

THE COMMUNICATION PATTERNS OF LEADERS AND EMPLOYEES. EVIDENCE FROM MEDIUM AND LARGE ENTERPRISES¹

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Introduction

Companies need to be effective. Determinants may be found in a whole range of organizational issues, starting with innovative techniques and technologies, through meticulous employee training, to time consuming financial analyses. Communication is the basic process of managing and leading a company. This is because the management of an organization is conducted by communicating with people – managers and employees in every position. If the communication process is performed successfully, the organization functions effectively. In contrast, when communication is poor, then problems and inefficiencies occur [Sinickas, 2001, p. 1-5]. Of course, communication cannot be treated as the only factor leading to the effectiveness of an organization, but if there is a lack of coherent communication, other factors will not make up for it, no matter how good they are. Therefore, the assumption is made that if managers and employees have a similar communication pattern then communication is efficient, promoting effective management of the organization.

The main aim of the article is to find if communication patterns of managers and employees differ. For this purpose, three types of communication were differentiated to describe it.

Research Background

Organizational communication has been described from a variety of viewpoints [Dennis, 1974; Postmes, 2003; Redding, 1973; Smidts et al., 2001]. in terms of the hierarchical position of the sender and receiver, the direction of the communication, its level of abstraction, the function of the communication, and its content and form, among others. Moreover, issues on communication are frequently related to other variables, e.g., the communication climate and its identification at various levels within an organization [Bartels et al., 2006, 2007], commitment and job performance [Wallace 1995; Chen, Silverthorne & Hung, 2006], organizational climate, job satisfaction and employee performance [Ainspan, Dell, 2000; Jo, Shim, 2005], the result of organizational success [Baskin, Aronoff & Lattimore, 1996], identification with the organization and belonging to a profession [Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Cheney, 1983; Postmes, 2003; Smidts et al., 2001], a work group which fosters an atmosphere of cohesion [Levine and Moreland, 1990], and many other relationships.

There are some publications which focus on communication as a tool of managing organizations. For example, supportive oral communication is related positively to individuals' perceptions of management's supportiveness and friendliness. Perceived support

creates trust that the organization will fulfill its exchange obligations by rewarding employee efforts [Jo, Shim, 2005].

Research Model and Hypothesis

For the purpose of the study, three types of communication patterns were identified – traditional, opportune and networking. The basis for differentiating the communication types were three dimensions – the initiator of the communication process, the purpose and content of the message, and the time of the conducted communication (simultaneous or asynchronous).

Traditional communication

The employee is treated as a tool (often a highly specialized one) and his duty is to perform flawlessly the assigned tasks in a manner imposed by his manager. Therefore, more often, the initiator of the communication process is a superior. The message is sent down the organizational structure. It provides information concerning the tasks to be performed and provides guidance to perform them. The employee does not need to know the wider context of the work or plans for the organization's future. The messages issued by the managers often refer to short, even one-day time horizons. As the information flows down, it becomes more precise at each level of the structure, with the greatest number of details at the lowest organizational level. As it moves up, the communication becomes less detailed and provides a general character or takes the form of a summary [Bartels et al., 2010]. The message and any information communicated up are related to the fulfillment of duties and obligations, the degree of progress, problems with work, finished jobs, or the lack of raw materials or tools etc. This type of internal communication should tell superiors how closely employees understand and follow the instructions [Langley, 1988; Thackeray & Neiger, 2009; Longenecker, Simonetti & Sharkey, 1999].

As a rule, vertical communication is work-related and travels top-down and bottom-up within the organization's hierarchy [Dutton et al., 1994; Downs & Adrian, 2004; Goldhaber, 1993]. An employee in this type of communication, in principle, does not determine the work for his position – he initiates the process of communication when he is not sure how to perform operations at his workstation [Fletcher, 1999; Okumus, 2003]. This type of communication recognizes that, actually, only the manager is directed to make a decision and, therefore, only he should have adequate and complete information for this purpose. Subordinates, playing roles unrelated to the decision-making processes, do not need to have such information. Excessive

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transfer of information to employees is considered a burden for the employee and a cost for the company. Therefore, workers and lower-level managers have limited access to information (a cascade of information) [House & Rizzo, 1972; Schuler, 1977; Oakland, Tanner & Gadd, 2002].

Horizontal communication, occurring among employees at the same level, is sharing the information primarily for the coordination of activities, to support the completion of tasks, and in decision-making. This type of communication within the organization is voluntary, both in the sense that the employees are willing to communicate, because they see a mutual benefit, and it is not imposed by the hierarchical relationship of work [Ashforth & Mael, 1989].

If problems occur, they are related to a too narrow range of information the employee has and a lack of overview perspective connected to it [Levasseur, 2001; Parker, 2004]. This means that through wider communication, frequently made simple problems are able to be overcome. Moreover, poor communication can result in a failure to understand the initiatives or the direction of management, which will result in a communication vacuum that may be filled with rumors and speculation [Longenecker, Simonetti & Sharkey, 1999]. All team members are in the same place and time – this is most of the time direct communication. The rules presented and discussed above are sometimes carried out by means of a computer. Nevertheless, they remain unchanged – the computer is treated as another separate communication channel.

To sum up, traditional communication is mainly vertical communication, rarely horizontal, and initiated most of the time by a superior. It is also characterized by the content of the communication which is devoted almost exclusively to clarifying how tasks should be performed in a short time horizon (sometimes extremely short) and specifying the method of performing the task. The preciseness of the informative content of the message changes according to the level of hierarchy – the higher the level, the more overall, strategy-oriented it is, while the lower the level, the more detailed and task-oriented it is. Traditional communication is usually simultaneous. Communication problems relate to the narrow information content of the message.

Opportune Communication

Teams communicate to do the job and to coordinate projects, thus, the employee is not just a tool to do a clearly defined job. Although it is necessary to tell people about any proposed changes for them to understand and support them, active, top-down communication alone is not sufficient to ensure success [Levasseur, 2001]. Communication here is task-related and also occurs between people on an equal and different footing in the hierarchy [Postmes et al., 2001; Postmes, 2003]. Three types of communication are in use here: (1) top-down, bottom-up, (2) a horizontal information exchange, and (3) lateral, so the initiator of the communication process is not limited – manager, employee, team mate – depending on the needs [de Waal, 2004; Okumus, 2003; Stone, 2006]. Sharing organizational messages through effective communication either vertically or laterally has a direct impact on an organization's level of task fluffiness [Spillan, Mino & Rowles, 2002].

People are limited by the amount of information they are presented with and the time they can devote to reliably and accurately selecting, comparing and processing it, and making a decision [Benrey, 1985]. Moreover, the possibility to use modern solutions makes the worker generate huge amounts of information. This excess has led to a variety of technological tools which aid the search for relevant information. The appearance of modern technologies in the first stage of its mass use has led to the blocking of previously used communication channels where there is an excess of incoming information. This problem was dealt with relatively quickly and easily – by improving technology, and improving the parameters of the transmission, recording and storage of data. Then the issue moved to the human cognitive limitations, visualizing the unit in information processing. The flood of information caused difficulties when loaded with these important, necessary and reliable data.

Teams and their members communicate directly or indirectly but usually synchronously (e.g. by means of a computer network or telephone) everyone is at his workstation during working hours at the same time. However, employees tend to prefer direct interpersonal communication to communication when they need more information on ongoing organizational issues [Cameron, McCollum 1993].

Opportune communication is conducted between team members, and is dominated by lateral and horizontal communication rather than vertical. It concerns earlier assigned tasks (a different time horizon) – the number of tasks, the date of commissioning; how the tasks are performed is no longer imposed. The communication process was initiated by a team member – a manager or co-worker – according to needs. Communication assures access to both detailed and general information. There is simultaneous and asynchronous communication in a way that the time is the same but the place may be different. Communication problems relate to cognitive limitations in processing information.

Networking Communication

The humanization of economic processes meant that classic resources no longer have a competitive advantage, man does. Employees are the most crucial resources for an organization, the main advantage to compete on the market and the key difference between organizations [Zingheim, Ledford & Schuster, 1996]. They are a source of innovative business ideas as they share concepts in the organization through communication.

Internet tools affect the continuous change of mutual relationships and people's behavior in organizations. Tools of remote communication and control can be used [Castells, 2013]. The organization gives up direct control over the employee (freedom of time and place of work) and the worker is able to work according to his preferences – it is important, first of all, to perform and complete tasks on time. Using electronic means of communication in real time allows consultations concerning the workflow, and any problems which appear can be solved. An employee is an inventor instead of being the executor. Therefore, there is a significant change to the work-time approach. Employees do not perform ordered production tasks within a clearly designated 8 hours [Stromer-Galley, 2000; Shaw, Gant, 2002; Nowak et al., 2005; Sproull and Kiesler, 1985; Walther, 1996]. Now the employee works conceptually, beyond the working time stated by the country's labor laws.

Along with the expansion of employees' decision-making powers and responsibilities, there is an increase of the information and communication need. If a person (employee or manager) encounters a need for information, he can instantly get the missing information through personal contacts, phone calls or e-mails. Similarly, developed ideas, methods of improvement and solutions can be immediately conveyed to the right people. Unfortunately, not only is the rapid increase in the amount of information amount troublesome, but so is the dramatic decline in its quality. Networking employees have to be able to filter information and be prepared to operate effectively in the new information environment, where the problem is a surplus of messages, information and data. An attractive multimedia communication or message is often empty in content [Chaffee, Metzger, 2001; Hanson, et al., 2008].

These employees use diametrically different communicative competences to those employed in traditional organizations. Each team member introduces the information to the information network, where it is stored, can be updated and commented on at any time. Team members are not required to be in the same place or time, but if it is necessary, defined team members agree on a meeting time to perform direct communication.

To sum up the features of networking communication, it is initiated *ad hoc* – when any member of the organization needs information or communication; it occurs according to a hierarchy but is also separate from it. Communication is devoted to issues as needed (minor matters and strategic). It allows people to work remotely, because it lets them solve most problems and issues without personal meetings. Faults and

problems are most often because of information overload, where it is difficult to find the crux of potential recipient's problem.

In this paper the hypothesis is put forward that: managers and employees have different communication patterns.

Method

The project was financed by the National Science Center (NCN), decision number DEC-2012/09/B/HS4/02722. Data were collected from October 2014 until December 2015, from which time data analysis has been conducted, and the end of the project is planned for September 2016.

Research was directed at for-profit companies operating in Poland. The empirical research was divided into two stages. The first stage of this study focused on organizations employing at least 50 people.

The sample was chosen randomly based on the criterion of employment: medium – up to 50 employees, large – more than 50 employees, and industry – trade, production and services, according to country statistics.

A questionnaire was addressed to managers responsible for the personnel policy in the company (the HR director or the director of the appropriate department of human resources management in the company; in the case of organizations without HR, the owner or director of the company participated in the survey).

In order to increase the inclination to participate in the survey, several different forms of encouragement were used, such as direct calls (this allowed us to initiate contact with over 5,200 companies), invitations sent electronically to managers responsible for personnel policy in companies (e-invitations were sent to 7130 companies), and finally invitations were sent by traditional correspondence addressed directly to the CEOs of companies (traditional letters were sent to 745 companies).

A significant obstacle to receiving information about the organization was the structure of the research procedure – companies that agreed to take part in the first phase had to consistently agree to the second phase as well. In the end, 297 companies took part in the first stage of the study.

Interviews with managers responsible for the personnel policy in the company were carried out by means of two methods: Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviews (CATI), the default method (274 interviews), and Computer-Assisted Web Interviews (CAWI) (23 interviews).

The contact method was tailored to the respondents' preferences. The questionnaire was designed according to the mix mode method, which allows comparable results to be obtained regardless the contact method. Both methods used item rotation in order to avoid the effects of freshness or fatigue.

During the first phase of the research, contact was made with more than 12,000 companies that met the criteria. 297 interviews were successfully completed with people responsible for the HR policy from various organizations. Preliminary approval to join the second phase of the study was received.

The study was conducted on a representative sample of enterprises employing at least 50 employees. The sample was chosen randomly according to several criteria, such as: employment (medium/large) and type of industry (trade, industry and services). The responsiveness of individual groups of companies was diverse, and the sample was characterized by the over-representation of traders and the under-representation of services. Due to this, the structure of the sample was aligned to the structure of the population of medium and large enterprises in Poland through the use of analytical balances. The second phase of the survey was carried out on a limited sample of 40 research subjects chosen from the group surveyed in the first stage. To join the sample, the company had to provide surveys from a minimum of 20% of employees. Companies that provided a smaller percentage of completed questionnaires were excluded from the

analysis. The second phase of the research was directed at employees on contracts. The selection procedure tried to reach and invite every employee to join the survey. At the enterprise level, the sample was sufficient. Employees were informed about the survey and encouraged to take part in the research. There were two entities responsible for this. There was a research agency (which prepared information materials to promote the research and explain its purpose) and a partner company (whose team was assessed). The partner company committed to distributing information about the survey with all available communication channels typical for the company, such as intranets, the Internet, announcements (bulletin boards, showcases), direct communication (during meetings with employees) and other typical solutions for individual organizations. Workers completed a questionnaire using one of two methods – it was either an online survey (in the case of employees with access to a computer, questionnaires were sent as a link to their e-mail addresses) or a survey paper (in the case of workers who did not have access to a computer, e.g., manual workers, production workers). The company supplied an adequate number of printed questionnaires as well as a sealed box for workers to put their questionnaires in. The first method gave feedback of 1322 surveys, the second 952. Both methods ensured the confidentiality and anonymity of the research.

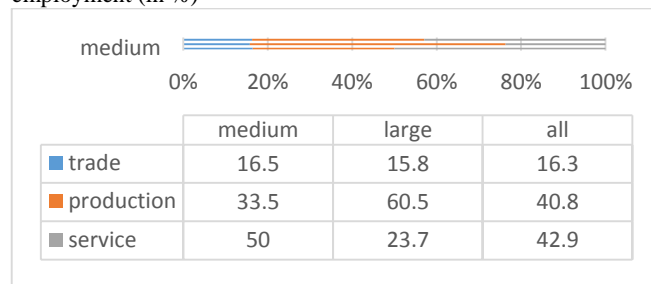
Result of the Study

The tool for data analysis was the SPSS program. Due to the characteristics of communication patterns, they were treated as qualitative data. The age of the respondents and seniority in the company are ordinal data. Tests based on the Pearson Chi-square (ϕ and Cramér's V) were conducted. In the case of the presented outcomes there is statistical significance ($\alpha=0.05$; $p < 0.001$; $n=2274$) unless stated otherwise.

The study was conducted on a representative sample of Polish enterprises employing at least 50 people. 289 companies answered the research questions, 76.8% of which were companies employing 50 to 249 people (defined as 'medium'), while 23.2% of companies employed over 250 people (defined in the study as 'large').

In the research sample, 42.8% of companies were in the service branch, 40.9% in production, and 15.9% in trade. Details are presented in Pic 1 below. Answers were collected from 297 managers and 2274 employees. 35.8% were women and 64.2% were men.

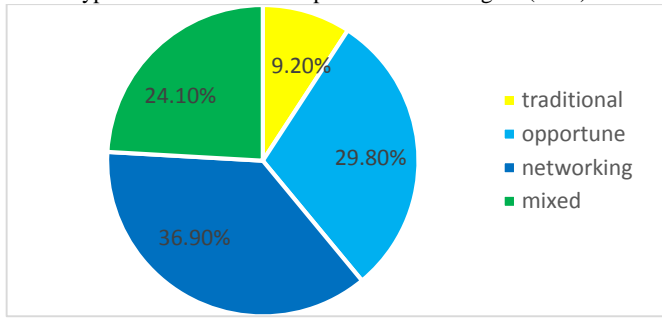
Pic 1. The research sample characteristic according to branch and employment (in %)



Mixed Communication Category

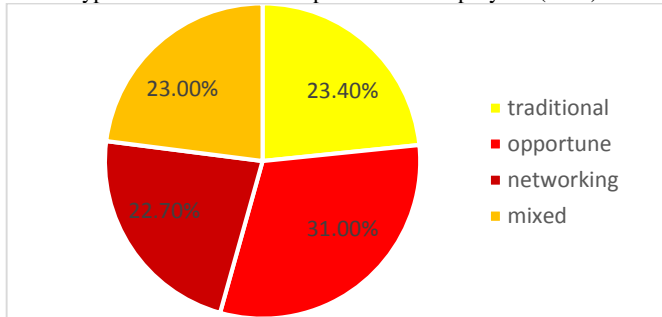
Detailed analysis of the research data showed that people use two communication patterns at the same time with the same intensity. It was shown via the equal number of answers to the questions concerning two different patterns. As a consequence of this finding, the 'mixed' category was introduced. Most likely it suggests a change in communication pattern. Unfortunately, the direction of change was not established. This mixed type of communication was found significant among the used communication patterns, with more than 1/5 of the population.

Pic 2. Types of communication patterns for managers (in %)



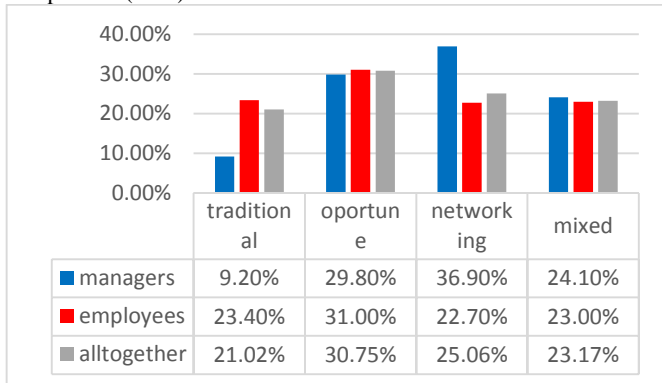
Managers prefer the networking type of communication most – 36.9%, while opportune communication at 29.8% is the second most frequently used pattern. The least frequently used communication pattern by managers is the traditional one – 9.2%.

Pic 3. Types of communication patterns for employees (in %)



Employees prefer the opportune communication pattern – 31.0%. The traditional and mixed categories are the second choice – 23.4% and 23.0% respectively, while the least frequently used pattern is networking – 22.7%.

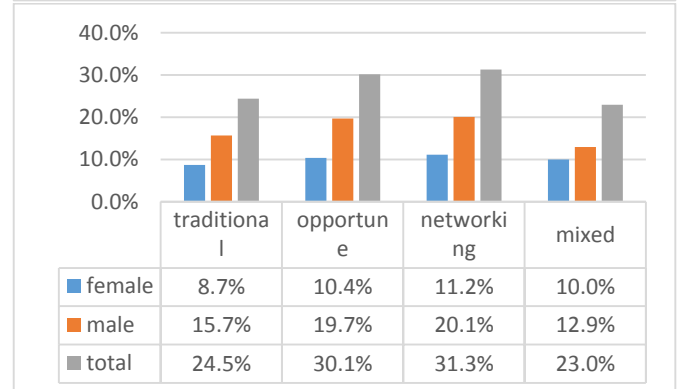
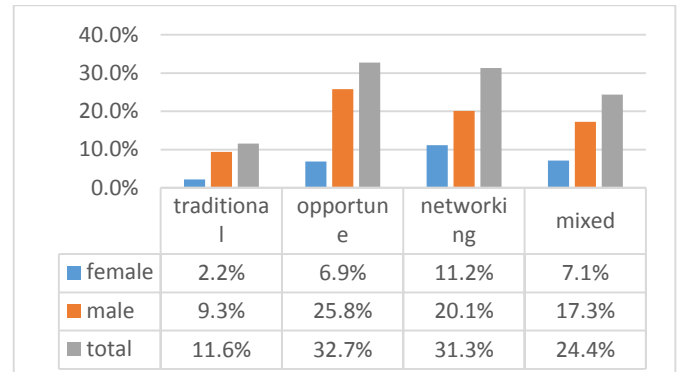
Pic 4. Communication patterns of managers and employees – a comparison (in %)



The networking communication pattern is used by 36.9% of managers and 22.7% of employees. To sum up, managers prefer the networking communication pattern, while employees prefer opportune. Only one in ten managers chose the traditional method of communication, while almost one in four employees use this pattern.

There are no statically significant differences in the type of communication as far as number of employed people in the organization was concerned. In both medium and large organizations, employee communication is opportune while for managers it is networking.

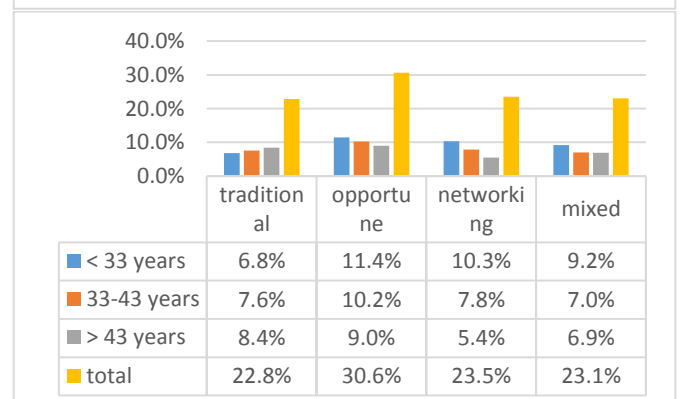
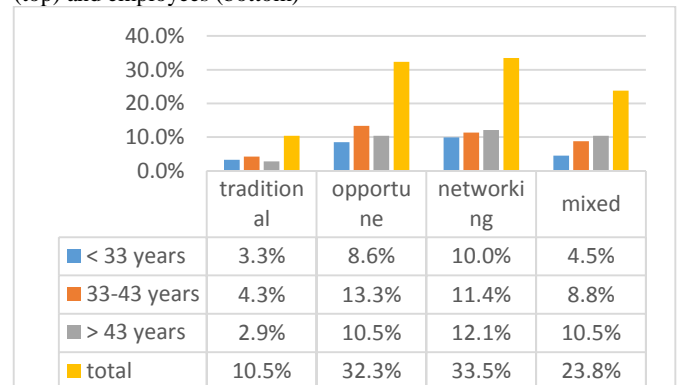
Pic. 5 Types of communication patterns according to gender managers (top) and employees (bottom)



27.4% of managers were female and 72.6% were male in comparison to the number of employees as a whole, which was 38.9% female to 61.1% male.

As can be seen in the picture above, no matter the position, women tend to use the networking pattern of communication less frequently than men – they prefer opportune if they are managers and networking to a small degree if they are employees. Moreover, the mixed category is the second most frequently used pattern, together with opportune, by women no matter the position – 7.1% and 6.9% by managers and 10.0% and 10.4% by employees.

Pic. 6 Types of communication patterns according to age of managers (top) and employees (bottom)

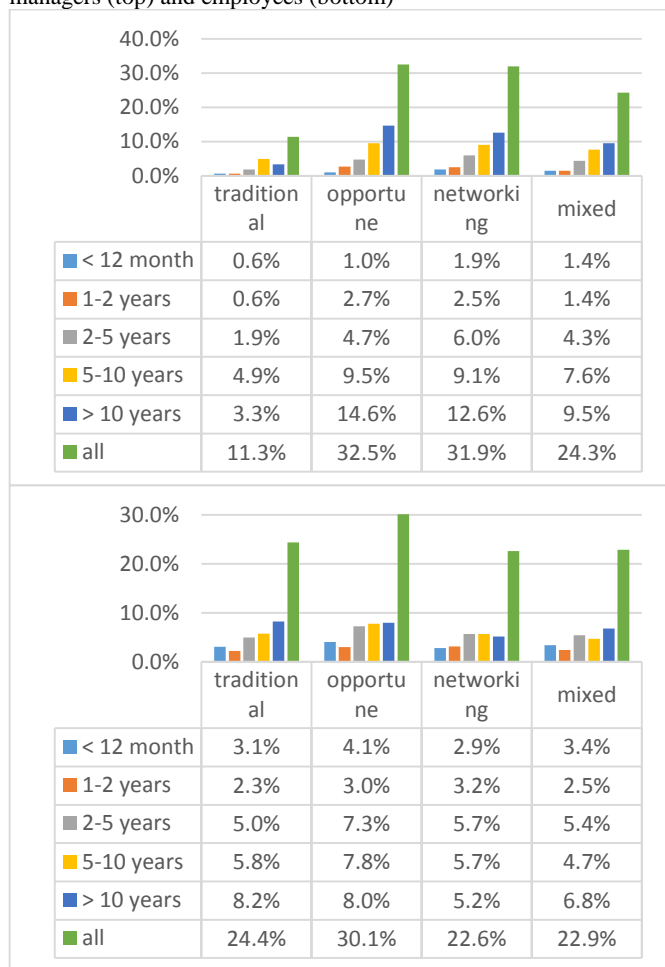


The 'age' category was divided into three equinumerous groups. This division stands for the statistical significance of the outcome.

The range of years is therefore the smallest in the youngest group, since it starts mostly at the age of 25, so this group covers 9 years, the second group covers 10 years, the last one, "over 43", is the biggest – at least 22 years. The retirement age at the time of conducting the research was 65, however, it is possible to work even later. To sum up, the number of people in the company aged over 43 is equal to the number of people aged 25-33. Although it was not the aim of the study, the conclusion is that younger people are frequently employed in Polish companies.

The group of managers aged 33-43 use opportune communication pattern the most while the other age groups prefer the networking pattern. The dominant communication pattern of employees is opportune in all age groups – at the age of 33-43 it is consistent with the preferences of managers. Managers in the "over 43" category hardly use the traditional communication pattern (2.9%) while for employees it the second most frequently used one (8.4%).

Pic. 6 Types of communication patterns according to seniority managers (top) and employees (bottom)



In the presented, representative sample, most managers work for companies for more than 10 years (39.9%) and the percentage drops according to the number of years spent there – the smallest is the group of managers working for less than 12 months, at 4.9%.

The smallest group of employees work for a year or two – 11%, while the biggest group of employees – 28.2% – work for more than 10 years.

None of the manager groups prefer the traditional communication pattern – for managers it is always a last resort, while the group of employees working for more than 10 years prefers the traditional communication pattern over the others (8.2%). Among employees,

only the group of people working for 1-2 years prefer networking, with the rest opting for opportune communication.

Discussion and Conclusion

The current knowledge suggests that to obtain success in the effective management of an organization, consistency of communication patterns is needed. The present study shows that managers and employees have different communication patterns. The differences may be the reason for problems or even failures in managing the organizational teams.

In an organization of the 21st century, it is necessary to communicate fast and efficiently. People bring the skills they have into the organization and are acquainted with or even happy to use technological innovations to communicate. It seems managers just copy the frequency and scope of the use of technology in their private life to their organization life, while employees seem to be indifferent to the scope. Moreover, as the research shows, the older employees are happy to keep up with communication technologies whereas the younger ones prefer traditional communication.

The type of communication favored by managers is the networking type. In the group of managers, the opportune type of communication does not dominate. Perhaps the employees are in the process of matching the networking communication solutions that managers introduced into the organization or they may be trying to "catch up" with the type of communication. It is possible, however, that the opposite scenario is true – employees are trying to "delay" the imposed networking type of communication, tired of being constantly "on-line".

Slightly dominant among respondents, the networking and opportune communication patterns seem to be a natural consequence of social attitudes. They aim to direct social contacts [Aronson, 2003] and, in the process of communication, they are the quickest and most efficient in the circumstances. The greater commitment of employees to the traditional type of communication seems to confirm this need. This study does have strengths: the research method, and the sample – the research is representative of Poland.

This study also has certain limitations. During the research analysis, it turned out that there was an equal number of answers to two communication types, therefore, the 'mixed' category was introduced. The assumption was made that there are organizations which are undergoing a communication change. This does not have to be a valid assumption, however. It is still unknown if the shift is towards a more asynchronous way of communicating or the opposite. The abovementioned research outcomes could form the basis for further surveys.

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