

**What Makes the Grapevine So Effective? An Employee Perspective on Employee-organization communication and Peer-to-peer Communication**

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**Abstract**

With increasingly sophisticated technology, employees have become accustomed to being a part of the conversation. Although internal communication has embraced this trend utilizing engaging and collaborative forms of employee communication, such consistent access to information has increasingly compelled stakeholders toward more personal and trustworthy sources. Leaders who embrace the changing communicative needs of employees and look to other communicative models for inspiration to create better organizational relationships will enjoy greater organizational outcomes.

In depth interviews provide a rich, comparative analysis of employees' perspectives on formal employee-organization relationships (EOR) and communication, and informal peer communication networks, such as the grapevine, characterized by frequent, informal, conversational interactions. Ultimately, this research makes important theoretical and practical contributions to the growing body of EOR literature. Namely, findings suggest that the perceived nature, and relational outcomes of informal communication relationships are equally as conceivable in formal communication relationships.

Detailed discussion of how employees perceive the impact of access, availability, and informality in peer relationships against their expectations of professionalism and formality in relationships with leaders provides specific insight on how organizations may effectively leverage the characteristics of informal peer-to-peer relationships as part of an overall strategic internal communication.

**Keywords:** employee-organization relationships, relationship-management, internal communication, peer-to-peer communication, horizontal communication, informal communication

## **Introduction**

Internal communication teams can send their carefully crafted messages to global audiences with the click of a button, yet still the informal system of communication, commonly known as the grapevine, remains a thriving competitor to formal communication systems. Teams of communicators work around the clock assessing, massaging and managing corporate messaging and despite careful planning, employees often tune into the grapevine as their preferred communication channel. The relationships held by people within an organization determine the type of communication that is utilized. While formal relationships will lead to the use of formal channels of communication, informal communication flourishes with social relationships (Davis & O'Connor, 1977). Because formal channels of communication do not carry all of the information that employees need, informal channels play a significant role in the day-to-day life of organizational members (Davis & O'Connor, 1977). As illustrated by Davis (1967), informal communication "is a powerful influence upon productivity and job satisfaction. Both formal and informal systems are necessary for group activity, just as two blades are essential to make a pair of scissors workable" (p. 212).

Important theoretical scholarship through the relationship management lens positions internal communication as a public relations management function aimed at creating and maintaining high-quality, communicative, cross functional employee relationships. This study recognizes existing relationship management theory research (Bruning, 2002; J. E. Grunig & Huang, 2000) to encompass the establishment of organizational-employee relationships and aims to advance research to include peer-to-peer relationships in the internal communication function. While current scholarship is concerned with organizational-peer relationships, expanding the theory to include peer-to-peer relationships offers broader study to a rich and powerful communication tool, the grapevine, an informal peer-to-peer communication network (Heath, 2013; Erden, 2013).

The dynamics of relationship management theory justify the unique contribution of the grapevine as an effective and efficient internal communication vehicle. Relationship management theory is heavily concerned with relationship influencers and points to a multitude of conditional, or "when" and "where" influencers such as relationship timing and availability to the person or persons within the relationship. The theory further addresses contextual or "what" influencers, such as the structure of the relationship as well as the content shared within the relationship. Finally, conceptual or "why" influencers are outlined, including the intrinsic influencers of relationships, such as intrinsic realization or gratification.

Through the lens of relationship management theory, the purpose of this case study is to explore the informal and formal communication taking place within a multinational medical device maker headquartered in the United States and examine how an organization can capitalize on the grapevine both as a communication tool and relationship opportunity. Previous literature has provided useful information regarding the grapevine's speed, accuracy, probable content, different communicators involved, and how the information flows (Davis, 1971; Sutton & Porter, 1968; Davis & O'Connor, 1977). It has also addressed organizations' perceptions of the value and influence of the grapevine (Newstrom, Monczka, & Reif, 1974). More recently, research attention has included information technology and new media as drivers of social and communication systems, particularly within organizations (Baerjee & Singh, 2015). Increasingly, an organization's online presence consists of information posted to various websites, blogs, and

interactive social media platforms that allow user commenting (Chen, Ji & Men, 2017). Although online organization-public engagement has empirically demonstrated a positive impact on relational outcomes (Men & Tsai, 2014), the lack of censorship, incommensurate reach, and unfettered speed that characterizes the internet compared to traditional mediums, centers internal relationship management at the critical forefront of public relations and organizational effectiveness (Berger, 2008; Men & Stacks, 2014; Verčič & Vokić, 2017). Baerjee and Singh (2015) note, employees seeking or sharing informal information electronically can quickly impact an organization's reputation and bottom line, which can only be mitigated through existing trust and relationships within the organization. As such, this study recognizes the importance of the internet and new media and focuses on the importance of cultivating and maintaining internal relationships through strategic communication in that effort.

The findings of this study add to the growing body of knowledge in the public relations field through the scope of relationship management and add prescience to the grapevine as an effective means of internal communication. The practical implications of this study are that its results could shed light on how to increase the organizations' level of awareness and control of the information that is being communicated through the grapevine.

## **Literature Review**

### ***What is the Grapevine?***

Employee-driven communication is an informal, organic interaction that reduces the inherent communication loss that takes place in formal organizational communication (Nicoll, 1994). Often referred to as the grapevine, employee-driven communication features distinct and unique characteristics that contrast formal communication networks. Regardless of how well an organization formally communicates to its employees, human's socialization needs will always lead employees to engage in informal conversations (Erden, 2013). While formal communication is structured and not open to rapid changes (Mishra, 1990), the information shared in the grapevine has the potential to spread in a faster manner (Harris & Hartman, 2001). It is inherently non-restrictive and efficient. No public statement needs to be written or approved (Davis & O'Connor, 1977). Although today's technologically driven environment has led to important changes in the way people communicate, the grapevine still largely thrives as a face-to-face and word-of-mouth platform (Davis, 1962; Davis & O'Connor, 1977).

Informal communication tends to emerge when formal channels are perceived as being too rigid, when employees perceive that management is withholding critical information, and under conditions of organizational change in which the future of the employees is uncertain (Newstrom et al., 1974). During the development of informal communication, employees engage in the interchange of rumors and gossip (Erden, 2013). While rumors intend to interpret situations that are undefined or threatening (Clegg & Van Iterson, 2009), gossip occurs when a third person who is not currently present is criticized and disapproved of by individuals (Erden, 2013). Having said this, it is important to add that employee-driven communication is not merely a euphemistic iteration of what is colloquially known as the rumor mill or gossip circle. While the grapevine, and gossip, and rumor are all informal communication means (Houmanfar & Johnson, 2004; Nicoll, 1994) and exist in response to reducing uncertainty, gossip and rumor exist in conditions of threat, crisis, alarm, fear, instability and/or upheaval (Caputo, 1977; Clegg & Van Iterson, 2009; Stein, 1980). Additionally, while gossip and rumor have evidenced

insignificant long-term impact on the organization in which they have taken place (Houmanfar & Johnson, 2004) the grapevine makes an impression (Davis, 1973).

Communicating informally is part of human nature. In an organizational environment, informal communication helps build relationships and bonds among peers (Berger 2005; Crampton, Hodge, & Mishra, 1998; Neill, 2014). While a dynamic grapevine reveals employees' desire to share ideas about their place of work, an environment in which workers are not conversing about what is going on in their organizational lives highlights a lack of interest (Erden, 2013). In other words, an organization's *esprit de corps* can be unveiled by observing its informal communication networks (Davis, 1973). While the grapevine will generally have some elements of truth to it, ambiguity, deletions, and embellishments may distort the original message (Newstrom et al., 1974). Studies have found that between 75% and 90% of the information that is disseminated through the grapevine is correct (Davis, 1973). While this may seem like a high percentage, it still means that between 10% and 25% of the information is incorrect. Rumors carrying incorrect information can create anxiety, fear, misunderstanding and a wide range of conflicts in the organization (Erden, 2013).

Three titles are usually given to employees participating in the grapevine: liaison, isolates, and dead-enders (Davis & O'Connor, 1977). Liaisons are those who actively participate in the grapevine by contributing to the flow of information (Jacobson & Seashore, 1951). Liaisons have further been defined as those who will share organizational information with more than one individual (Davis, 1953; Sutton & Porter, 1968). On the other hand, a study conducted by Sutton and Porter defined isolates as those who did not hear the information half of the time, and dead-enders as those that passed on the information they received less than one-third of the time (Sutton & Porter, 1968). Irrespective of the term used to describe the individuals participating in the transmission of information, Davis and O'Connor assert:

the grapevine is more of a product of the occasion and situation than it is of the person.

This explains why the grapevine is more active at some times than at others, and also why one might be classified as a liaison in one grapevine transmission and as an isolate or dead-ender in another. (1977, p. 64)

### ***Relationship Management Theory and Organization-Public Relationships***

Since Ferguson (1984) first suggested that relationships should be the unifying concept of public relations, the efforts placed by academics and practitioners toward understanding organization-public relationships (OPR) have increased considerably. By managing organization-public relationships, the relationship management perspective contends that the public relations discipline balances the interests of organizations and publics (Ledingham, 2003). Within this framework, public relations has been defined as "the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends" (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1994, p. 2). Similarly, in 2012, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) conducted a crowdsourcing campaign and public vote that defined public relations as "a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics" (PRSA, 2017, About PRSA section, para. 4).

L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, and Ehling (1992) suggested that the dimensions of reciprocity, trust, mutual legitimacy, openness, mutual satisfaction, and mutual understanding determine the relationship state. Some years later, Ledingham and Bruning (1998) proposed the

following five dimensions: trust, openness, involvement, investment, and commitment. The next year, Hon and J. E. Grunig (1999) offered strategies for maintaining OPRs such as access, positiveness, openness, assurance, networking, and sharing of tasks. They also suggested the following four outcomes as indicators of the quality of successful organization-public relationships: control mutuality, trust, commitment, and satisfaction.

Control mutuality is defined as “the degree to which parties agree on who has rightful power to influence one another” (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999, p. 19). Commitment is defined by the same authors (1999) as the extent to which the public feels it is worth maintaining a relationship with the organization. Satisfaction, which involves affection and emotion (J. E. Grunig & Huang, 2000), measures “the extent to which one party feels favorably toward the other because positive expectations about the relationship are reinforced” (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999, p. 20). Finally, trust indicates “one party’s level of confidence in and willingness to open oneself to the other party” (1999, p. 19). Using these outcomes, Hon and J. E. Grunig (1999) developed statistically valid and reliable scales to measure these four dimensions. In a follow-up study, J. E. Grunig (2002) reported qualitative methods to effectively observe and evaluate relationships in organizations using the same indicators, dimensions, and definitions, citing qualitative methodology as an opportunity to capture in-depth understanding of a relationship’s quality and nature. Noting the emergence and importance of relationship management as a paradigm of public relations (e.g., Dozier, L. A. Grunig, & J. E. Grunig, 1995; Jo & Shim, 2005; Sha, 2017), internal communication scholars include control mutuality, trust, commitment, and satisfaction as suggested by J. E. Grunig & Hon (1999) to define, operationalize, and contribute to the internal perspective of the organization-public relationship. Linking strategic internal communication to relational outcomes, Men and Stacks (2014) define the employee-organization relationship as “the degree to which an organization and its employees trust one another, agree on who has the rightful power to influence, experience satisfaction with each other, and commit oneself to the other” (2014, p. 307). According to Verčič and Vokić (2017), the interdisciplinary prominence of the relationship management paradigm, internal communication’s ability to impact quality relational outcomes, and the emergence of concepts such as engagement as a way to connect with stakeholders calls upon the field to establish clarity around relationship indicators and outcomes. Defined in management literature as emotional and intellectual commitment to an organization, and in psychology as an “individual’s involvement and satisfaction with as well as enthusiasm for work” (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002, p. 417), engagement, Verčič and Vokic suggest “can be perceived as only a step away from commitment” (2017, p. 886). The authors conclude that while engagement reflects different aspects of organizational constructs and can be connected to commitment, the organizational perspective of commitment empirically separates the two constructs (Verčič and Vokic, 2017). Specifically, where engagement considers short-term employee attitudes, organizational commitment concerns a long-term perspective (Vokić, & Hernaus, 2015). This perspective is expressed in three components that comprise an employees’ organizational commitment; (1) affective commitment, or personal desire to remain with the organization, (2) continuance commitment; or rationalizing whether the costs of leaving outweigh the benefits and, (3) normative commitment, or internalizing feelings of obligation to stay. Thus, the current study explores the linkages between peer-to-peer communication and strategic internal communication and examines resulting relational outcomes toward greater quality EORs. Consistent with previous studies, (e.g., Jo & Shim, 2005; Kim & Rhee, 2011; Men & Jiang, 2016) relational

outcomes include control mutuality, trust, commitment, and satisfaction (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999; Huang & J. E. Grunig, 2000), four widely held relationship dimensions within relationship management literature (Men & Stacks, 2014).

RQ – How can organizations utilize the grapevine as an effective communications tool and as a relationship opportunity?

P – Peer-to-peer relationships meet human a) conditional, b) contextual and c) conceptual needs more effectively than organizational-employee relationships.

## **Methodology**

Methodologically inspired by operational and theoretical elements of relationship management (Ledingham, 2003), this study employed a qualitative design to evaluate the quality of communicative relationships (J. E. Grunig, 2002). All employees at the U.S. headquarters location of a large multinational, medical-device manufacturing organization were invited to participate in in-depth, semi-structured interviews.<sup>1</sup> To ensure a range of perspectives (Marriam, 2009), participants were purposively-sampled from the total pool of voluntary respondents (Patton, 1990) until a point of subject saturation, whereby no new themes emerged (Creswell, 2012). Interviews with 18 employees reflect an adequate representation of organizational function and perspectives. Specifically, participants consist of nine females, and nine males with an average organizational tenure of 8.2 years. Four additional confirmatory interviews verified data saturation. Data was collected face-to-face, in private participant-selected office locations. Following J. E. Grunig and Stamm's 1973 recommendation on coorientation in communication research where, rather than orienting to an organization's goals, problem or policy to change participants' attitudes or beliefs with strategic messaging, a researcher can rather define effective communications through "focus(ing) (...) attention on the relationship of sender to receiver in the communication system" (p. 567). Toward understanding, accuracy, agreement, and congruency, McLeod and Chaffee (1973) likewise suggest researchers orient to the communication system and individuals' resulting perceptions rather than any one individual in the system, or any individual to whom responsibility for its structure may be attributed. Using this logic, executives were excluded from the participant pool. Table 1 offers a description of participants, including gender, organizational hierarchy, function, and years with the organization.

### ***Interview Guide***

A theoretically grounded, IRB-approved semi-structured interview guide, interactive, open, and closed-ended questions, and a narrative-constructed questioning route was utilized to orient researchers and participants to the research context and elicit responses (Bryman, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). Interviews and recruitment took place concurrently throughout a 45-day period beginning Jan. 31, 2017, concluding Mar. 17, 2017, at the point of maximum variance and subject saturation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Merriam, 2009). All interviews were audio recorded and notated with participants' written, informed consent. To maintain participant confidentiality,

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<sup>1</sup> 338 employees employed at U.S. Headquarters, 554 employed worldwide

identifying information was not attached to recordings and was redacted from notations. Two researchers attended all interviews, one as a facilitator, one as an observer and notator. One researcher independently transcribed all interviews verbatim for validity and accuracy. Thematic analysis, specifically, a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) revealed emergent categories and the identification of key concepts. Following thematic analysis, two researchers participated independently in an open coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Enabling deeper examination, and categorization, open coding includes line-by-line data analysis. Data is individually notated, coded, and assigned around themes emergent from initial transcription and interviews. After completing coding, two researchers met to compare coding. To rationalize unassigned data and inconsistencies researchers independently evaluated specific transcription and notation segments and, while additional themes were added and successfully captured all remaining content, a third, IRB-approved, independent researcher was identified as part of the study to rationalize inconsistencies to ensure research validity. Participant responses are transcribed and included verbatim in the results to ensure process, and data validity. Prior to coding researchers participated in intensive coding training comprised of topic and context-specific background research and best practices for qualitative coding (Patton, 1990; Saldaña, 2015).

**Table 1**

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Hierarchy</b>	<b>Team</b>	<b>Tenure</b>
1	Female	Supervisor	Packaging	9 years
2	Female	Individual Contributor	Human Resources	15 years
3	Male	Individual Contributor	Engineering	7 years
4	Male	Individual Contributor	Manufacturing	10 years
5	Male	Supervisor	Engineering	8 years
6	Male	Supervisor	Supply Chain	13 years
7	Female	Individual Contributor	Customer Service	6 months
8	Male	Individual Contributor	Supply Chain	16 years
9	Female	Supervisor	Clinical Research	1 year
10	Male	Individual Contributor	Engineering	5 years
11	Female	Individual Contributor	Packaging	1 year
12	Male	Individual Contributor	Clinical Research	4 years
13	Female	Supervisor	Human Resources	2 years
14	Female	Individual Contributor	Customer Service	17 years
15	Male	Supervisor	Manufacturing	10 years
16	Female	Supervisor	Customer Service	15 years
17	Male	Individual Contributor	Marketing	6 years
18	Female	Individual Contributor	Engineering	3 years

## **Themes**

### ***Conditional Influencers: When and where communication happens***

#### Employee-Organization Communication

A cascade approach to the organization's most important information typified employee communication. "Most of the information I get from the organization comes from the monthly employee meetings" (R3). While these meetings are perceived to be useful and a good way for the organization to communicate new developments and what lies ahead organizationally, they are not seen by the employees as opportunities to engage in two-way communication. "These types of conversations with the organization will take place in an auditorium with a large number of people, so many employees will not want to talk. They will not feel comfortable talking unless a base relationship is established" (R8). Similarly, another employee stated that these company meetings served as an opportunity "for the organization to talk to me" (R1), and not the other way around. Employees stated that they also receive organizational information through emails as well as the company's internal TV channel.

While hallway chats with organizational leaders occur when employees need to engage in a more individualized fashion with the organization, they will usually schedule these kinds of meetings. Instead of just dropping by a leader's office when something needs to be communicated, many employees suggest that "there is a heavier bias toward actually scheduling meetings" (R5). The reason that employees choose to communicate this way is mainly based on not wanting to disturb the organization's leaders: "You don't want to waste their time" (R10).

A general perception among a wide range of employees was that the amount of trust and two-way communication between workers and the organization increases when proximity and time spent with leaders increases. An organizational member that was living the experience of having one of the vice presidents of the company sit in their department for some time emphasized how positive the experience was: "Now that we have a vice president just down the hall, and checking in on us during the day, it helps build trust and makes you feel that they are more involved on a day-to-day basis. It transmits availability" (R7). Similarly, an employee from another department stated that having organizational leaders work near them and spend more time with them would "help tremendously. When you get to see what people are doing and going through, it changes your perceptions. Learning about others helps to increase your empathy and changes your way of thinking" (R14). On the same subject, another employee stated: "Spending time with people of different areas only helps them become better leaders, because they could see some of those details and fully understand all the bits and pieces that go into it" (R10).

#### Peer-To-Peer Communication

Unlike the more structured organization-employee communication, peer-to-peer communication occurs in a much wider range of circumstances and locations: "It happens in the hallways, in the conference rooms, and over lunch. It happens wherever it happens. They are around all the time and are more approachable just because they are there" (R6). The approachability increases the amount of communication that is being transmitted and shared: "There is a lot of interaction. If I have questions, I will go to their desks. If we are not face-to-face I will email or text them. There is a close and constant contact" (R18).

Employees also choose to communicate more with certain peers than with others. “I have an inner circle with four or five guys, in which we will talk about everything” (R4). Similarly, another interviewee stated that he tends to communicate a lot with his “text group” (R17).

### ***Contextual Influencers: What is communicated***

#### **Employee-Organization Communication**

Employees agree that the organization openly shares with them the most important developments occurring in the company: “They share their findings with the whole company in employee meetings” (R2). Similarly, another interviewee stated: “Leadership makes an effort to communicate and be transparent” (R13). Employees also stated that most of their conversations with the organization are “strictly professional” (R8). At the same time, they recognize that the medical device manufacturer has an open-door policy and feel that they can address organizational issues with them: “I feel pretty good about being able to speak to the organization about different processes and things that affect the future of our organization” (R5). On the same issue, another employee stated: “I’m able to say what’s on my mind. I don’t have to be fearful that what I say is going to be used against me in some way” (R11). Although all employees agreed that the organization has an open-door policy, not everyone felt the same level of comfort in speaking with organizational leaders: “If I had to talk about something related with my position, I would consider it scary and intimidating” (R13). On a similar note, another employee stated: “You have to learn your boundaries about what you can and cannot say. It is not quite as casual as it is with peers. It is probably just because it involves people I do not work with on a daily basis” (R4).

The organization will also reach out to individuals and ask them about their perceptions of issues related to the company: “They will sometimes call me and ask what I think about certain issues” (R2). Whenever this occurs, whether it is the organization or the employee that has made the initial contact, employees overwhelmingly agree that what they will say will be previously studied and prepared: “Speaking to the organization requires more preparation. I would want to make sure I have all of the facts, so that when I went in, I was on point and able to answer the questions” (R14). The lower the level of permanent contact employees have with organizational leaders, the lower the likelihood they will share their insights, concerns, or thoughts about issues: “I can’t be down to earth with the organization. Spending more time with them would certainly make me feel more comfortable with the organization. (...) I don’t feel it now because I don’t see them very often” (R16).

#### **Peer-To-Peer Communication**

Employees widely agreed that communication with peers is more casual and there is less concern about the consequences of what is said: “When you communicate with peers, you don’t have to back up statements. When you communicate with the organization, you want it to logically make sense” (R5). Similarly, another employee stated: “There is a feeling of less judgment among your peers. With the organization, there is more thought put into what you are going to say” (R7). The fact that the communication is more casual leads to a greater amount of personal information being shared: “There is more conversation, more information being exchanged at a personal level with peers than with the organization” (R9). In addition to discussing personal matters, employees will also talk to their peers when they feel like they need

to vent about organizational matters that disturb them: “There’s a lot of venting, and then once it’s out, we move on to business as usual” (R17).

Interviewees also mentioned that they go to their peers when they need to catch up with organizational information they have missed. Peers also serve as a way to get informed about what is going on in other departments: “There are particular departments that usually know what is up, and because we share peers and friends the information usually tends to flow freely between those groups” (R10).

### ***Conceptual Influencers: Why communication occurs***

#### **Employee-Organization Communication**

One of the main reasons that employees have for communicating with the organization is to influence or at least raise awareness on a certain issue: “I see them as opportunities to influence” (R5). Another interviewee shared this perspective and stated: “Conversations with the organization will eventually have more of an impact than speaking with peers” (R6). Among those interested in raising awareness, one interviewee stated: “Typically, my goal when I discuss things up to that level, is not to necessarily change their minds, but to present them with some additional information that they may not be aware of, so that they can weigh it in while making the ultimate decision” (R10). Employees want to feel valued and respected while communicating with the organization: “They listen and value my opinion. (...) It makes me feel good that someone can put that level of trust in me” (R2).

#### **Peer-To-Peer Communication**

Regarding the reasons employees have for communicating among peers, one of the employees simply stated the following words: “they listen” (R2). Whether they are sharing their personal lives or their experiences at work, people enjoy sharing with those that listen to them. Similarly, another employee stated: “Peers will probably listen to you and take your opinion into account a bit more than higher-ups. It is easier to influence a peer than someone above you” (R6). Others stated that they communicated with their peers because they feel comfortable doing it: “Among peers, you are much more comfortable probably because of an increased level of interaction. There is a sense of camaraderie” (R7). Employees also feel that it is easier to communicate with peers because they share experiences and are often in the same stages of life: “A lot of my peers are in the same place as I am in life. We all have kids, and are of a similar age. We all have interests and expertise in similar areas that we share with one another. I think that allows a natural and deeper connection” (R10).

### ***Control Mutuality***

#### **Employee-Organization Communication**

Most of the interviewees felt listened to by the organization: “I feel that my position is invited. If I needed to talk to them about something in particular, I feel like I could do it” (R13). While they do not anticipate that the organization will act upon every comment or suggestion they make, they do expect to be respected and considered: “I think that opinions are respected and heard, even if they are not taken” (R17). Similarly, another employee stated: “I may feel comfortable saying things, but I am not sure that they will be acted upon. There are times that there is a bigger picture involved. It is not just about me. There are decisions that have to be made, and that is understandable” (R9).

Peer-To-Peer Communication

One of the things employees value most about their peers is that they listen: “My peers listen, they engage with me, and they actually want to know my opinion, seriously and sincerely” (R16). Employees feel that the advice they give to peers will make a difference: “They seek out my opinion and my counsel as far as what needs to be done” (R8).

*Trust*

Employee-Organization Communication

Reliability and consistency were two important concepts referred to by respondents who described how the organization inspires trust with employees: “It’s a track record that has led me to know that I can take these people on their word. I am able to trust what they say because historically they have been truthful” (R8). While having the organization communicate transparently to them is certainly important, trust will only be built if the organization keeps their word and proves that they have the ability to fulfill their promises: “When something is communicated one way and either retracted or communicated differently later, I begin to question what that’s about. Actions and words have to be aligned” (R7). Similarly, another employee stated: “When they tell me they’re going to do something, it happens” (R15). Employees do not expect the organization to be perfect. They know that there will sometimes be problems and difficulties. However, they do expect the organization to show an interest and capacity to address the issues: “When you see that the organization addresses a problem, it gives me confidence that they are interested in us” (R5).

Being treated fairly was another important aspect for employees: “The organization prides itself on treating everyone well. They do their best to treat their people as well as they can” (R8). At the same time, trust toward the organization increases when employees feel that the organization trusts them: “The organization does not come over and question us about our work. I value that. They let us do our thing. They trust our capabilities” (R4). Similarly, another employee gave a specific example of the organization showing trust toward him: “When I had kids I could work from home on certain mornings to help with my wife’s schedule. They have given me trust and given me the freedom to make my life work while at the same time accomplishing the goals of the company” (R10).

Peer-To-Peer Communication

Several employees shared the view that it is easier to trust your peers than the organization because you spent a larger amount of time with them, which allows you to make a more informed decision regarding their trustworthiness: “I think there is a huge component to proximity, availability, and personality in terms of who you can trust, and who you feel comfortable talking to” (R17). Following through with your promises is another important aspect: “At the beginning of a relationship, eye contact, engagement, and affirmation help build trust. Later on, following through, no matter how small or large the commitment, builds trust” (R7). Sharing ideas and collaborating is another aspect that builds trust among peers: “Openly sharing ideas, collaborating, and showing a willingness to sacrifice for the team builds trust” (R12). Employees also emphasized that trust is built when there is a sense of safety: “I know that they will not throw me under the bus, or tell me a lie, because they know I will not do it to them. This is just something that happens over time” (R15).

### ***Commitment***

#### **Employee-Organization Communication**

While commitment is shown on a day-to-day basis, specific actions in decisive moments can have an impact that may last for years. In this particular organization, a large number of interviewees remembered how the organization remained committed to them during the recession that was caused by the financial crisis of 2008: “The organization’s decision of not laying anybody off during the recession spoke volumes about their compassion and care for employees” (R12). Similarly, another employee stated: “They did not fire anyone when we went through all those low periods. All they did was move people around. They did a great job to work through it” (R4).

At the same time, some employees stated they would perceive the organization as more committed if the organization were to express more interest in the individual rather than the employee: “I think that if I heard more from them about me, I might feel like that. But they don’t want to know me, they just want me to do my job. My friends show a long-term interest in me by asking about my wife, my kids, and my life” (R1).

#### ***Peer-To-Peer Communication***

Mutual listening, devoting time, and being willing to help, were perceived to be important factors when determining how committed peers are: “They listen, and they seek me out to listen to them, or just to talk to them about stuff they need advice on” (R1). Similarly, another interviewee stated: “It is interdependent and reciprocal. If those guys are having a hard time they know that I am there for them” (R10). When peers show an interest in an individual both inside and outside of work, it helps create a sense of commitment: “They take an interest in me, not just about work, but outside of work. For instance, if I take off a half-day or am out sick, they make an extra effort to help me when I am gone. It makes you feel that they missed you as a person” (R14).

### ***Satisfaction***

#### **Employee-Organization Communication**

While job security and benefits are certainly valued by employees, a large number of the interviewees stated that what truly satisfies them is feeling that their work has a positive impact on society: “I think that I am helping society by making this a better place to live. By helping to move forward the technology of healthcare, people in the United States and around the world are being benefitted” (R3).

#### **Peer-To-Peer Communication**

Forming personal relationships with peers creates a sense of satisfaction among workers: “Peers give me personal satisfaction. By spending a lot of time with them, I have more fun. And the more we see each other, the more we develop our relationship” (R17). Similarly, another employee stated: “With peers, even when you are just getting something off your chest, you get a good feeling from sharing a personal thing. I cannot share as much or get that feeling with the organization” (R18). Being able to form true connections and feeling that peers are interested in your well-being has a positive impact on employees’ satisfaction: “Among peers, we take care of each other and we all benefit from this” (R16).

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Relationship management is perhaps public relations' most enduring and emerging area of scholarship (e.g., Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999; Jo & Shim, 2005; Ledingham, 2003; Sha, 2017). Like previous studies, (e.g., Bruning, 2002; J. E. Grunig, 2006; J. E. Grunig & Huang, 2000; L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig & Dozier, 2002; Men & Jiang, 2016) this study recognizes the intangible organizational benefits resultant of the employee-organization relationship, a unique contribution of strategic communication and relationship management, and aims to advance the body of research by including the peer-to-peer relationship. Employees have been recognized as an organization's most authentic organizational ambassadors (Smudde, 2013), and the extent to which employees positively perceive their relational experience in terms of their ability to create influence, experience trust, commitment, and satisfaction impacts their internal and external communication behavior (Kim & Rhee, 2011; Wilcox, Cameron, Reber, & Shin, 2013). Although employees have the closest connection to the organization and are therefore perceived as trustworthy insiders, (Berger, 2008), according to Men and Jiang an "easily neglected yet critical stakeholder group for OPR building is the internal stakeholders, particularly the employees" (2016, p. 462). Previous studies have demonstrated employees who perceive positive organizational-relationships are more likely to identify with, and advocate for the organization (Men, 2014), consider the organization's problems their own, and share positive organizational news, even during troubled times (Kim & Rhee, 2011).

Among other strategic internal relationships, public relations as a member of an organization's dominant coalition has been widely discussed as a formal and impactful opportunity to influence organizational outcomes (Bowen, 2009; J. E. Grunig et al., 2002). Increasingly, research attention has included informal coalitions as an important focus for strategic public relations in organizations (Berger, 2005) as microboundary spanning, a term used to describe the public relations activity of bridging an organization and its environment to valuable information (Kim & Rhee, 2011) has evolved to include employees (Neill, 2014). Kim and Rhee (2011) explicate employee communication behaviors and specify through scouting and megaphoning, or gathering and sharing of information, employees voluntarily engage in microboundary spanning or "navigating and negotiating boundaries," (...) that can influence public relations outcomes (p. 249). Significantly, Kim and Rhee (2011) found a strong effect of relationship quality on microboundary spanning efforts. Specifically, employees will actively collect and disperse positive internal information when they feel high levels of organizational mutuality, trust, commitment, and satisfaction (Kim & Rhee, 2011). Similarly, the findings of the current study emphasize the value and significance of the informal relationship and power of the information within it. From a strategic perspective, this finding demonstrates the employee's ability to create sustainable influence, and the internal communication professional's opportunity to cultivate and maintain effective employee relationships to effectively tap into the grapevine.

This study emphasized the critical importance of leveraging internal relationships and gaining competitive advantage by connecting with employees as a wellspring of organizational information. Immersed in the innerworkings and day-to-day operations of the organization, employees are an organization's most exclusive group of insiders (Men & Jiang, 2016; Morsing, Schultz & Nielsen, 2008). Organizations whose leaders and communicators make efforts to develop informal relationships with employees may gain critical business insights from employees' unique knowledge, hands-on experience, and creative ideas that often include

practical strategies to overcome challenges (Uusi-Rauva & Nurkka, 2010). Neill (2014) likewise identified collaboration, information, and “connecting-the-dots,” (p. 600) as indicators of effective public relations and internal relationship building, which help organizations avoid costly mistakes and operate more efficiently.

Results of this study additionally suggest the consistency of peer communication lends strategic integrity to the grapevine as an internal communication channel, a finding that is consistent with previous internal communication studies which suggest important organizational information lies with the employee constituency (Berger, 2006; 2008).

This study found employees enjoy communicative relationships characterized by frequency, openness, respect, listening, and kindness. Overall, employees reported satisfaction with such relationships, regardless of the outcome of any one conversation. Given Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, and Peterson’s (2008) description of authentic leaders as those who act with kindness, morality, honesty, and accountability, and who communicate with frequency, objectivity, and openness, and consistent with Men and Jiang’s (2016), Men and Stacks’ (2014) and Shen and Kim’s (2012) finding that employees tend to develop higher quality organizational relationships and relational outcomes when they perceive their leaders to be authentic, this study suggests leaders may successfully leverage internal relationship building through the principles of authentic leadership.

### ***Theoretical and Practical Implications***

The findings of this study provide important theoretical and practical implications for strategic communication scholars and professionals. To the growing body of EOR literature (e.g., Dozier et al., 1995; J. E. Grunig et al., 2002; Kim & Rhee, 2011; Men & Jiang, 2016; Shen & Kim, 2012) this research theoretically contributes by appreciating both formal and informal communication in creating quality relational outcomes. Exploring factors such as communication timing, content, and how communication events and interactions take place, the findings empirically articulate the unique functions, inherent differences, and opportunities characteristic of formal and informal communication in establishing organizational life. Specifically, employees enjoy the availability, frequency, informality, and availability of peer communication relationships. This finding underscores the need for open, fair, and balanced, communication characteristic of peer relationships and authentic leadership (Walumbwa et al., 2010).

Toward understanding and capitalizing on the grapevine as an internal communication channel, employees shared their willingness to engage with the organization more frequently and informally, yet professionally. In terms of practical implications, this finding emphasizes the importance of frequent, informal interactions between leaders and employees to ensure positive relational outcomes. Leaders who regularly walk around the organization simply to say hello, may casually observe work processes outside their own specialty, and prompt employees to share their procedures, successes, even issues. Arranging informal coffee meetings with less-visible leaders may also create a natural communication environment where employees feel inclined to interface and provide input. Organizations who cannot support additional meetings and scheduling to increase visibility may consider hosting existing meetings in conference rooms throughout the organization or hosting *stand-up* meetings in common areas for non-confidential topics that can be discussed quickly and within smaller groups. Ultimately leaders’ brief, consistent, and casual efforts to interact with employees, even in the hallway, that include eye contact, and a small degree of personalization, such as, “I hope you’re enjoying this weather!”

are the genesis of informal, and thus strategic communication relationships between leaders and employees. Comprehensive communication training delivered to leaders throughout the organization may help leaders develop greater communication competency, and help the organization realize greater impact from communicative efforts. Finally, organizational leaders and strategic communication professionals at all levels are critical to ensuring clear, frequent, and consistent, messaging that is in alignment with the organization's values, and goals. These factors contribute to the effectiveness of an internal communication system, its formal and informal relationships and to producing positive EOR outcomes (Men & Stacks, 2014).

#### *Suggestions for Future Research & Current Study Limitations*

This study, like all is not without limitations. While the indications of this study were established qualitatively to provide rich descriptions of the experience associated with the phenomenon, a quantitative methodological approach would not only help universalize the findings but would further serve to indicate the predictability of the implications. It is suggested both as a potential limitation and suggestion for future research that the data collected from this study benefit from a more expansive sample population. The influence of the new media landscape, specific technologies, and their impact on the employee-organization relationship may add further prescience to the topic and field.

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