

Transforming management in the era of post-globalization and agentic economy

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PROCEEDINGS



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Foreword

The annual Sinergie-SIMA Management Conference is more than an opportunity to present and discuss research findings. It is a moment in which our scientific community comes together to reflect on the transformations affecting firms and organizations and, at the same time, on the evolution of management as a discipline.

The 2026 Conference, hosted by the University of Pavia and entitled Transforming Management in the Era of Post-Globalization and Agentic Economy, invited us to consider this double transformation. We are experiencing profound changes whose direction, scope, and consequences are often difficult to anticipate. Understanding them is already a demanding task. Management must then translate them into organizational choices, processes, and practices that work in concrete contexts.

A significant part of managerial work has traditionally consisted of collecting information, synthesizing it, and transforming it into reports, scenarios, forecasts, and decisions. Artificial intelligence does not “know everything”, but it greatly increases the capacity to process information. As a result, managerial value no longer resides primarily in access to information or in routine analysis, but in the ability to steer how knowledge is generated, filtered, integrated, and critically interpreted. Managers are therefore called upon to become even more critical interpreters. They must recognize ambiguities, balance conflicting objectives, and assess organizational constraints, as well as the reputational, social, political, and institutional implications of different courses of action. Information may be increasingly abundant and accessible, but judgment and responsibility cannot be delegated to a technological system.

The nature of coordination is also changing. Management has always involved coordinating people, organizational units, and processes. Today, alongside people, there are data, algorithms, platforms, and artificial agents. Human teams are increasingly becoming hybrid systems. The challenge is to design work architecture in which human and artificial intelligence can cooperate effectively, without people losing control, competence, or responsibility. Technology should strengthen human capabilities. It should not reduce the human contribution to the passive execution of technologically generated instructions or subject individuals and organizations to an unsustainable acceleration of productivity expectations.

The limits of these technologies are not yet fully understood, nor is their medium- and long-term impact on organizations and society. What is already clear, however, is that the way artificial intelligence enters organizations changes decision-making processes and redistributes responsibilities, competencies, and power. Management, therefore, does not disappear. It changes its nature. If the nature of management changes, the responsibility of our scientific community must also evolve. We must examine whether the concepts and theories we use to interpret organizations remain adequate. We must investigate how technologies transform work, coordination, authority, and accountability. We must also reflect on the contributions that management studies can make to firms, institutions, and society in a period of rapid, sometimes contradictory change. The “SIMA Manifesto degli studi di management” was developed in this spirit: not as a definitive answer, but as a platform for discussion. It invites us to question what matters today for our discipline, whether the categories we use to interpret emerging phenomena are still appropriate, and what relationship management scholars intend to build with firms, institutions, and society.

The papers collected in these Proceedings provide tangible evidence of the vitality and diversity of our community. They represent different theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches, and fields of inquiry. Together, they demonstrate the ability of management research to address complex questions with rigor, openness, and responsibility. They also reflect a community capable of bringing together research and teaching, senior and younger scholars, international engagement, and dialogue with firms and institutions. This ability to connect different dimensions of academic life is one of the distinctive strengths of the Sinergie-SIMA Conference. A scientific conference truly fulfills its purpose when it is not merely a program of scheduled sessions, but becomes a space inhabited by its community: a space in which papers are presented and discussed, questions are raised, different perspectives are compared, relationships are developed, and new collaborations begin. Attention must be devoted to younger scholars. Their ideas, questions, and research trajectories are essential to the future of our discipline. Creating opportunities for their development, supporting their participation in the scientific community, and encouraging research that combines academic quality with practical relevance are central responsibilities for SIMA.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Sinergie Italian Journal of Management, the University of Pavia, the Conference Chairs, the scientific and organizing committees, the Chairs of the tracks and SIMA thematic groups, the reviewers, and all those who contributed to the organization of the Conference and to the preparation of this volume. Above all, I thank the authors and participants who presented their work, discussed papers, raised questions and animated the many opportunities for exchange. Their engagement made the Conference the expression of a living scientific community.

A conference ends well when it does not close a discussion but leaves participants eager to continue it. I hope that these Proceedings will carry forward the ideas, questions, relationships, and new possibilities for joint work that emerged in Pavia and will strengthen the capacity of management research to understand and responsibly shape the transformations of our time.

Beatrice Luceri, President of Italian Society of Management (SIMA)

Editorial Note

To the reader,

This volume contains the short papers presented at the Sinergie-SIMA 2026 Management Conference, hosted by the University of Pavia on 28 and 29 May 2026. The Conference, entitled *Transforming Management in the Era of Post-Globalization and Agentic Economy*, provided an opportunity to discuss the transformations affecting organizations, managerial practices, and management research.

The conference program included contributions related to:

- the main Conference theme;
- the research areas represented by the SIMA thematic groups;
- management case studies.

The diversity of the subjects addressed, theoretical perspectives adopted, and the methodological approaches employed reflected the breadth and vitality of the Sinergie-SIMA scientific community.

The Conference call invited the submission of both short and long papers. Overall, the editorial team received 315 submissions, consisting of 249 short papers and 66 long papers.

All submissions underwent the peer-review process established for the Conference. Short and long papers were evaluated by 245 reviewers, selected from the Sinergie and SIMA scientific communities on the basis of their expertise in the subjects addressed.

The submissions were assessed according to the following criteria:

- clarity of the research aims;
- appropriateness and rigor of the methodological approach;
- originality and innovativeness of the contribution;
- theoretical and practical relevance;
- clarity of communication;
- quality and significance of the bibliographical foundations.

For the short and long papers, the evaluation followed the peer review process, with a double-blind review performed by, respectively, one and two referees - university lecturers and experts about the topic - selected from among members of the SIMA community. At the end of the evaluation process, the authors received the reviewers' reports and incorporated their observations into the presentation and discussion of their work at the Conference.

The evaluation process resulted in the acceptance of 296 papers. The present volume contains 216 short papers whose authors authorized their publication.

All the contributions included in the volume were presented and discussed during the Conference and are made available online through the Sinergie-SIMA Management Conference portal (<https://www.sijmsima.it/>). The papers collected here should be understood not only as individual research contributions, but also as evidence of the questions, perspectives, and developing research trajectories that characterized the scientific debate in Pavia.

We wish to thank the authors for entrusting their work to the Conference; the reviewers for the quality and care of their assessments; the track and thematic group Chairs for coordinating the evaluation and discussion processes; and all participants for contributing to an open and constructive scientific exchange.

We hope that this volume will support the further development of the research presented during the Conference and contribute to the wider debate on the transformation of management and organizations.

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2033



Società Italiana di
MANAGEMENT

Short papers

Track:
Strategic Communication



Employee communication as a lever for enablement: Insights from The State of the art of employee communication in Italy

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Abstract. *This paper is part of a broader multi-method study investigating employee communication as a strategic business lever for employee enablement within the specific socioeconomic context of Italy. In particular, this paper examines the evolutionary path of employee communication as it transitions toward an authentic strategic role within organizations. It also analyzes the role of management in fostering an environment that enables employees to act as strategic communicators and addresses future challenges for employee communication.*

To explore these topics, the study leverages 16 interviews conducted in Italy in 2025 with consultants and experts in employee communication.

Findings show that employee communication has shifted from an operational function to a real strategic lever for companies and that COVID-19 pandemic served as a catalyst for these changes, although some interviewees remain skeptical about the long-term sustainability of this new importance of employee communication. Findings also indicate that effective employee communication now demands a holistic approach, integrating responsibilities traditionally associated with human resources, information technology, and external communication functions. Additionally, findings show that employee communication serves as an antenna for organizational climate and a control room for employee experience. Key characteristics that enhance the strategic value of employee communication include the shift toward bidirectional dialogue, and the empowerment of employees as active communicators, specifically as ambassadors internally and externally. However, a "Cinderella" status remains, as the function often lacks formal authority and a relevant role in the company governance compared to HR or external communication functions.

While the generalizability of these findings is limited by their specific geographic focus and potential social desirability bias, this study provides unique insights rooted in a specific cultural setting, allowing assessment of the specific configuration and evolutionary patterns of employee communication in Italy.

Keywords: *employee communication; employee enablement; internal communication; strategic communication; employee communication behavior*

Framing of the research. *Employee communication, also known as internal communication, is the area of strategic communication through which organizations engage in dialogue with employees, considered primary stakeholders (Mazzei, 2025b; Mazzei & Butera, 2024; Falkheimer & Heide, 2022; Men & Bowen, 2017; Tkalac Verčič et al., 2012; Welch & Jackson, 2007). It is likely the most important aspect of strategic communication, as without it an organization cannot simply exist and operate (Mazzei, 2025b).*

Routed into the resource theory of the company, employee communication can be defined (Mazzei, 2010) "as a set of interactive processes aimed at generating the catalytic resources that make a company work. These two resources consist of knowledge to fuel working processes and employee engagement that trigger employees to apply their knowledge to company processes" (Mazzei, 2025a, 197-198).

Internal communication begins before employees join an organization and continues after they leave it (Tkalac Verčič et al., 2021). It has three primary aims: aligning employees, activating employees, and fostering engagement and employee voice (Mazzei & Butera, 2024). Aligning employees means ensuring they understand corporate objectives, sharing the organizational culture and values with them, and providing the information they need for organizational functioning. Activating employees involves encouraging voluntary and strategic employee communication behavior that support the organization. Fostering engagement and employee voice entails sustaining the engagement of employees and an open climate that empowers them to express ideas, suggestions and constructive dissent. Moreover, it should be acknowledged that listening is both a prerequisite for and an integral part of all internal communication objectives (Mazzei & Butera, 2024).

Emphasizing that employees are essential for generating intangible resources for competitive advantage (Mazzei, 2010, 2025a), due to the relational nature of this process in organizations, implies that all employees play a key communicative role (Mazzei, 2025b). Employees are individuals who initiate communication flows and send messages to colleagues and managers: in other words, they are active agents of communication within the organizational context (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Heide & Simonsson, 2011; Kim & Rhee, 2011; Mazzei, 2010).

To understand employee communication behavior in a comprehensive way, a holistic mapping based on two distinctions has been proposed (Mazzei, 2018, 2025b): the first distinguishes between voice and silence behavior; and

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the second considers the intention behind the communicative actions. In this mapping, voice and silence are viewed as the two opposite poles of a continuum, as both are deliberate and conscious communicative actions expressed in different ways (Mazzei, 2018, 2025b). Considering the intention behind the communicative actions, the holistic mapping of employee communication behavior distinguishes between “procompany communication behavior” and “anticompany communication behavior”. These terms express unequivocally that the subject in favor of or against whom the actions of an employee are directed is the company, not society or a social group in general (Mazzei, 2018, 2025b). Therefore, the holistic mapping includes four possible categories of employee communication behavior: voice and silence, each further distinguished by a procompany or anticompany intention (Mazzei, 2025b). Procompany employee communication behavior can be both in-role and extra-role, and are voluntary and discretionary (Mazzei, 2025b). Therefore, they cannot emerge by means of prescriptions and control techniques but rather emerge more indirectly and genuinely through the management of a series of levers. This concept is referred to as enablement (Mazzei, 2014).

The concept of enablement has been incorporated into employee communication as a core element of the consultancy function performed by communication professionals (Zerfass & Franke, 2013), who act as facilitators supporting employees in their communicative responsibilities (Heide & Simonsson, 2011), and are evolving into designers of the overall employee experience (Men, 2021). Consequently, the primary objective of the employee communication department is to create a comprehensive internal experience that shapes perceptions, attitudes, actions, and behavior (Men, 2021), thereby fulfilling a strategic enabling role (Men & Bowen, 2017). Ultimately, employee enablement involves developing communication strategies within a consistent framework of workplace conditions that foster effective and positive communicative engagement (Mazzei, 2025a) while avoiding prescriptions and control mechanisms that would be ineffective (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2017). Based on the concept of enablement, Mazzei (2014) explored the perceptions of managers about the relevance of employee communicative actions and investigated whether the companies they worked for had implemented specific employee communication strategies. The study found that managers considered employee communication behavior as the basis for company success, specifically for the implementation of the company strategy and as a source of competitive advantage, knowledge creation and sharing, stakeholder engagement, and reputation building processes.

To sustain the active role of employees as communicators, the employee communication function managed by the organization serves as a fundamental lever for engaging the workforce, ensuring they are informed, motivated, and actively contributing to the success of the company: employee communication plays an important role in enabling employees to be strategic communicators (Mazzei, 2025a). Indeed, it provides the context for organizational actions, the meaning of events, knowledge, information, and motivation (Mazzei, 2014). For employee enablement, it is crucial to adopt strategies based on the integration of employee communication with human resource management and relationship-building practices (Mazzei, 2014).

This theoretical framework led to the development of the Enabling Model of Employee Communication (Mazzei, 2025b; Mazzei & Quarantino, 2020). This model highlights specific characteristics of employee communication. First, it is intended to be strategic – supervised by top management, allocated dedicated resources, and recognized as a source of value. Second, it is managed with a managerial approach, using planning and evaluation methods typical of the managerial cycle. Third, it aims to activate employees through supervisor-employee dialogue and by creating environments that encourage the voice and free expression of employees. Fourth, it is open to experimenting with new social arenas that arise from digitization. These characteristics should enhance the generation of the most important intangible resources for competitive advantage, particularly employee engagement as a prerequisite for strategic employee communication behavior.

Purpose of the paper. *This study is part of a broader research project: “The state of the art of employee communication in Italian companies”. It investigates employee communication as a strategic business lever for employee enablement within the specific socioeconomic context of Italy and examines the evolutionary path of employee communication. This broad research is the second edition of the one conducted in 2019 and is based on a multi-method approach: first, qualitative research through 16 interviews with experts and consultants and 16 dialogues between academics and practitioners; second, quantitative research through a survey involving a sample of 115 companies; third, comparative analysis of 13 industry reports on employee communication or related topics produced in Italy and abroad in the period 2019-2025.*

The present paper discusses the findings of the first explorative phase based on interviews and it aims at identifying key themes that allow for describing the evolutionary path of employee communication as it transitions toward an authentic strategic role within organizations. It also aims at focusing the role of management in fostering an environment that enables employees to act as strategic communicators, and addresses future challenges for employee communication.

Methodology. *The paper is based on empirical research using the accounts of 16 consultants and experts in employee communication. Qualitative data were collected through 16 interviews conducted between June and September 2025. The sample includes a high concentration of executive leaders from leading communication and consulting agencies. The sample counts 7 CEOs and Presidents, 6 Partners and Managing Directors, 2 independent consultants specialized in internal communication, and 1 Creative Director. Among the interviewees, 4 are women and 12 are men.*

The semi-structured interview guide covered topics including a) the strategic relevance of internal communication and its evolution, b) the use of managerial communication as a strategic lever, c) the involvement of employees as active

communicators, and d) the future challenges for employee communication. The findings are described below according to these themes. It is worth noting that the findings of this qualitative study have been discussed with a group of companies which provided additional insights. These were useful to interpret the data collected through a survey that is part of the broader research within which this qualitative study was conducted and that is not the subject of this paper.

Results.

a) *The strategic relevance of internal communication and its evolution.* The results show a significant evolution in employee communication within Italian companies. According to the interviewees, it has shifted from a purely operational function to a genuine strategic lever for companies, capable of guiding people as a real asset and influencing leaders in their strategic decisions. This transformation was accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which served as a turning point. During the emergency, employee communication had to bridge physical distance, maintain the corporate community, and reunite teams through constant information flows. Although some interviewees remain skeptical about the long-term sustainability of this new, important role for employee communication, data indicate a general increase in the number of people working in this function and a rise in dedicated budgets.

According to interviewees, using employee communication strategically means going beyond simple alignment with corporate objectives to include culture, values, and the organizational model, thereby stimulating motivation and a sense of belonging. Employee communication acts as an “antenna” that detects the corporate climate and guides people, especially during times of crisis and change. It supports major contemporary transformations, such as digitalization and sustainability, by conveying the meaning of change even before its operational impacts are felt. Furthermore, the purpose of employee communication has expanded, incorporating responsibilities and activities traditionally associated with Human Resources, such as employee well-being, diversity, equity and inclusion and the management of the internal climate; Information Technology, such as Intranet and digital channels management; and external communication, with which it now shares responsibility for company reputation. This expansion into non-traditional responsibilities and functions raises the question of whether the term “employee communication” is still sufficient to describe such a broad business function.

According to the interviewees, in this new strategic vision of employee communication the role of top management is crucial. The strategic role for employee communication is enhanced if the company is viewed as a storytelling community, with the CEO as the primary content curator. However, a cultural challenge persists: many top managers still underestimate the potential of employee communication, involving it only after decisions have been made, which limits its strategic impact. In these cases, top management is unaware of the powerful role employee communication can play, and employee communication has yet to gain authority within the organization. It can be said that it is still often considered as a “Cinderella” when compared to the human resources and external communication functions: even when its strategic importance is recognized, it is not given a significant organizational role in governance and processes, nor are people with leadership and specific skills assigned to this function.

Another fundamental pillar of a strategic employee communication approach is bidirectionality. Employee communication increasingly manages the dialogue between central functions and the organizational periphery and sustains employee participation. People want to participate, trust those who trust them, and have opportunities to express their ideas. Unfortunately, this still conflicts with the Italian business tradition, which has historically favored top-down communication. According to the interviewees, nowadays top managers have a significant need to listen in order to guide the organization, given the speed and complexity of the current environment. However, listening also requires a willingness to engage: when a manager or an organization listens to someone, they must also take responsibility for providing feedback and taking action. It is necessary to accelerate the implementation of actions and responses to requests.

b) *The use of managerial communication as a strategic lever.* In this process, managerial communication plays a crucial role. In particular, middle management acts as the “transmission belt,” according to interviewees. Middle managers are essential for cascade communication, gathering and relaying bottom-up information, and facilitating horizontal communication. They form a “compressed community” between top management and employees, as well as between company objectives and operational tasks. They also foster a sense of belonging and involvement through employee communication. This is especially important in contexts marked by high complexity and significant cultural differentiation, such as companies that have expanded through acquisitions, where integration relies heavily on middle managers. In these cases, while top management is typically already aligned with company objectives, the challenge is to involve the rest of the company population.

In the context of hybrid work, managerial communication is also pivotal for ensuring bidirectionality. The physical presence of employees facilitates informal communication that can partially bypass managerial barriers, but in hybrid contexts informal communication is weakened. Therefore, in such contexts middle managers need to act as facilitators, ensuring communication with remote employees. According to interviewees, another important point is that managers today are communication producers: it is not the internal communication function telling managers what they have to communicate, but rather the managers themselves who express the need. Often, they detect changes and requests faster than the organization does.

c) *The involvement of employees as active communicators.* The theme of participation mentioned above can be associated to the involvement of employee as active communicators, and in particular according to the interviewees to the concept

of employee ambassadorship, which companies are actively promoting in two main ways: first, organizations seek to involve employees in internal dissemination and to foster people engagement around organizational values; second, they are leveraging the potential of employees for external communication in their role as ambassadors. This approach is highly effective for talent acquisition, especially with Gen Z, and for this reason, according to interviewees, it will continue expanding and being adopted.

To encourage the spread of employee ambassadorship, some companies have also introduced a gamification component as an incentive, for example by offering shopping vouchers to employees who publish posts first or whose posts receive the most likes. However, it is important to emphasize that the process of creating ambassadors should not be forced. Instead, companies should offer employee training to develop the necessary skills and support, for instance by providing tools or repositories of content, graphics, and photographs. This can enable individuals to become active communicators. Related to the role of employees as creators of content, it should be noted that the employee communication function does not necessarily need to develop and distribute content directly, but should instead recognize and amplify the content created by employees, adding value to it. In this sense, employee communication is no longer just a content production center but a control room that coordinates content dissemination.

d) *The future challenges for employee communication.* The future challenges for professionals in this sector are numerous and complex and can be grouped into activities and objectives, and the professional role itself. Regarding activities and objectives, employee communication will need to act as an agent of cultural change on key topics such as diversity, equity, and inclusion, working closely with the HR department to develop a people strategy aligned with the purpose of the company.

Managing communication in hybrid work environments will be crucial, as physical dispersion can erode the sense of community; in this context, employee communication must act as a unifying force. The ability to measure the impact of employee communication activities through tangible indicators will be equally important, as this will help move beyond the perception of employee communication as merely an overhead cost.

According to the interviewees, another challenge is related to technological evolution, which requires reflection on the role of human intelligence in employee communication: integrating Artificial Intelligence into work activities should focus on personalizing messages without sacrificing the human touch, transparency, and consistency that new generations of workers strongly expect.

Regarding the profession, one interviewee stated that “in any company, communicating is the only job that everyone thinks they can do, because we are born as communicators; we are communicators as human beings”. Professional credibility must therefore be earned on the ground, which is more difficult when it does not involve technical expertise. Another challenge is the absence of direct internal reporting to the CEO, while there is a need for direct access to this figure to enable quick action. Additionally, communication teams have become complex and multidisciplinary, requiring the introduction of new mindsets and skills, breaking out of the usual model and encouraging cross-fertilization among teams.

Research limitations. This study purposely aimed to map the most advanced practices of employee communication in Italy and for this reason the 16 qualitative interviews were conducted within the Italian socioeconomic context, with all interviewees being consultants and experts from leading companies in Northern Italy to provide detailed, nuanced data offering an overview of the state of employee communication in organizations that are well-developed examples of its use. This precise choice implies that despite the insights gained from this study, two main limitations should be acknowledged and addressed in future investigations. First, the sample size could be increased and its composition diversified to represent the average situation in Italy. Second, the qualitative nature of the research relies on the subjective accounts of consultants and experts, introducing the potential for social desirability bias, in which interviewees may emphasize their aspirations rather than the daily operational realities to which they refer in their accounts.

Managerial implications. The effectiveness of employee communication is a critical factor in company dynamics and, as noted at the beginning of this paper, is probably the most important aspect of strategic communication, as without it an organization cannot simply exist and operate (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018; Mazzei 2025b).

First, this research shows that, for employee communication to function as a true strategic lever, companies must move beyond a purely operational approach and top-down communication model, adopting an approach that recognizes the relevance of a bidirectional communication flow and encourages employees to take an active role as communicators. Accordingly, managers should go beyond using employee communication merely for informational alignment but also leverage its role as an “antenna” to detect the organizational climate and support people during times of crisis and change. Organizations should make listening a core activity: collecting feedback should be viewed not as a formality, but as a commitment to rapid, visible organizational action and human-centred engagement.

Secondly, another key managerial implication of the study is the need to legitimate the employee communication function. According to some interviews, this function still holds a “Cinderella” status compared to more established functions, organizations should better value the contribution that employee communication makes to leadership, allocate larger dedicated budgets, and consider establishing direct reporting lines to the CEO to ensure that its strategic impact extends beyond mere dissemination after decisions are made. Only then can employee communication help shape important employee outcomes such as engagement and citizenship behavior.

Third, enhancing interdepartmental collaboration for synergistic interventions, particularly with human resources, information technology, and external communication functions, is crucial, given that today employee communication shares with these functions a range of responsibilities and activities: from promoting employee well-being to managing internal digital channels and governing company reputation.

Fourth, instead of merely producing content, the employee communication function should adopt an enablement approach, equipping employees with training, tools, and repositories that facilitate their role as organic brand ambassadors.

Finally, the leading role of employee communication is especially important in contemporary work settings characterized by hybrid and remote work, where organizations strive to bridge the physical and cultural gaps created by digital transformation. In particular, middle managers are tasked with preserving features typical of traditional, in-person employee communication, such as bidirectionality in manager-employee relationships and informal, serendipitous communication.

Originality of the paper. While employee communication research has expanded over the last few years, much of the literature still treats communicative dynamics as culturally neutral (Verčič et al., 2025). By analyzing the evolution of employee communication, its challenges, and its role as an enabler within the specific socioeconomic context of Italy, this study provides unique insights rooted in a specific cultural setting, allowing assessment of its specific configuration and evolution patterns in the country.

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