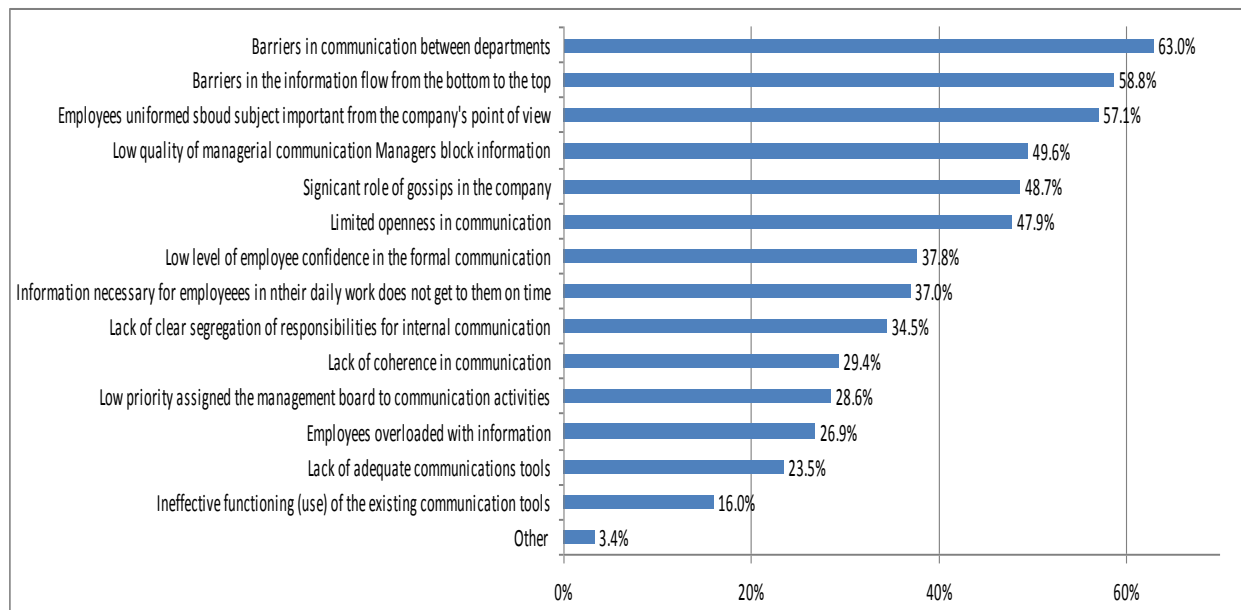
Figure 1. Problems of internal communication
Source: own study based on the "Komunikacja wewnętrzna w Polsce 2010" report, GFMP Management
Consultants, November 2010

It is also worrying that as many as 40.2% of the respondents believe that senior managerial
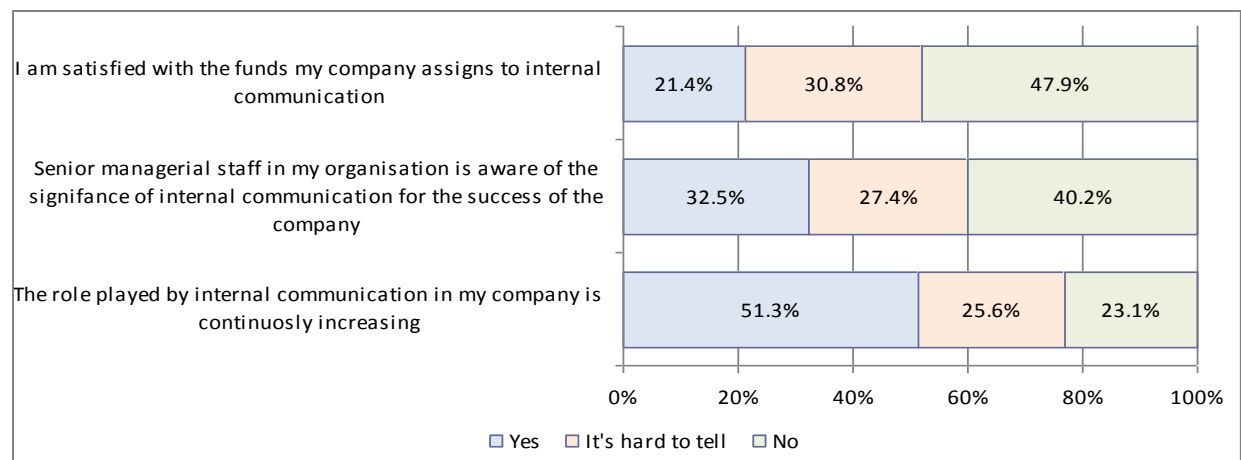staff is not aware of the importance of internal communication for the success of the company.

Figure 2. The importance of internal communication in a company
Source: own study based on the "Komunikacja wewnętrzna w Polsce 2010" report, GFMP Management
Consultants, November 2010

Among the activities related to internal communication in 2010, the respondents strongly
indicated: communicating the changes occurring in the company (66.4%), organizing events and
company meetings (63.9%), communicating a specific project (63%), and improving the existing
internal communication tools (63%). Over 60% of the indications fall to these tasks (Figure 3).
39.5% of the companies took efforts to improve the information flow from the senior managerial
staff to employees. Improvement in the bottom-top communication was mentioned by 29.4% of
the companies. Even more rarely implemented projects were those aimed at improving the
operational communication, i.e. the information flow between departments in company — such

projects were commenced by 26.1% of the companies. The lowest number of answers indicated by the respondents (less than 25%) concerned the following tasks: implementation of projects aimed at building the involvement of employees (21.8%), communication related to the economic crisis, and thus the information about adapting the company to the changes occurring in its environment (20.2%), development of employees' communication skills (20.2%), and implementation of knowledge management projects (19.3%).
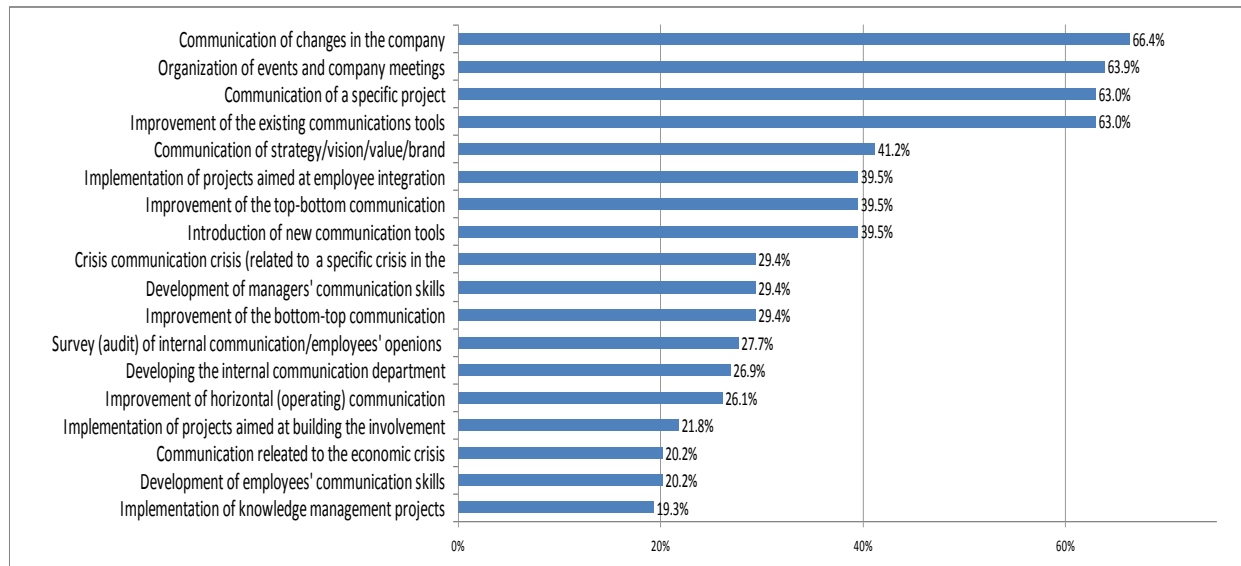
Figure 3. The tasks concerning internal communication, on which the companies focused in 2010
Source: own study based on the "Komunikacja wewnętrzna w Polsce 2010" report, GFMP Management Consultants, November 2010

The list of planned activities in the area of internal communication differs significantly from the list of tasks performed in 2010 (Figure 4). More than 30% of the companies plan to conduct an audit of internal communication, with a special emphasis put on individual opinions of employees (31.1%) and to introduce new communication tools (30.3%). Over 20% of the companies intend, inter alia, to develop communication skills of managers (28.6%), implement projects of building the involvement of employees (27.7%), improve horizontal communication (26.9%), and develop communication skills of employees (24.4%).
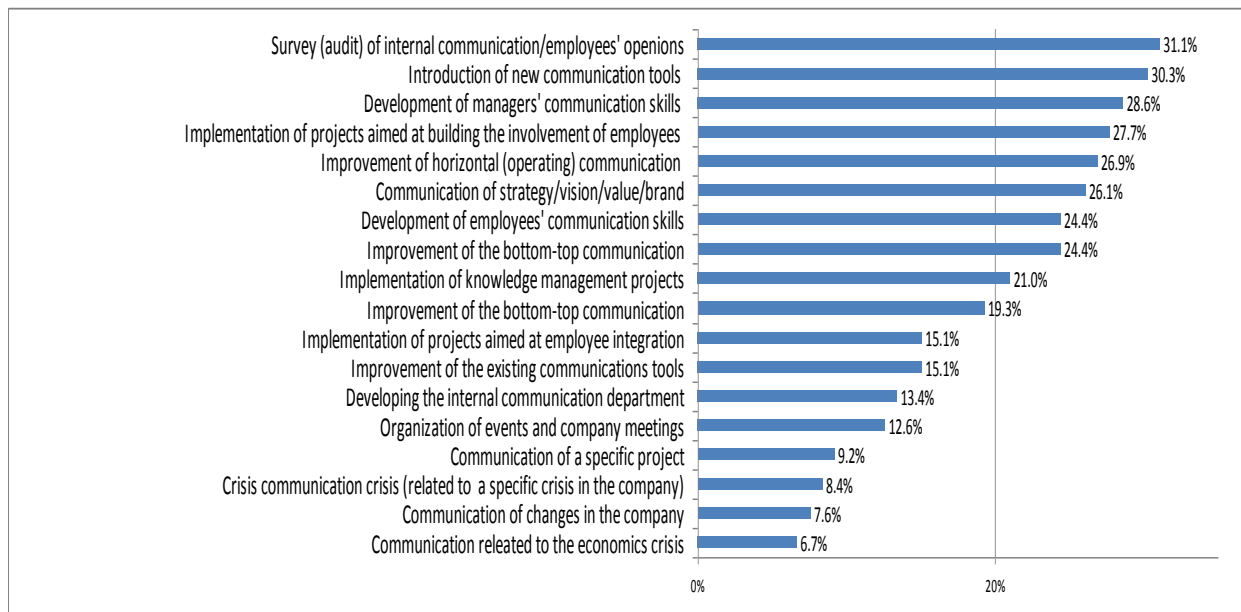
Figure 4. The tasks in the scope of internal communication that the companies intend to carry out in the near future
Source: own study based on the "Komunikacja wewnętrzna w Polsce 2010" report, GFMP Management Consultants, November 2010

From among the most frequently used internal communication tools, the surveyed organizations indicated the direct communication tools addressed to large groups of employees. They include (Figure 5) integration events and parties (73.1%) as well as meetings and presentations for large groups of employees (72.3%). Also meetings in teams are arranged very often (66.4%). In more than half of all the organizations surveyed, traditional printed tools (bulletin boards, internal publications and posters) are very popular. The most commonly used electronic tools include intranets (67.2%) and e-newsletters (58.8%).

It seems that new tools, such as social media, discussion forums, chats, social networks, and blogs, will become more and more important. These media offer unprecedented opportunities to build mutual relationships between employees, exchange knowledge and transfer information. More and more companies implement social media, thus creating a virtual work environment conducive to collaboration, in which people can interact with their colleagues in the same way as they do it with their friends, but in this case – for the benefit of the business. However, these are not standard tools and they much more often appear in the list of tools to be implemented than in the list of the tools already used. Declarations of using these tools were made by a little more than 10% of all companies surveyed. However, there are reasons to believe that this situation will change. The companies are interested in new solutions and over 30% of the respondents indicated the introduction of new communication tools among the projects planned for implementation. It is worth noting that 15.1% of the respondents plan to implement a social network inside the company. Implementation of these plans would certainly strongly change the image of internal communication in Polish companies.

When analysing the results of the surveys, it is worth to mention the revival of basics of communication – particularly direct face-to-face communication, for which there is still huge demand among the employees, but not always satisfied. Almost half of the surveyed companies (42.9%) use the direct visits by the President to individual locations, which proves that there is an additional motivational function realized simultaneously with the informational and control function of communication.
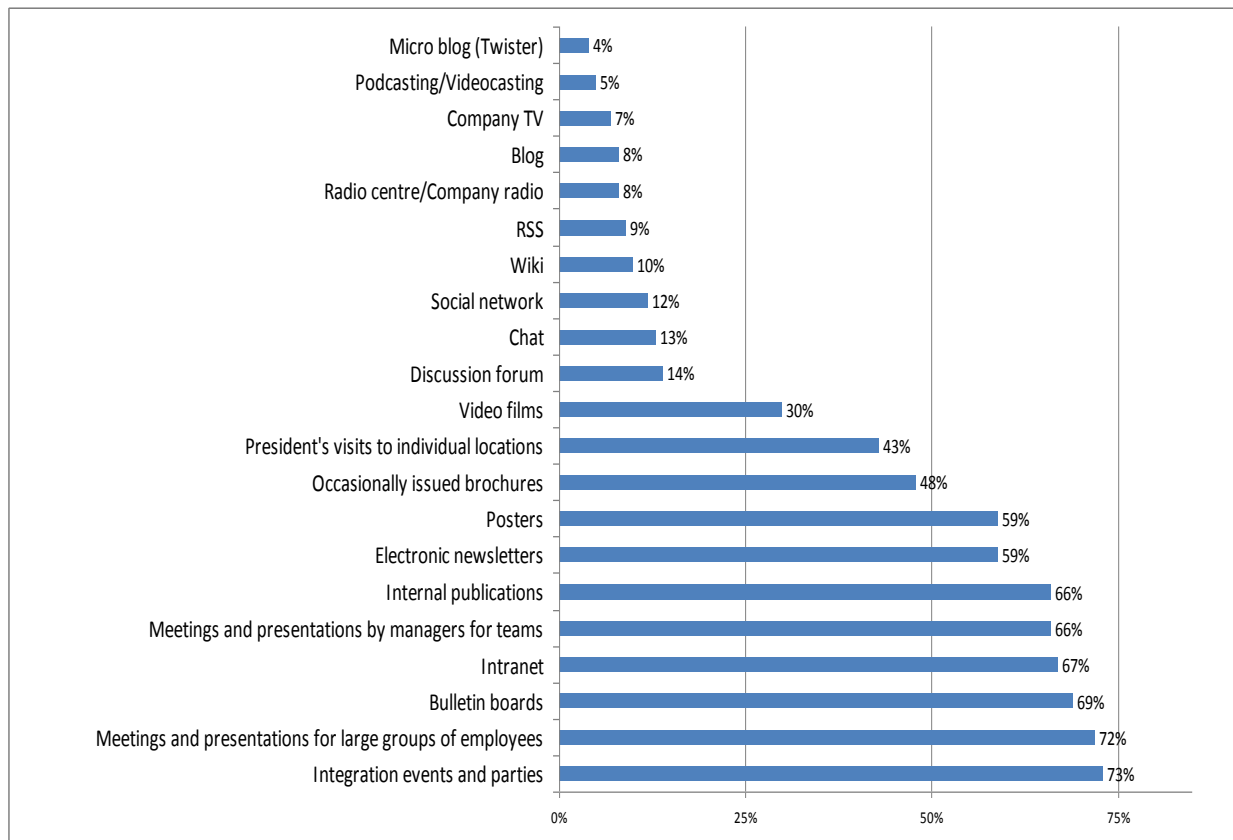
Figure 5. Internal communication tools used in the surveyed companies
Source: own study based on the "Komunikacja wewnętrzna w Polsce 2010" report, GFMP Management Consultants, November 2010

The participants in the survey evaluated critically the functioning of internal communication in their companies. This proves that there is high awareness of the need to improve communication and to understand how good internal communication should look like. At the same time it shows big problems in ensuring an effective shape of communication.

According to the respondents, improvement is required to a relatively least degree in providing the employees with information on the results of the company and preventing the information overload. However, the number of indications of the need of improvement is lower than in the case of other aspects of communication subject to the assessment because of the fact that for every fifth company surveyed this is not a goal of company communication at all. In all other aspects of communication, answers indicating the need of improvement far outweigh the positive opinions on the effectiveness of communication. According to the respondents, an improvement is required, first of all, in the ability to communicate within the company in order to build support for the projects or changes being implemented, and ensure that the company's strategy is understood and translates to an employee. Subsequently, there were mentioned aspects related to development of the dialogue with employees, building the credibility and trust in managers, and managerial communication.
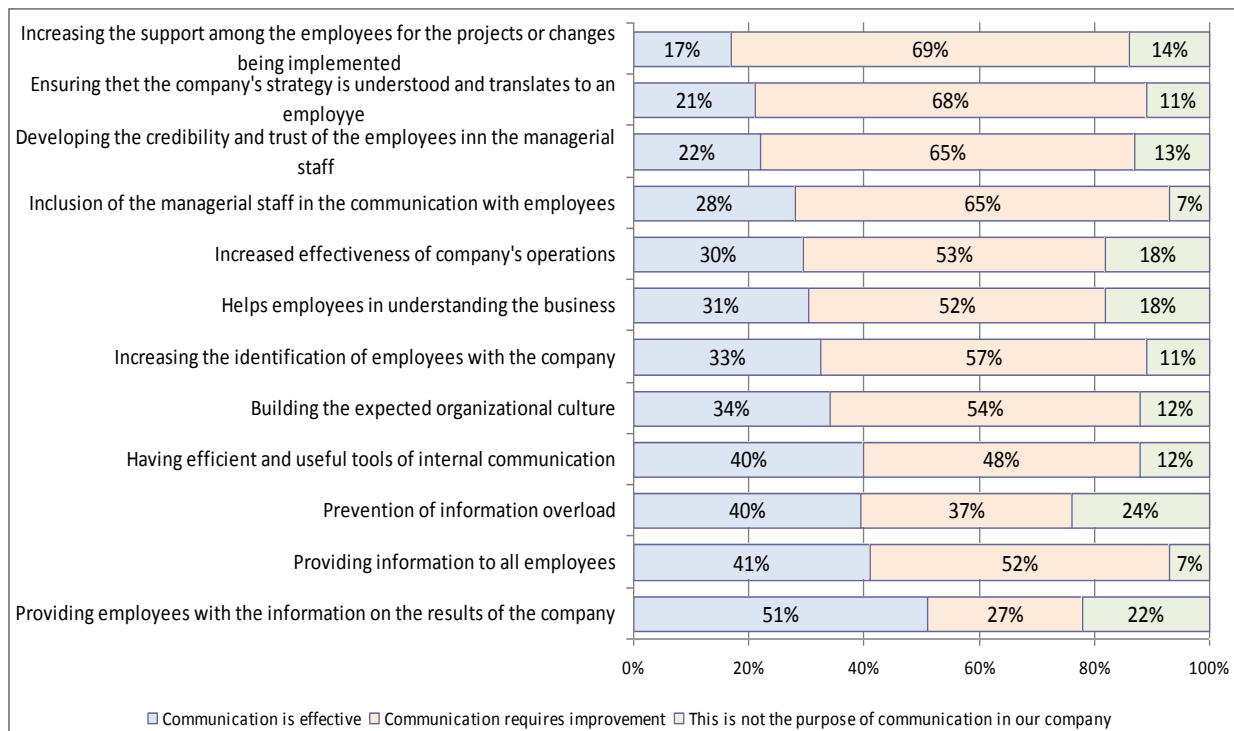
Figure 6. Evaluation of the effectiveness of internal communication
Source: own study based on the "Komunikacja wewnętrzna w Polsce 2010" report, GFMP Management Consultants, November 2010

5   Conclusion

The analysis of the studies carried out clearly demonstrates the increasing role of communication in an organization. More and more company managers look for sources that allow building their competitive advantage basing on the organizational culture and people. Persons responsible for communication processes in an organization have an important role – to strengthen such awareness continuously. The main task of activities taken in the area of communication is to support the implementation of company's strategy. Such activities should be coordinated under a strategy of communication, which is still absent in many companies, and linked with the company's strategy. The condition for developing an effective strategy is to make a right diagnosis of the initial situation and measure the effects of the implementation of this strategy. Showing the managing staff the valuable data, which prove the correctness of the activities taken, contributes actually to increasing the importance of communication in an organization.

The contemporary environment imposes a leading role on communication when talking about changes and large projects. This means continuous development of necessary instruments in the form of skilled managing staff. This means continuous development of credibility of the managing staff and internal communication through honest and open communication that speaks about employee issues in a human tone. Restricted openness in communication is a big problem for many organizations. There are many barriers in the information flow from the bottom to the top that can be noticed, as shown by the presented surveys. As a result, members of the managing are cut off from the feedback from employees and from the important information possessed by rank and file employees who work in the first line. In turn, employees perceive the managing staff as being cut off from the reality, which damages their image in the eyes of the employees. The social media which give the employees a better chance for speaking, can provide the opportunity for many companies to change their culture towards the greater openness. Social

networks can also play a big role in building close relations between employees and reducing the barriers between departments. Tools are not everything, but they can help changing the organization.

Thus, the growing need to develop a strategic and systematic approach to internal communication is confirmed. The companies that as the first will take more advanced activities in this area will have a better chance to increase the organizational effectiveness and to achieve greater involvement of employees, which in turn will translate into an increase in business ratios.

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