Strategic internal communication for effective internal employer branding

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Abstract

Purpose – Although internal communication is perceived as one of the crucial elements for favorable internal evaluation of an employer brand (EB), the importance of internal communication for EB advocacy has been insufficiently theoretically problematized and related empirical evidence is almost non-existent. In this paper, the relationship between employees' satisfaction with internal communication and their perceptions of their employers' attractiveness is explored.

Design/methodology/approach – A questionnaire-based field research study was conducted on a sample of 3,457 Croatian employees. The Internal Communication Satisfaction Questionnaire (ICSQ) (Tkalac Verčič *et al.*, 2009) and the Employer Attractiveness (EmpAt) Scale (Berthon *et al.*, 2005) were used for assessing internal communication satisfaction (ICS) and employer attractiveness (EA).

Findings – Findings reveal that respondents' overall satisfaction with internal communication in their organizations is significantly positively related with the overall attractiveness they assign to their employers, that all explored ICS dimensions are significant for the overall EA, and that each ICS dimension is significant for at least one EA dimension. The most relevant ICS dimensions for EA are "satisfaction with feedback" and "satisfaction with communication climate".

Originality/value – A conducted large sample study is among the first quantitative empirical studies that proved that employees who are satisfied with internal communication are likely to see their employers as attractive. Moreover, findings point toward internal communication endeavors which add more value to developing an attractive internal EB.

Keywords Internal communication satisfaction, Internal employer brand, Employer attractiveness, Internal Communication Satisfaction Questionnaire (ICSQ), EmptAt scale

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In the current business world, retaining talents has been a significant issue for companies globally (Tenakwah, 2021). This has forced organizations to differentiate themselves from their competitors on the basis of being great places to work. They strive to become an employer of choice, both for prospective employees with superior competences (external employer branding) and for their high-flyers (internal employer branding), and therefore seek to creatively engage in employer branding initiatives.

Scholars have identified many elements which are crucial for a favorable evaluation of an employer, especially a good corporate image/reputation and well-known product/service

brands (e.g. Arachchige and Robertson, 2011; Kissel and Büttgen, 2015; Wilden *et al.*, 2010); extensive external and internal corporate communication (e.g. Neill, 2016); and high-performance human resource policies/practices (e.g. Adler and Ghiselli, 2015; Holtbrügge and Kreppel, 2015), especially employee attraction/recruitment (e.g. Ahamad, 2019; Lievens and Slaughter, 2016), pleasant and challenging working environment (e.g. Schlager *et al.*, 2011), motivating compensation systems (e.g. Moroko and Uncles, 2008) and constant training and development (e.g. Itam *et al.*, 2020; Kucherov and Zavyalova, 2012). Also included is internal branding (e.g. Saleem and Iglesias, 2016; Sharma and Kamalanabhan, 2012), leadership responsiveness (e.g. Itam *et al.*, 2020) and corporate social responsibility endeavors (e.g. Klimkiewicz and Oltra, 2017; Turban and Greening, 1996).

Among these elements, corporate communication is continually propounded to be at the core of employer branding (e.g. Ambler and Barrow, 1996; Edwards, 2010; Itam *et al.*, 2020). Specifically, corporate communications create strategic communication plans and disseminate messages to present and future employees about company values and ethics, which are considered central elements of employer branding (e.g. Neill, 2016). Although the importance of corporate communication for employer brand advocacy has been theoretically problematized and qualitatively explored (e.g. Itam *et al.*, 2020; Hoppe, 2018; Moroko and Uncles, 2008), one of the areas that has not yet been quantitatively applied to employer branding is the potential of internal communication in developing an attractive employer brand.

In this study, internal communication is operationalized through internal communication satisfaction (ICS), which is defined as the socio-emotional outcome an individual perceives related to various interpersonal, group and organizational communication situations (Tkalac Verčič *et al.*, 2009). The employer brand (EB) is operationalized through internal employer attractiveness (EA) – the attractiveness of a specific employer for its employees (Berthon *et al.*, 2005).

The aim of the study was to highlight the importance of ICS and to explore which ICS areas (e.g. satisfaction with feedback, communication climate and quality of communication media) are the most important for having an attractive internal employer brand altogether, as well as to reveal which EA dimensions (e.g. social, economic and development) are leveraged the most with regard to ICS and its specific components. The emphasis is placed on the most significant ICS facets, both for general and dimensional EA, which are therefore inherently strategic by nature as they contribute distinctively to the fulfillment of the brand promise.

Theoretical background
The conceptualization of strategic internal communication
Internal communication defined. Internal communication creates and maintains communication systems between employers and employees (Tkalac Verčič, 2019), and is a prerequisite of various positive outcomes in organizations. This is the basis upon which internal communication needs to be carefully assessed and managed (Ruck and Welch, 2012).

There is a growing body of evidence that links internal communication to various individual level outcomes, including the degree to which employees are informed (White *et al.*, 2010), employee engagement (Tkalac Verčič and Pološki Vokić, 2017), organizational identification (Nakara, 2006) and job satisfaction and performance (Gray and Laidlaw, 2004; Zucker, 2002). On the organizational level, a significant link exists between internal communication and organizational climate and productivity (Joshi and Sharma, 1997). Moreover, internal communication has shown to improve corporate reputation and credibility, since employees represent a highly credible source for all external publics (Dawkins, 2005; Hannegan, 2004; White *et al.*, 2010), and has added insight into leadership communication (Men and Stacks, 2014; Men, 2015; Men and Jiang, 2016). Organizations therefore invest considerable financial and human resources in developing effective communication systems and achieving suitable communication within the organization (Carrière and Bourque, 2009).

Strategic internal communication defined. While definitions and conceptualizations of internal communication are numerous, the same is not the case for the concept of strategic internal communication. Drawing from the strategic management postulates of Mintzberg *et al.* (2003), strategic internal communication could be defined as the pattern that integrates an organization's major internal communication goals, policies and actions into a cohesive whole with a purpose of contributing to the achievement of organizational goals. Based on Chong (2007), strategic internal communication can be defined as communication that focuses on building and maintaining strong relationships among management and employees by communicating the company's mission, core values and strategic directions through a comprehensive and integrated communication network.

In public relations, relationships with employees have been named internal communication or internal public relations and have centered around relationships with internal stakeholders (Lee and Yue, 2020). Based on the excellence theory of public relations, Men and Bowen (2017) defined internal relations as "the strategic management of internal communication in managing interdependence and building mutually beneficial relationships between the organization and its employees." (p. 12). Although the internal communication literature does not provide a unanimous definition of strategic internal communication, some affiliated characteristics could be identified. For example, Men and Stacks (2014) explained that a strategic internal communication system is a system that fully embraces symmetrical and transparent communication, as well as authenticity and quality in employee–organization relationships. When internal communication is approached with a symmetrical communication worldview, it promotes transparent communication practice. And transparent internal communication, characterized by "information substantiality, accountability, and employee participation", broadly contributes to "employee trust, control mutuality, commitment, and satisfaction" (Men and Stacks, 2014, p. 301).

Internal communication is a key element of organizational functionality through strategic influence on how employees talk about the organization with each other, and with external publics. As employees have a big influence on the perception of external stakeholders, it is important that they are champions of organizations. This is why organizations should not passively wait for employees to speak highly of their employers. Instead, communication should be strategically and proactively managed and their informal communication should improve the organization's identity through internal branding (Raj and Jyothi, 2011). Namely, a strategic approach to communication is essential in distinguishing the employer from competitors, as well as helping target candidates be aware of the breadth of roles offered by the employer. Good management of internal communication also helps avoid conflicting value propositions of employer, corporate and consumer brands, as well as a domination of potentially negative consumer brand image (Moroko and Uncles, 2008). Strategic internal communication is therefore "a dynamic multifaceted approach to fostering strong employee-organization relationships as a means to satisfy employee needs and define the employee experience" (Omilion-Hodges and Baker, 2014, p. 435). As Men (2014) concluded, to facilitate strategic internal communication, the organization must provide employees and managers with accurate information, in line with organizational values and goals.

Internal communication satisfaction as the operationalization of internal communication. ICS can be defined as satisfaction with various parts of communication within organizations (Crino and White, 1981). It is connected to, but different from communication practices, and includes numerous formal and informal communication activities aimed at disseminating information and including horizontal, downward and upward communication (e.g. Carrière and Bourque, 2009). Tsai *et al.* (2009) defined ICS as satisfaction with different elements of communication in interpersonal, group and organizational contexts. Within organizational communication, the concept of satisfaction is mostly linked to job satisfaction.

ICS has been approached as both a unidimensional and multidimensional concept. As it is increasingly important to understand the factors influenced by and influencing communication satisfaction, a multidimensional approach seems more appropriate. Whilst defining

communication satisfaction as a multidimensional concept has had empiric support (Clampitt and Downs, 1993; Crino and White, 1981; Gray and Laidlaw, 2004; Tkalac Verčič *et al.*, 2009), researchers do not agree on the number of dimensions. However, most tend to include receptivity of upward communication, communication climate and amount of information employees receive (Downs and Hazen, 1977; Hargie *et al.*, 2002). This discussion becomes additionally important in choosing standardized measurement instruments with good psychometric properties.

One of the most renowned instruments for measuring communication satisfaction is the Communication Satisfaction Questionnaire (CSQ) which was constructed by Downs and Hazen (1977) almost 50 years ago. The CSQ was constructed in America (like most questionnaires for measuring communication satisfaction (Yamaguchi, 2017)), decades ago, which is why for this study we used the Internal Communication Satisfaction Questionnaire (ICSQ) (Tkalac Verčič *et al.*, 2009, 2021) which offers a modernized and upgraded view of dimensions that form ICS. Originally developed in Croatian (Tkalac Verčič *et al.*, 2009) and later validated in English (Tkalac Verčič *et al.*, 2021), it is comprised of eight dimensions (see detailed description in the methodology section), and proved to be reliable and valid in its various applications, both in Croatian and English (Balgač and Borovec, 2017; Connolly, 2021; Davidson, 2022; Krywalski Santiago, 2020; Lalić *et al.*, 2012, 2020; Li, 2022; Ravina-Ripoll *et al.*, 2022).

The conceptualization of internal employer brand

Employer brand defined. The most featured definition of employer brand is the one coined by Ambler and Barrow (1996) as "the package of functional, economic, and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company" (p. 187). Employer brand highlights the unique aspects of the firm's employment offerings or benefits that differentiate it from those of its competitors (Backhaus and Tikko, 2004), and that make it an "employer of choice", i.e. "the best place to work for", for both present and prospective employees.

An attractive employer brand is related to numerous positive individual and organizational outcomes. On the individual level, it results in higher employee satisfaction (e.g. Schlager *et al.*, 2011), organizational citizenship behavior (e.g. Gozukara and Hatipoglu, 2016; Hoppe, 2018) and employee loyalty (e.g. Chhabra and Sharma, 2014), as well as increased employee retention (e.g. Adler and Ghiselli, 2015; Ambler and Barrow, 1996; Kucherov and Zavyalova, 2012). On the organizational level, it constitutes efficient product/ service and corporate branding (e.g. Schlager *et al.*, 2011; Tkalac Verčič and Sinčić Ćorić, 2018), improves organizational culture and employee relations (e.g. Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Berthon *et al.*, 2005), results in more efficient and cost-effective recruitment of employees (e.g. Knox and Freeman, 2006; Sommer *et al.*, 2016) and ultimately leads to organizational competitive advantage (e.g. Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004).

Internal employer brand defined. Internal employer brand refers to the identity of an employer for insiders (employees), i.e. their mental representations of attributes related to an organization as an employer (Lievens and Slaughter, 2016). It is a set of perceived benefits that an existing employee identifies with an organization (Arachchige and Robertson, 2011), in other words, how employees evaluate an employer based on their authentic employment experience. Internal employer brand plays an important role in advocating an external employer brand (Itam *et al.*, 2020), as it portrays the real picture of working for an organization – current employees are the best EB ambassadors and advocates.

Internal employer attractiveness as the operationalization of internal employer brand. EA is defined as the envisioned benefits that a potential or current employee sees in working for a specific organization (Berthon *et al.*, 2005). Consequently, internal employer attractiveness is the degree of attractiveness among the company's current employees (Bhanot, 2016).

There are many dimensions that make an employer attractive, such as, according to Backhaus and Tikoo (2004), functional/instrumental attributes (rational, tangible features such

as salary, benefits, job security, working conditions and promotion opportunities) and symbolic attributes (emotional, intangible features such as organizational culture, an organization's prestige, social approval or corporate social responsibility). The most well-known EA typology in academic circles is the five-dimension typology established by Berthon *et al.* in 2005 (Pološki Vokić and Mostarac, 2021), comprised of internal, social, economic, development and application value, which is used in the empirical research presented in this paper.

The relevance of internal communication for developing an attractive internal employer brand

Internal communication has both a direct and indirect role in internal employer branding. The direct part refers to the employers' communication of employment benefits to existing employees (e.g. Chhabra and Sharma, 2014; Hoppe, 2018). As argued by Hoppe (2018), employees should be viewed as a relevant target group for relevant corporate information that may foster a prestigious evaluation of the employer. Based on the qualitative study they conducted, Moroko and Uncles (2008) illustrated that a company with a successful employer brand has the conscious awareness of what is of value to its people and why, carries through on that with action, and effectively supports this with communication. They specify that the accuracy of internal communication and its consistency with external communication have a central importance for the internal employer brand.

The indirect role of internal communication, founded on strong corporate values, implies the transformation of employees into "walking embodiments" of the core values and key touchpoints into opportunities for fulfilling the brand promise (Chong, 2007). This makes internal communication an essential part of the "inside out" approach of creating a powerful employer brand, since internal employee experience turns employees into brand advocates. As indicated by Itam *et al.* (2020), a realistic internal communication system enables a positive employee experience. In addition, Punjaisri *et al.* (2009) empirically proved that that employee brand identification, loyalty and commitment may be fortified by internal communication and training, while Dryl (2017) concluded that internal branding is a result of employers' internal communication efforts to develop a workforce that is committed, loyal and identifies with the organization's values and goals.

Although the relevance of internal communication for developing an attractive internal employer brand has been theoretically explored, to date there is no firm empirical evidence in support of this relationship. Therefore, using the aforementioned operationalizations of internal communication and internal employer brand, the first research question of this study is,

RQ1. Does ICS contribute to the attractiveness of an employer for its current employees?

As the ICS construct in this study consists of eight ICS dimensions, it is expected that some elements of ICS would contribute more to the attractiveness of an employer as perceived by its employees than others. Those ICS areas which add more value to employer branding are considered strategic. Consequently, the second research question on this paper is,

RQ2. Which ICS dimensions could be considered strategic as they contribute more to the attractiveness of an employer for its current employees?

Methodology
Measures
ICS was measured with the ICSQ (Tkalac Verčič *et al.*, 2009, 2021). The ICSQ is a 32-item self-report instrument revealing an eight-dimensional construct and reflecting the following four-item dimensions: satisfaction with feedback (SwF), satisfaction with communication with immediate superior (SwCIS), satisfaction with horizontal communication (SwHC), satisfaction

with informal communication (SwIC), satisfaction with information about the organization (SwIO), satisfaction with communication climate (SwCC), satisfaction with the quality of communication media (SwQCM), and satisfaction with communication in meetings (SwCM). Respondents evaluated their satisfaction on a seven-point Likert-type scale (response options ranged from 1 to 7, being extremely dissatisfied and extremely satisfied respectively), and sample items being "Satisfaction with the availability of immediate superior" and "Satisfaction with the length of meetings".

For assessing employer attractiveness, the Employer Attractiveness (EmpAt) Scale was utilized as developed and validated by Berthon *et al.* (2005). The scale is a 25-item instrument revealing a five-dimensional construct and reflecting the following five-item dimensions: interest value, social value, economic value, development value and application value. As with the ICSQ, items were measured by a seven-point Likert-type scale (scoring 1 to 7, strongly disagreeing to strongly agreeing respectively), and sample items being "Job security within the organization" and "The organization produces innovative products and services".

Sample and data collection
The data were collected as a part of a large Croatian national scientific research project. Firstly, a list of organizations that would be approached to participate in the study was generated, following Gerring's (2016) recommendation about the typical unit criteria. The research team agreed upon typical criteria and selected 50 mid-sized and large organizations (60–8,000 employees) with no extreme characteristics, out of which 26 agreed to participate in the study – 14 subsidiaries or branches of foreign-owned multinational companies, three Croatian multinational companies, five domestic corporations and four state-owned companies.

In each company, with the support of the HR department, a representative sample of employees according to occupations, hierarchical levels and business areas was selected. Selected employees received an e-mail invitation to participate in the study, explaining the academic purpose of the study and ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, together with a hyperlink to the survey. This is with the exception of employees in four organizations where the data were collected through a paper-and-pencil method. The response rate per organization varied from 20 to 45%.

The sample consisted of 3,457 employees. 50% were female and 50% were male respondents. In terms of age, the majority of respondents were between 36 and 45 years of age (35.4%), around a quarter of them were between 26 and 35 (26.8%) or between 46 and 55 years of age (23.7%), while respondents younger than 25 (4%) and over 55 years of age (10.1%) were less represented. The majority of respondents had a secondary (42.5%) or undergraduate/graduate degree (49.2%), while smaller numbers had less than a secondary (3.1%) or a postgraduate degree (5.2%). For work experience, the most represented were employees with less than 10 years of experience in their current organization (46.6%), around one-third of respondents had between 11 and 20 years of experience (29.2%), and a minority of respondents had between 21 and 30 years (15.3%) or more than 30 years of experience (8.9%).

Data analysis
For the initial data analysis, descriptive statistics, internal reliability calculations (Cronbach's alphas), correlation analysis (Pearson correlation coefficients) and collinearity diagnostics (Tolerance (T) and Variance Inflation Factors (VIFs)), were used. For the main data analysis – the analysis of the relationship between the overall ICS and ICS dimensions (independent variables), and overall EA and EA dimensions (dependent variables), both for the total sample and demographic-based subsamples, bivariate and multiple linear regression (enter procedure) was applied (assumptions of linear regression satisfied). For the data analysis, the statistical software package, IBM SPSS Statistics 21.0, was used.

Results

Table 1 exhibits the correlation matrix, together with means, standard deviations and Cronbach's alphas for the explored constructs and their dimensions. Correlations between ICS (in total and by dimensions) and EA (in total and by dimensions) imply a moderate (9 cases; $0.625 < r < 0.690$) to strong (45 cases; $0.704 < r < 0.900$) uphill (positive) and statistically significant relationships at a 0.001 level. Although the correlation between the overall ICS and the overall EA is relatively high and raises the question of the redundancy of constructs, we agree with Robbins and Judge (2017) and believe that despite a high degree of overlap between different job attitudes, there is still a clear distinction among them. Moreover, tolerance and VIF values for all ICS dimensions and the overall ICS suggest that independent variables were not in violation of multicollinearity, as VIFs were below the maximum acceptable level of 10, and Ts surpassed the reference value of 0.10 (reference values from Hair *et al.*, 2019).

Table 2 shows that respondents' overall satisfaction with internal communication in their organizations is statistically significantly positively related with the overall attractiveness they assign to their employers, as well as with the interest, social, economic, development and application value they see from working for their employers. Moreover, 63.5 to 73.4% of the variance in the evaluation of EA dimensions, and 80.9 of the total attractiveness of employers for the surveyed employees, could be explained by their overall satisfaction with internal communication.

Table 3 shows that for the overall EA, satisfaction with all aspects of internal communication except "satisfaction with communication during meetings" is statistically significant, explaining 81.8% of the envisioned benefits from working for an employer. For interest value, all ICS dimensions except "satisfaction with communication with immediate superior" and "satisfaction with communication in meetings" were found to be statistically significant. For Social value, all ICS dimensions except "satisfaction with information about the organization" and "satisfaction with the quality of communication media" were found to be statistically significant. For Economic value, three ICS dimensions were not found to be statistically significant ("satisfaction with communication with immediate superior", "satisfaction with horizontal communication" and "satisfaction with communication in meetings"). For Development value, all ICS dimensions except "satisfaction with horizontal communication" and "satisfaction with communication in meetings" were found to be statistically significant. For Application value, three ICS dimensions were not found to be statistically significant ("satisfaction with communication with immediate superior", "satisfaction with informal communication", "satisfaction with communication in meetings"). Moreover, when looking at beta (standardized regression) weights and t values, the best predictors of Interest value are "satisfaction with communication climate" and "satisfaction with feedback", the best predictors of Social value are "satisfaction with horizontal communication" and "satisfaction with communication with immediate superior", the best predictors of Economic value are "satisfaction with feedback" and "satisfaction with the quality of communication media", the best predictors of Development value are "satisfaction with communication climate" and "satisfaction with feedback", the best predictors of Application value are "satisfaction with communication climate" and "satisfaction with the quality of communication media", while the best predictors of the overall EA are "satisfaction with communication climate" and "satisfaction with horizontal communication". Altogether, "satisfaction with communication climate" and "satisfaction with feedback" turned out to be the most relevant ICS dimensions for the perceived employer attractiveness in general. Precisely, those two ICS dimensions are only two ICS dimension statistically significant for all five EA dimensions and the overall EA, but as well they are both among the best predictors of three EA dimensions (more than any other ICS dimension), while "satisfaction with communication climate" is even the best predictor of the overall EA.

Construct	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1 Overall ICS	4.56	1.32	(0.979)														
2 SwF	4.17	1.58	0.917*	(0.906)													
3 SwCIS	4.82	1.62	0.856*	0.784*	(0.919)												
4 SwHC	5.02	1.25	0.834*	0.696*	0.690*	(0.876)											
5 SwIC	4.23	1.31	0.886*	0.781*	0.704*	0.737*	(0.814)										
6 SwIO	4.47	1.53	0.879*	0.806*	0.669*	0.653*	0.739*	(0.880)									
7 SwCC	4.37	1.58	0.914*	0.839*	0.743*	0.709*	0.785*	0.786*	(0.949)								
8 SwQCM	4.78	1.50	0.885*	0.756*	0.674*	0.707*	0.770*	0.783*	0.776*	(0.923)							
9 SwCM	4.41	1.52	0.912*	0.805*	0.766*	0.733*	0.786*	0.773*	0.797*	0.785*	(0.902)						
10 Overall EA	4.64	1.33	0.900*	0.834*	0.743*	0.762*	0.795*	0.795*	0.842*	0.802*	0.794*	(0.971)					
11 Interest value	4.52	1.50	0.839*	0.787*	0.665*	0.682*	0.738*	0.760*	0.794*	0.760*	0.742*	0.945*	(0.902)				
12 Social value	5.05	1.33	0.797*	0.706*	0.704*	0.797*	0.725*	0.637*	0.715*	0.670*	0.690*	0.867*	0.765*	(0.894)			
13 Economic value	4.12	1.46	0.800*	0.754*	0.647*	0.625*	0.714*	0.729*	0.742*	0.720*	0.709*	0.912*	0.830*	0.706*	(0.859)		
14 Develop. value	4.54	1.57	0.850*	0.801*	0.711*	0.672*	0.745*	0.756*	0.806*	0.758*	0.744*	0.950*	0.876*	0.772*	0.848*	(0.924)	
15 Applica. value	4.81	1.36	0.856*	0.786*	0.688*	0.713*	0.743*	0.778*	0.801*	0.777*	0.760*	0.932*	0.871*	0.758*	0.805*	0.861*	(0.875)

Note(s): Cronbach's α shown in brackets; * $p < 0.001$

Table 1.
Means, standard deviations, reliabilities and correlations between studied variables (in total and by dimensions)

Discussion and conclusion

In this study we addressed the void in the literature by analyzing the link between internal communication and employer attractiveness. There have been few studies where this relationship has been empirically tested (e.g. Tkalac Verčič, 2021). Our results support the assumption that employer attractiveness relies partially on the quality of internal communication and consequent employee satisfaction with internal communication. In other words, employees who are satisfied with internal communication are likely to see their employers as more attractive.

Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) described employer branding as a three-step process, where after developing a concept of value to employees, followed by marketing externally this value proposition to potential employees, the third step (incorporating the brand promise as an integral part of the organizational culture) is primarily carried out through internal communication. Previous studies have shown that employer attractiveness adds to ICS (Tkalac Verčič, 2021) and that internal branding efforts can help support communication efforts, promote organizational values and increase employee satisfaction (Punjaisri *et al.*, 2009).

This study offers new insight into the relationship between ICS and employer attractiveness. Our results highlight the importance of understanding what forms employer brands from an organizational context. As the effects of good internal employer branding are increasingly recognized – more competent employees, favorable employee attitudes, higher employee productivity, employee/knowledge retention, greater customer satisfaction/loyalty, etc. it is clear why it is important to enhance the employer brand. This is why activities, processes and systems that help form positive employer brands, such as internal communication, should be well understood.

Our first research question was aimed at exploring if ICS contributes to the attractiveness of an employer for its current employees. As the respondents' overall satisfaction with their organization's internal communication proved to be significantly positively related to their

	Interest value		Social value		Economic value		Development value		Application value		Overall EA	
	B	t	β	t	β	t	β	t	β	t	β	t
Overall ICS	0.839	86.848*	0.797	74.260*	0.800	75.084*	0.850	90.481*	0.856	93.280*	0.900	113.877*
F	7542.598*		5514.530*		5637.641*		8186.742*		8701.176*		12,967.935*	
Adj. R^2	0.704		0.635		0.640		0.722		0.734		0.809	

Note(s): *$p < 0.001$

Table 2.
Bivariate regression analysis results for the relationship between the overall ICS and EA (in total and by dimensions)

	Interest value		Social value		Economic value		Development value		Application value		Overall EA	
	β	t	β	t	β	t	β	t	β	t	β	t
SwF	0.223	10.425*	0.091	4.177*	0.225	9.382*	0.237	11.348*	0.143	6.988*	0.204	11.556*
SwCIS	−0.030	−1.788	0.164	9.651*	0.024	1.300	0.086	5.289*	0.015	0.972	0.054	3.956*
SwHC	0.090	5.657*	0.495	30.877*	0.018	1.028	0.034	2.178	0.149	9.842*	0.166	12.711*
SwIC	0.066	3.607*	0.141	7.550*	0.124	6.021*	0.071	3.950*	0.027	1.531	0.087	5.773*
SwIO	0.137	7.499*	−0.021	−1.112	0.159	7.763*	0.106	5.925*	0.182	10.403*	0.116	7.696*
SwCC	0.255	12.364*	0.125	5.985*	0.141	6.168*	0.261	12.982*	0.233	11.814*	0.224	13.084*
SwQCM	0.170	9.272*	0.006	0.343	0.164	8.002*	0.171	9.522*	0.183	10.451*	0.158	10.317*
SwCM	0.024	1.198	−0.071	−3.500*	0.037	1.659	−0.018	−0.909	0.032	1.682	0.005	0.290
F	1022.804*		974.848*		739.178*		1097.075*		1160.452*		1714.019*	
Adj. R^2	0.721		0.711		0.650		0.736		0.746		0.818	

Note(s): *$p < 0.001$

Table 3.
Multiple regression analysis results for the relationship between ICS dimensions and EA (in total and by dimensions)

employer's overall attractiveness, the study points to a strong link between the explored concepts. ICS accounted for between 63.5 and 73.4% of the variance in the evaluation of EA dimensions, and 80.9% of the total attractiveness of employers, which shows that internal communication (and the resulting satisfaction) should never be underestimated in organizational employer branding strategies.

Our second research question was focused on discovering which ICS dimensions contribute more to employer attractiveness. Results show that seven out of eight dimensions of ICS (the exception of "satisfaction with communication during meetings") are statistically significant for overall employer attractiveness (explaining 81.8% of the perceived benefits of working for an employer), as well that multiple ICS dimensions are statistically significant for each of the explored EA dimensions. Altogether, the two most relevant ICS dimensions for favorable employer attractiveness proved to be "satisfaction with communication climate" and "satisfaction with feedback", which is in line with Itam's *et al.* study (2020) implying that one of the most important elements in creating a meaningful and differentiated employer brand is the responsiveness of management. Authors support this with their finding that employees should feel good about the organization they work for, as well as believe that the company requires and recognizes that their hard work adds value to the growth and success of the company. In other words, these two elements of internal communication signal to current employees the organizational values, policies and practices, and by that the elements of employer value.

Welch and Jackson (2007) stated that despite the importance of internal communication to practice, there are still considerable gaps in the internal communication literature, and that strategic communication managers need a fresh perspective from which to consider internal communication management. One such consideration is the potential of strategic internal communications for developing and maintaining an attractive employer brand. This is supported by Neill's study (2016, p. 11), which proves that internal communicators are "aware of and embrace the employer branding movement".

In line with that, our results have several managerial implications. Firstly, organizations should conduct continuous ICS surveys and ensure that employees' voice is being heard. Continuous information about changes in employees' attitudes and their satisfaction with internal communication may help strategic internal communicators to better understand and manage internal communication dimensions with a greater impact, as well as to revise and improve their internal communication practices accordingly. Secondly, organizations should make an effort to coordinate and cooperate among departments and functions involved in employer branding strategies and initiatives. Human resources and internal communication functions should be united (Sharma and Kamalanabhan, 2012). A misalignment between these functions can quickly lead to undesirable outcomes and unfavorable reputation. For example, the level of accuracy and consistency in communication must be rigorous because any miscommunication between recruitment advertising and employer branding promise leads to negative employee experiences (Itam *et al.*, 2020). Finally, when internal communication is founded on strong corporate values, it can help transform employees into EB ambassadors, and key touch points into opportunities for fulfilling the brand promise (Chong, 2007). Managers' understanding of employees' satisfaction with various internal communication dimensions is a prerequisite for achieving those goals.

Research limitations and future research potential
This research is not without limitations. In valuing the results, one should take into consideration the typical limitations of research in the field – the cross-sectional study design, collecting data by self-reporting, and the usage of a common source for assessing constructs (ICS and employer attractiveness are measured from the same source). Additionally, the self-

selection processes of selecting respondents might affect the relationships between the observed variables and may thus limit generalizability. Next, in this study, the internal communication is operationalized through ICS. However, Carrière and Bourque (2009) emphasized that one must consider the likelihood that satisfaction with communication represents a fundamental benchmark against which all of the organization's activities and initiatives are measured. Finally, our sample came from Croatia, so whether it can be generalized beyond one country should be explored.

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