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## **Examining the role of internal communication and employee engagement in Cyprus-based medium-sized organisations in times of challenging strategic changes**

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**Abstract:** In response to the 2013 financial crisis in Cyprus, employers made uninformed decisions to downsize and restructure as techniques for maximising profit and decreasing cost. The employers did not consider the change management issues associated with change. The purpose of conducting this study is to: a) examine the employees' perceptions to determine whether there exists any relationship between internal communication and employee engagement in medium-size organisations during challenging economic conditions; b) determine the impact of internal communication on the employees' engagement. Using the purposive sampling technique, 343 participants were recruited. In this qualitative study, a thematic analysis of the interview responses was conducted to help in retrieving insightful information from the collected data. Applying pattern coding facilitated in proving that the hypotheses should be accepted. The findings of the study were that the top management in medium-sized organisations should use effective internal communication and employee engagement to support strategic change.

**Keywords:** internal communication; management; medium-sized organisations; employee engagement; strategic changes; corporate communication; economic change; Cyprus; staff communication; workplace relationships; employee commitment.

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## **1 Introduction**

The concept of internal communication and employee engagement has evolved in the past years, congruent with the current information era that is associated with increased technological advancements and the prevalent globalisation trends. In organisations, there has been an increased focus on the phenomena of employee engagement and internal communication (Vercic and Vokic, 2017, p.1). Analysing existing literature facilitated in identifying that increased employee engagement and effective communication is associated with enhanced work performance, decreased absenteeism, reduced turnover, and improved customer loyalty (Mishra et al., 2014, p.184; Papasolomou and Vrontis, 2006; Vercic and Vokic, 2017, p.1). In addition, Carroll (2016, p.1) posit that organisations should focus on creating an efficient engagement culture aimed at increasing the employees' satisfaction and pride in their jobs.

In Cyprus, a significant number of organisations recognise the important role of employee engagement, in difficult times of economic and strategic organisational changes. In their studies, Nicoli and Komodromos (2013), Papasolomou and Vrontis (2006), and Ruck and Trainor (2012) supported that the success of organisations in times of strategic changes relies on the effectiveness of the communication inside any kind of organisation and employee engagement. Papasolomou and Vrontis (2006) found that employees prefer working in organisations where the management is dedicated to creating trust through effective communication. Public relations experts note that during changes that are part of the overall strategy of the company, in difficult economic times. It is essential to maintain efficient communication to keep the employees informed (Nicoli and Komodromos, 2013; Vrontis et al., 2016). Also, creating an open communication culture helps the management in anticipating the employees' needs (Ruck and Trainor, 2012). A significant number of researchers and public relations practitioners acknowledged the important role of internal communication as a method of improving increasing the engagement rate of internal employees (Mark, 2010; Nelli, 2018; Ruck and Trainor, 2012). Conversely, there is limited empirical evidence focused on the correlation between internal organisational communication and the engagement of employees in medium-sized organisations in times of strategic changes (Tench and Yeomans, 2006).

Several researchers, in their studies, have supported that there is a relationship between the engagement of employees and the internal communication in the workplace environment (Jiang and Men, 2015; Mazzei, 2010; Papasolomou and Vrontis, 2006; Richardsen et al., 2016; Richmond and McCroskey, 2009). However, according to Ismail et al. (2019), there is limited research on the role of internal communication and employee engagement in medium-sized organisations. The majority of the existing studies that have been conducted focus on large organisations. Thus, there exists a gap in research on the role of internal communication and employee engagement in medium-sized organisations during times of challenging strategic changes. This qualitative study was conducted with the goal of increasing the number of studies that focus on internal communication and employee engagement in medium-sized organisations.

This study is significant because, first, it adds to the limited literature review on the significant role of the communication of employees inside an organisation and employee engagement in medium-sized organisations in Cyprus during times of strategic changes. Previous studies focused on internal corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices and

job satisfaction within the small and medium-sized enterprises in Cyprus (Droussiotis and Austin, 2007; Pappasolomou et al., 2018; Vrontis et al., 2015). This study will test the relationship, if any, between internal communication and employee engagement and examine, if, internal communication influences employee engagement, and determine in what way internal communication might affect the engagement levels of employees. Engaged employees are always a great asset to any kind of organisation. Second, the study was conducted from the perspective of non-managerial employees who work in medium-sized organisations located in Cyprus. Third, the issues assessed are important in an emerging economy such as Cyprus. The financial and economic conditions in Cyprus require organisations to implement strategic changes focused at maximising profit and decreasing costs in the challenging times.

Nelli (2018) emphasised that there is a need to conduct research focused on internal communication and employee engagement in Cyprus. As a result, this study is expected to contribute to the current literature, especially, in the Cypriot context. The purpose of conducting this study was to

- examine the employees' perceptions to determine whether there is any relationship between internal communication and employee engagement in medium-size organisations during challenging economic conditions
- determine the impact of internal communication on the employees' engagement.

The research question that this study sought to answer is, what is the role of internal communication and employee engagement in Cyprus-based medium-sized organisations in times of challenging strategic changes? This paper has been categorised into different sections: internal communication; theoretical framework; constructs; hypotheses development; research methodology; results; conclusions, discussion, and managerial implications; and limitations and recommendations.

## **2 Internal communication**

The communication inside the organisations can be considered as the process of exchanging information between the organisation's management and employees (Stevanovic and Gmitrovic, 2015; Titang, 2013). The alternative terms for internal communication include internal public relations, employee communication, and staff communication. Internal communication reflects the ability of an organisation's management to create relationships with the employees (Mishra et al., 2014). Stevanovic and Gmitrovic (2015) supported that internal communication is essential in organisations because it helps promote the success of the company's operations (Al-Zyoud and Mert, 2019). Bharadwaj (2014) suggest that organisations' management should plan the communication profile of their company as a technique for promoting functionalities. Efficient internal communication can result in satisfaction among employees. Similar to Bharadwaj (2014), Martinez and Hurtado (2018) report that internal communication is a significant element that influences the organisations' functionalities.

Eskelinen et al. (2017) conducted a study that focused on the concept of the employee communication internally in organisations in small and medium-sized enterprises. In the research, the authors argued that a participative business model is a useful technique for identifying the challenges that occur in organisations. The researchers

concluded that the participative model increases motivation among employees, encourages communication, and creates a unanimous understanding of the techniques for solving problems (Eskelinen et al., 2017). In a different study, Neill (2015) supported Bharadwaj (2014), Eskelinen et al. (2017) and Martinez and Hurtado (2018) on the importance of internal communication. Neill (2015) added that organisations should recruit individuals who should have the strategic role of managing internal communication in the company.

Men (2014) conducted a study involving 400 employees from medium-sized and large organisations to assess the concept of internal communication. In the study, the researchers identified that in organisations where the management apply face-to-face channels of communication, the employees feel more engaged. Men (2014) also identified that employees prefer emails as a first option, and a general meeting as a second option, and as a third option an interpersonal communication as modes of receiving information about new decisions, events, changes, and policies. In a different study, Mazzei and Ravazzani (2014) assessed the internal communication strategies applied by companies in Italy during the 2008 global financial crisis. The researchers found that the companies in Italy underutilised internal communication, activation of employee behaviours, and transparency strategy. Some companies applied evasion and cohesion strategies, which adversely affected the employees' trust and adoption of strategic change. Based on the findings, Mazzei and Ravazzani (2014) emphasised the need for maintaining a sense of trust, influencing the employees' behaviour to overcome the crisis, creating realistic expectations among the workers, increasing a sense of security, and communicating factual information.

## *2.1 Synthesis statement*

Analysing existing literature facilitated in identifying that the communication inside an organisation has a significant impact on organisations' operations, employees' attitude, work behaviour, and job performance. Effectively planned internal communication increases employees' satisfaction, promotes the exchange of information, and fosters unanimous understanding (Bharadwaj, 2014; Eskelinen et al., 2017; Martinez and Hurtado, 2018; Neill, 2015). The management's ability to develop relationships with the employees can be determined by the internal communication strategy within the organisation (Mishra et al., 2014). Literature supports that can be concluded that in medium-sized organisations, neglecting internal communication could result in decreased organisational commitment (Komodromos et al., 2019). In addition, the underutilisation of internal communication, lack of transparency, application of evasion, and the use of cohesion adversely affects internal communication (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2014). In organisations, the employees prefer a combination of face-to-face, email, general meetings, and interpersonal communications (Chmielecki, 2015; Men, 2014).

## *2.2 Employee engagement*

The concept of employee engagement involves providing the organisation's workers with an opportunity to make choices that are congruent with the company's goals (Kaliannan and Adjovu, 2015). According to Saks (2006, p.614), employee engagement refers to the extent that employees are involved in performing their roles and

responsibilities. Intellectual, affective, and social engagement are the core facets of employee engagement (Gupta and Sharma, 2016). Intellectual engagement is aimed at enabling the employees to think about the job and promote continuous improvement. Employees with effective engagement feel positive about their work. Social engagement is associated with the employees' readiness to discuss the techniques for improving work-related matters with others (Gupta and Sharma, 2016). Similar to effective communication, the effective engagement of employees inside the organisation can be related with aspects of human behaviour such as motivation, job satisfaction, commitment, and psychological contract (Bharadwaj, 2014; Eskelinen et al., 2017; Gupta and Sharma, 2016; Martinez and Hurtado, 2018; Neill, 2015).

Positive outcomes such as increased job satisfaction are associated with employee engagement (Mishra et al., 2014; Vercic and Vokic 2017). Teimouri et al. (2016) conducted a study to assess the impact of employee engagement on organisational engagement. The researchers found that organisational effectiveness is affected by employee engagement if workers are considered as key stakeholders in firms. Employee engagement supports organisational performance and increased productivity. In another study, Ababneh et al. (2019) stated that organisations that invest in employee engagement are likely to benefit from increased productivity. In the study, the researchers emphasised on the importance of effective employee engagement measures that are based on job satisfaction, work involvement, and organisational commitment. Additionally, Monica and Krishnaveni (2018) found that employee engagement should be based on communication, competence development techniques, social support, and job attributes.

According to Mansoor and Hassan (2016), the dimensions of engaging employees at work include the management of the company, communication, learning and development, job role, and collaboration. In a recent study, Bekirogullari (2019) emphasised that employee engagement is essential in organisations because it supports the workers' creativity. A close but cordial relationship among the management and employees is essential. Nienaber (2019) argued that employee engagement could be identified in the workers' well-being, performance, and ability to achieve goals. In the study, the researchers highlighted the importance of employee engagement on strategy implementation. Similarly, Sugandini et al. (2018) found that employee engagement affects work satisfaction and organisational commitment. Also, successful engagement at work may be influenced by rewards such as salary, wages, and career advancement opportunities. In a different study, Agrawal (2016) assessed the factors that influence employee engagement. The identified factors include career development and organisation citizenship behaviour. Agrawal (2016) concluded that organisations could increase employee engagement by creating a sense of teamwork and learning opportunities.

### *2.3 Role of internal communication and employee engagement*

The role and the impact of internal communication and employee engagement in organisations have received significant attention from scholars in practice and academia. Hakanen et al. (2008), Richman (2006), and Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) stated that internal communication and employee engagement are a source of competitive advantage, especially, in times of the increasingly technological innovation and dynamic

economic conditions, and changing social activities. In the majority of the European organisations, the top management applies the concept of effective internal communication and employee engagement as techniques for accruing competitive advantage over other companies (Al-Sada et al., 2017). The integration of all corporate functions and operational processes facilitates the formulation of techniques to guide the behaviour of all employees to be congruent with the organisation's strategy. In their studies, Austin (2009), Ambrose and Schminke (2009) and Balogun (2009) proved that the effectiveness of internal communication and the engagement of employees are associated with organisational success and profit. In addition, internal communication and employee engagement support positive business outcomes and performance, specifically, during times of challenging economic conditions or strategic changes (Austin, 2009; Ambrose and Schminke, 2009; Balogun, 2009; Hakanen et al., 2008; Richman, 2006; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004).

Various authors support that the employee engagement concept involves three psychological conditions. Kahn (1990) noted that meaningfulness, safety, availability, and psychological conditions significantly correlate with vigour, dedication, and absorption. The results in the study by Kahn (1990) were also confirmed in another research conducted after 20 years (Mark, 2010). In addition, Thompson and Yvonne (2009) quoted that employee engagement, especially, in times of strategic changes and supports the creation of a positive relationship between the management and workers in an organisation. Gibbons (2006) supported the need to involve the employees' mental and emotional connection during strategic change. In their study, Saunders and Thornhill (2003) examined the role of internal communication management, employees' engagement perceptions, and organisational commitment in the context of organisational changes. The researchers concluded that internal communication and engagement among the employees and their supervisors is a critical factor for promoting successful organisational and strategic change. In a different study, Saunders and Thornhill (2004) suggested that the management should focus on the perceived internal communication because employee engagement and organisational commitment are considered to have a positive impact on the employees' trust.

In recent studies, Mishra et al. (2014) argued that internal communication is essential in engaging employees and creating a culture of transparency between workers and employers. In their exploratory study, the researchers found that management applies different techniques such as face-to-face communication. Mishra et al. (2014) supported that the executives select communication strategies to create trust and engagement with employees. In addition to the study by Mishra et al. (2014), in their research, Vercic and Vokic (2017), explored the relationship between internal communication satisfaction and employee engagement. The researchers found that internal communication satisfaction in an organisation is positively correlated with increased employees' engagement (Vercic and Vokic, 2017). In another exploratory study conducted by Ahmed and George (2017) on the role of internal communication, it was identified that there exists a direct and positive relationship between job satisfaction, employees' commitment, employee engagement, and job satisfaction. Congruent with Mishra et al. (2014) and Vercic and Vokic (2017) arguments, Ahmed and George (2017) concluded by indicating that internal communication supports employee engagement, thus improving the overall functionalities of an organisation.

#### *2.4 Strategic changes in medium-sized organisations*

A change implementation process is supported by the need for organisations to gain a competitive advantage over other companies (Franken et al., 2009). There are prevalent economic changes that have an impact on organisations, especially in a challenging economic environment (Schildt and Sillince, 2012). The management in organisations needs to adopt strategies to facilitate in ameliorating the adverse impact of the changes. When introducing the strategies in response to the radical and economic changes, the managers could alter the vital organisational structures and activities (Goksoy et al., 2012). The introduced strategies can have a negative impact if the employees consider the actions by the management unjust or unfair. The feeling of anger and resentment among the employees could result in low levels of internal communication and employee engagement (Croonen, 2010; Gagnon et al., 2009).

In their studies, Buss and Kuyvenhofen (2011), and Rouleau and Balogun (2011) indicated that strategic economic changes in organisations are introduced from the higher to lower levels of a company. In medium-sized organisations, change is considered as an irregular event instead of a continuous activity that affects the companies (Carter et al., 2012). Ongoing changes could require employees to modify their work routines and social practices. In organisations with ineffective internal communication and employee engagement, workers often experience difficulties and tension when adopting the introduced changes or adhering to the new job requirements and circumstances (Carter et al., 2012; Dulac et al., 2008).

### **3 Theoretical foundation**

Theories provide research with a scholarly foundation. This section contains an explanation of Sirota's three-factor model of engagement that was applied to facilitate in increasing the credibility, transferability, conformability, and dependability of the study findings (Kivunja, 2018, p.48). According to Sirota's model, employees who can be considered as engaged perform their jobs in a manner that reflects a significant level of commitment (Gupta and Chowdhury, 2018, pp.58–60). Engaged employees apply their optimal knowledge, abilities, and skills to achieve organisational goals and objectives. The primary engagement factors include achievement, camaraderie, and equity. Achievement involves providing the workers with an enabling work environment and recognising employees for completing the roles performed. Recognising employees increases their morale and motivation. The concept of camaraderie involves considering the employees as family members of the organisation. Also, there should be cooperation among the employees in the organisation. The concept of equity supports that organisations should have conditions of employment that are based on the respect to others. An essential concept of equity is that employees working in organisations should be treated honestly. For instance, all organisations should have a safe working environment. Organisations should train the employees on safety and increase the workers' willingness to communicate their safety concerns with the management (Gupta and Chowdhury, 2018, pp.58–60).

The proposed conceptual framework supports that internal communication has an impact on the employees' engagement in medium-size organisations in challenging strategic changes (Appendix A). The proposed framework is based on the argument that

because internal communication involves the strategic management of the relationships and interactions among the stakeholders in an organisation, it is a strategy that can be applied to promote employee engagement. Employee engagement is associated with increased business performance, profitability and productivity, levels of job satisfaction, and customer satisfaction (Austin, 2009; Ambrose and Schminke, 2009; Balogun, 2009; Saunders and Thornhill, 2004; Thompson and Yvonne, 2009). In addition, employee engagement facilitates in the development of positive relationships, reduced the employees stress level, decreased the rate of employee turnover, increased ability of an organisation to adapt to change, and creates a culture of transparency (Harter et al., 2002; Mishra et al., 2014; Thompson and Yvonne, 2009; Vercic and Vokic, 2017).

#### **4 Constructs and hypotheses**

In the study, the independent variable was internal communication, and employee engagement was the dependent variable. The variables were derived from the research question *what is the role of internal communication and employee engagement in Cyprus-based medium-sized organisations in times of challenging strategic changes?* The economic and financial challenges experienced in Cyprus caused organisations in the country to implement cost reduction strategies such as downsize and organisational restructuring to maximise profits. The management did not consider the impact of the strategic changes on the employee's engagement levels. Thus, the purpose of conducting this study is to

- examine the employees' perceptions to determine whether there exists any relationship between internal communication and employee engagement in medium-sized organisations during challenging economic conditions
- determine the impact of internal communication on the employees' engagement.

Internal communication and employee engagement are essential concepts during strategic change (Mishra et al., 2014; Vercic and Vokic, 2017). Effective internal communication and employee engagement are associated with a rise in profitability and production, decreased rates of attrition, and increased workers' satisfaction (Harter et al., 2002; Mishra et al., 2014; Neill, 2015; Thompson and Yvonne, 2009; Vercic and Vokic, 2017). Internal communication and employee engagement are essential for supporting strategic changes in large organisations. Conversely, there is limited evidence on whether there exists any relationship between internal communication and employee engagement in Cyprus based medium-sized organisations during times of challenging economic conditions. Thus, there was a need to conduct this study.

In the literature review section, it was identified that the concepts of internal communication and employee engagement have been studied extensively. In existing literature, researchers indicated that in large organisations, there exists a relationship between internal communication and employee engagement (Ababneh et al., 2019; Bekirogullari, 2019; Bharadwaj, 2014; Bjerke and Ind, 2015; Chmielecki, 2015; Croonen, 2010; Eskelinen et al., 2017; Gagnon et al., 2009; Gupta and Sharma, 2016; Mansoor and Hassan, 2016; Martinez and Hurtado, 2018; Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2014; McBain, 2007; Men, 2014; Mishra et al., 2014). Conversely, there is limited literature in medium-sized organisations. Hence, the first hypothesis is

*H1: There exists a relationship between internal communication and employee engagement in medium-sized organisations, which supports strategic change during challenging economic conditions.*

Existing literature supports that both internal communication and employee engagement have significant roles in large organisations during strategic change (Hakanen et al., 2008; Richman, 2006; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). Internal communication and employee engagement are associated with increased business performance, development of positive relationships, and support the adaptability of the company (Austin, 2009; Ambrose and Schminke, 2009; Balogun, 2009; Saunders and Thornhill, 2004; Thompson and Yvonne, 2009). In addition, employee engagement and internal communication facilitate in reducing the employees' stress level, decreasing the rate of employee turnover, and creates a culture of transparency (Harter et al., 2002; Mishra et al., 2014; Thompson and Yvonne, 2009; Vercic and Vokic, 2017). Thus, the second hypothesis is

*H2: Internal communication has an impact on the employees' engagement in medium-sized organisations during challenging economic conditions that result in strategic change.*

## **5 Research methodology**

This section contains a discussion on the sample size and instruments applied in the study. A qualitative methodology was used to assess the role of internal communication and employee engagement in a medium-sized organisation during challenging economic conditions that result in strategic change. The qualitative methodology was identified as a suitable technique for assessing the concept of internal communication and employee engagement from the employees' point of view (Mohajan, 2018, p.2). Adopting the qualitative method was considered as appropriate because it facilitated in extrapolating the thought process of the participants and analysing the issue of internal communication and employee engagement using interviews. Specifically, applying the qualitative methodology helped the researcher in assessing the employees' perception of their organisation's communication channels. Also, the impact of internal communication channels on employee engagement was assessed. A qualitative methodology facilitates in determining to answer the 'how' and 'why' questions (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). The methodology allowed the researcher to apply a multiple-case study research design in answering the research question. Also, the qualitative methodology was selected because it enabled the researcher to assess the views of homogenous and diverse participants (Mohajan, 2018, p.18).

### *5.1 Sample and procedures*

The targeted population was non-managerial employees working in Cyprus. A purposive sampling strategy that is commonly applied in qualitative research, especially when the population is large, was used to recruit the participants. Applying a purposive sampling technique allowed the researcher to identify and select the non-managerial employees who possess knowledge on the impact of internal communication on employee engagement (Palinkas et al., 2015). In addition, purposive sampling enabled the researcher to recruit participants based on their availability, willingness,

and ability to articulate their opinions. Using purposive sampling facilitated in recruiting 343 participants from 20 medium-sized organisations in Cyprus. Out of the 343 participants, 199 (58%) were male, while 144 (42%) were female. The participants' age ranged from 25–58. The data on internal communication and employee engagement practices in 20 medium-sized Cypriot organisations in times of strategic changes and challenging economic conditions were collected from June to September 2019. The collected data were transcribed and coded. During data analysis, pattern coding was done to facilitate in identifying the recurrent concepts in the participants' responses.

## *5.2 Instrument*

Survey questions were used to collect data on internal communication and employee engagement from 343 non-managerial employees from 20 organisations in Cyprus. The survey questions were developed in Greek and were sent to three experts who critiqued the face value of the protocol (Appendices B and C). The survey questions protocol was pilot tested among 30 non-managerial employees to assess the adequacy of the instrument. During the actual study, the survey questions lasted for 20–30 minutes and were conducted via face-to-face interactions or Skype. The survey questions protocol facilitated in collecting and exploring data on participants' experiences and perspectives on the role of internal communication and employee engagement.

## **6 Results**

Analysing the study findings facilitated in answering the survey questions. The participants' responses helped the researcher in proving that the formulated hypotheses should be accepted. In response to the research question on the communication channels, the participants indicated that the prevalently used modes include face-to-face, broadcast media, mobile, electronic, and written. Participants (74%) responded that they consider face-to-face or personal communication as the common, effective, and preferred form of exchanging information that can be used within organisations. A number of the respondents (85%) replied that written personal communication methods such as email are the existing modes of exchanging information within the organisations. It was identified that organisations do not use electronic communication channels, such as social media platforms, to exchange information. Similar to the study findings, Men (2014) identified that in organisations where the management apply face-to-face channels of communication, the employees feel more engaged.

Some employees (48%) indicated that the traditional communication methods such as letters, memos, notices, and announcements are ineffective for transmitting information in a medium-sized organisation, particularly during strategic changes. In addition, the respondents (65%) indicated that mobile communication channels should be used when a more or complex message needs to be communicated to all or a significant number of employees. Similarly, a number of participants (68%) said that in their organisations, mobile mode of communication is used instead of face-to-face if the message is urgent. Using mobile communication promotes efficiency in reference to the time and effort it would take to coordinate a face-to-face meeting. Most of the respondents (88%) added that in times of strategic economic changes, they prefer electronic or mobile communication to be followed by personal communication because

it provides an opportunity for dialogue. Congruent with the findings, Men (2014) argued that employees prefer to emails followed by a general meeting and interpersonal communication as models of receiving information about new decisions, events, changes, and policies.

In response to the efficacy of the channels, employees (73%) stated that the weekly meetings with supervisors, email, and face-to-face communication to bearer the most effective internal communication methods within their organisations. The least preferred form of exchanging information includes printed material and non-interpersonal communication. In addition, the participants indicated that when they communicate face-to-face with their supervisors or the management, they feel more engaged because the channels provide quick and immediate ways of getting information during times of economic changes; thus, increasing trust. Existing researchers such as Mazzei and Ravazzani (2014) argued that effective internal communication should be based on transparency strategies. Also, employees (55%) agreed that when an organisation effectively communicates with its employees, they will be more willing to exert extra efforts in their work because they feel engaged. The findings are congruent with those by Keating (2015) that efficient internal communication increases the employees engagement and their dedication to work, which is associated with a rise in profitability, productivity, and customer satisfaction.

Research findings facilitated in identifying that open communication between the management and subordinate workers make the employee's day-to-day activities more meaningful (Altuntas et al., 2017). The cordial relationship may positively influence how employees feel about their work. In addition, researchers have supported that when there is a mutual understanding between supervisors and employees, the workers experience significant engagement and trust towards the organisation, especially, in times of economic changes (Mishra et al., 2014; Vercic and Vokic, 2017). Generally, research results support that increasing the level of engagement in times of strategic organisational changes or economic problems experienced in an organisation is associated with some advantages. The advantages include an improvement in employee retention rates, decreased absenteeism, reduced sick days, and increased willingness to cooperate and overcome the challenges that an organisation might be experiencing during that period (Harter et al., 2002; Thompson and Yvonne, 2009).

In regards to the employees' – supervisor relationship during times of economic changes in the Cyprus market, the respondents said that productive and respectful interactions are essential success factors in the company. Employees (83%) said they feel that their supervisors' top priority is not to have hardworking employees who fulfil the vision of their organisation in difficult times. Also, the employees indicated that during strategic changes, the supervisors develop superficial relationships, which result in uncertainties and distrust. Conversely, several employees (30%) answered that the supervisors spend more time with them and are dedicated to increasing engagement. Participants (41%) argued that during strategic change, the supervisors and management should avail adequate information to them during the process. Providing the participants with adequate information could facilitate in improving morale, productivity, and ultimately boost their confidence to succeed. Participants (65%) were of the opinion that the supervisors should share their ideas with them and request for suggestions. The process of requesting feedback increases comradely, which is a component of employee engagement.

Some of the participants (85%) indicated that the channels do encourage two-way communication. The employees responded that the implemented internal communication strategies should help the employees feel comfortable enough to disagree with the supervisors. The participants supported that an open line of communication can facilitate in creating a relationship that facilitates achieving the organisation's goals. In addition, a number of participants (75%) suggested that fully engaged employees are motivated and dedicated to supporting the strategic change that is congruent with the organisation's goals. Similarly, existing literature supports that engaged employees lead to increased productivity and outcomes, rise in customer satisfaction, and growth in output (Keating, 2015; Mazzei, 2010). Other participants (42%) added that the immediate supervisor, specifically in times of crisis, are indispensable workers because they facilitate in increasing the connection between the employees and the management. Thus, it is essential that there exists a cordial relationship between the participants and the employees to support two-way communication. Additionally, some of the employees (87%) were of the opinion that during economic crises and strategic changes in organisations, the management should listen to their concerns and provide them with feedback through the supervisors.

Most participants (92%) explained that strategic change is associated with emotions such as fear, which makes it essential for the management to engage the employees with the goal of empowering them and enhancing their confidence and enthusiasm. It was identified that non-satisfactory relationships between the employees and the management makes the workers feel uncomfortable and unwilling to participate in the strategic change. The employees emphasised the need for the management to engage them during any strategic organisational change. Existing literature supports the importance of the management to engage the employees to increase their positive association with proposed change (Farndale et al., 2010; Saunders and Thornhill, 2004).

The employees said they feel that without successful internal communication, exemplary leadership, a positive working environment, and adequate engagement change at their organisation during times of economic changes in Cyprus will not be successful. Most of the participants (80%) stated that upper management has the responsibility to communicate understandable messages. Also, the employees must be able to psychologically and physically act upon the message. Other participants (68%) noted that effective internal communication in times of strategic changes could only occur if there exists a collaborative relationship between employees and the management and employees. In their studies, existing researchers support that in times of strategic organisational changes, the employees are important in determining the success of the introduced changes (Hakanen et al., 2008; Richman, 2006; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004).

Employees (81%) said that when they receive continuous feedback from management, they feel safer. The employees also stated that they gain a positive attitude towards the proposed changed implemented to support the achievement of the predetermined organisational goals. Participants (75%) added that the success of strategic organisational changes is based on the employees' reactions. Thus, maintaining continuous communication with the employees facilitates in expediting strategic organisational change (Austin, 2009; Croonen, 2010). The management needs to consider the significant role of effective internal communication, especially, during times of strategic changes (Gagnon et al., 2009). In addition, participants (60%) added that their emotions affect their adaptive behaviour in times of strategic changes. Saunders

and Thornhill (2004) supported the argument by indicating that the employees' emotion that can be classified as either positive or negative has an impact on the adoption of the introduced strategic change.

## **7 Conclusions, discussion, and managerial implications**

Effective internal communication and employee engagement are essential in promoting a culture of transparency and honesty between the subordinate and the management. The purpose of conducting this study was to

- examine the employees' perceptions to determine whether there exists any relationship between internal communication and employee engagement in medium-sized organisations during challenging economic conditions
- determine the impact of internal communication on the employees' engagement.

A qualitative methodology was applied to assess the role of internal communication and employee engagement in medium-sized organisations. Data from the 343 participants recruited through purposive sampling were collected from June to September 2019. The data collected using an interview protocol were coded and a thematic analysis was conducted. The results supported the two formulated hypotheses and facilitated in proving that internal communication and employee engagement are significant factors in medium-sized organisations. Internal communication has an impact on employee engagement. Also, employee engagement influences the adoption of strategic change in organisations.

Sirota's three-factor model of engagement guided the study. According to the model, the primary engagement factors include achievement, camaraderie, and equity. The model facilitated in understanding the concept of employee engagement. The finding of the study were congruent with existing literature (Ababneh et al., 2019; Bekirogullari, 2019; Bharadwaj, 2014; Chmielecki, 2015; Croonen, 2010; Eskelinen et al., 2017; Gagnon et al., 2009; Gupta and Sharma, 2016; Mansoor and Hassan, 2016; Martinez and Hurtado, 2018; Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2014; McBain, 2007; Men, 2014; Mishra et al., 2014; Neill, 2015; Saunders and Thornhill, 2004; Stevanovic and Gmitrovic, 2015; Vercic and Vokic, 2017). The findings of the study facilitated in proving that the formulated hypothesis should be accepted.

Effective internal communication is essential because it is correlated with the strategic managers' ability to engage employees and achieve objectives. Similar to the study findings, Mishra et al. (2014) argued that internal communication is dependent on the management's ability to create relationships with employees. The management has an essential role in creating organisational change. During challenging strategic change, the management needs to communicate with the employees continuously. In the study findings, the workers explained that the process of change is associated with emotions. The participants argued that effective communication via face-to-face, emails, and general meetings. Congruent with the findings, Chmielecki (2015), Men (2014) and Mishra et al. (2014) identified that employees prefer to emails followed by a general meeting and interpersonal communication that facilitate in creating trust and engagement with employees.

Study results revealed that strategic change failure occurs when the employees fail to promote effective internal communication that is associated with increased employee engagement. Similar to existing research conducted in large organisations, internal communication is essential in organisations and motivates the employees' to support the decision the proposed strategic change (Bharadwaj, 2014; Eskelinen et al., 2017; Martinez and Hurtado, 2018; Neill, 2015; Stevanovic and Gmitrovic, 2015). It is essential to involve employees at every level of strategic communication to avoid uncertainty, fear, and lack of trust. Based on the participants' argument, it was identified that consistent communication increases their sense of trust and influencing their behaviour. Also, effective internal communication facilitates in creating realistic expectations among the workers and increases a sense of security. In their studies, Mazzei and Ravazzani (2014), Mishra et al. (2014) and Saunders and Thornhill (2004) indicated that the underutilised internal communication and transparency strategy and application of evasion and cohesion methods affect the employees' trust and engagement. Thus, internal communication and transparency should be applied to support strategic change in medium-sized organisations.

Employee engagement can be associated with increased motivation, job satisfaction, performance, and commitment. In the study, it was identified that it is essential for the management to invest in employee engagement and establish cordial relationships. In addition, employee engagement is associated with increased organisations' profitability and productivity, reduced employees' stress levels, and a decline in the rate of employee turnover. Hence, the lack of communication strategy planning in organisations results in missed opportunities. The top management should enhance two-way communication and ensure that employees have all the resources to do their jobs in times of strategic organisational changes. During strategic change, the employees can resist if they consider the actions by the management are considered unjust or unfair. Also, to ameliorate the feeling of anger and resentment among the employees towards the management, the management should focus on increased internal communication and employee engagement. Supporting internal communication has been associated with positive business outcomes and performance. It is important for the management and public relations to support and implement effective internal communication techniques, especially, during strategic changes to create and sustain the levels of employee engagement that promote the organisational trust, which is associated with improved performance and productivity. The study facilitated in proving that the management in medium-sized organisations should focus on internal communication and employee engagement during strategic change, as a technique for improving the overall functionalities of a company.

## **8 Limitations and recommendations**

The identified limitations are associated with the study design and sampling method. First, the interpretation of qualitative study findings is subjective. Conversely, this limitation was overcome by using existing literature to support the study. Second, using a purposive sampling technique increased the possibility of selection bias. Selection bias was overcome by including a large sample size of 343 participants. Third, the scope of the study was to assess internal communication and employee engagement in Cyprus. Thus, the study findings cannot be generalised to organisations in other countries. The

generalisability was enhanced by including literature findings from research conducted in other countries.

Future researchers can apply random or probability sampling techniques to eliminate the possibility of selection bias. Future researchers can conduct case studies comparing the concept of internal communication and employee engagement as a technique for improving the generalisability of the study findings. In addition, future researchers can conduct a study analysing the association between employee engagement and normative commitment in times of strategic changes in both large and medium-size in the service sector in Cyprus using a qualitative methodology. The study will help the researchers and practitioners to understand the factors that influence different types of commitment to the organisation.

This study contributes to the existing literature by examining the role of internal communication and employee engagement in medium-size organisations in Cyprus in times of strategic changes. There are limited studies focused on examining internal communication and employee engagement in Cyprus during strategic changes. Future researchers should conduct similar studies to increase the amount of literature on the concept. Also, future researchers could focus on the impact of employee engagement and internal communication and its association with company performance and sustainability in times of strategic changes in Cyprus.

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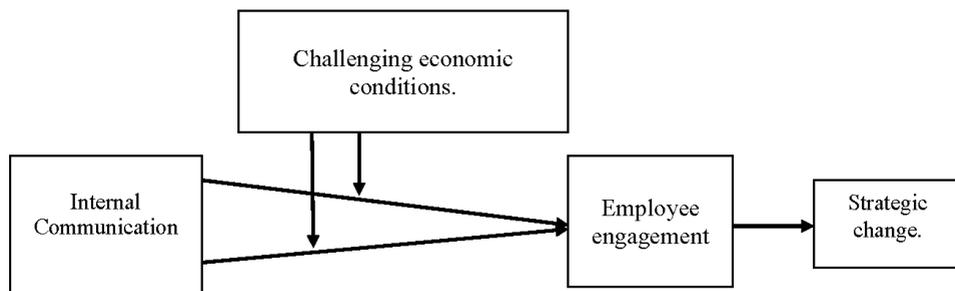
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## Appendix A: Proposed conceptual framework



**Appendix B: Demographic data form**

Instructions: Please respond to each of the following questions:

1 What is your gender?

Female \_\_\_\_\_

Male \_\_\_\_\_

2 How old are you?

25–35 Years

36–46 Years

47–57 Years

58–68 Years

**Appendix C: Interview protocol**

Interview length: 20–30 minutes

Participant pseudonym \_\_\_\_\_

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<i>Question No.</i>	<i>Question content</i>
1	What are the communication channels your company uses to share general company information? Answer.....
2	Do you consider these channels effective? Answer.....
3	How do you feel about your relationship with your immediate supervisor during these times of economic changes in the Cyprus market? Answer.....
4	How do you feel about your opportunities to communicate with upper management during times of economic changes in the Cyprus market? Answer.....
5	How do you feel about the reliability of the information you receive at your organisation during times of economic changes in the Cyprus market? Answer.....

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