

# STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AUDITS. A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE FOR IMPROVING HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

**Maria Corina Barbaros<sup>1</sup>, Oleseă Țaranu<sup>2</sup>**

## **Abstract**

Internal diversity within organizations and the technology-determined restraints of multinational competition raise the need of developing organizational communication more than ever. Communication audits have been approached as an effective tool for improving organizations' business targets, but this article argues that communication audits go beyond that and fill the diverse communication needs of today's manpower.

Firstly, the article clarifies the nature of strategic communication and the boundaries of this domain. Then, the paper examines the nature of the term „strategic”. We argue that the results of a communication audit are the first step towards a strategic communication plan. In view of this perspective, the article's main research questions are: What is the link between strategic communication, communication audit and management performance? How do we measure and illustrate where the organization currently stands in terms of its communication performance?

The conclusions of this conceptual paper highlight the role of communication audits in providing useful information for the strategic communication process and HR management by clarifying the nature of qualitative data that are instrumental for strategic communication and how should a researcher report the results of a qualitative study in order to be effective for the strategic communication plan.

**Keywords:** strategic communication, communications audits, qualitative research, human resources management

## **Résumé**

La diversité interne des organisations et les contraintes technologiques de la concurrence multinationale entraînent un intérêt croissant pour le développement de la communication organisationnelle. Les audits de communication sont un outil efficace pour atteindre les objectifs commerciaux des organisations, mais cet article soutient que

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<sup>1</sup> Ph.D. Lecturer, Political Science, International Relations and European Studies Department, Faculty of Philosophy, Social and Political Sciences, „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iasi, Romania, corina.barbaros@uaic.ro

<sup>2</sup> Ph.D. Assistant Lecturer, Political Science, International Relations and European Studies Department, Faculty of Philosophy, Social and Political Sciences, „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iasi, Romania, oleseă.taranu@uaic.ro

les audits de communication peuvent être plus utiles que cela, car ils répondent aux besoins de communication actuels de la gestion des ressources humaines.

Pour commencer, l'article clarifie les objectifs de la communication stratégique et les limites de ce domaine. Subséquent, la nature du terme «stratégique» est discutée et on fait valoir que les résultats d'un audit de communication sont la première étape vers un plan de communication stratégique. Dans cette perspective, les principales questions de recherche de l'article sont: quel est le lien entre communication stratégique, audit de communication et gestion de la performance? Comment mesurer et rendre compte de la situation dans l'organisation en termes de performance de communication organisationnelle?

Les résultats de cette étude conceptuelle mettent en évidence le rôle que jouent les audits de communication dans la fourniture des informations pour le processus de communication stratégique et la gestion des ressources humaines en clarifiant les types de données qualitatives utiles pour la communication stratégique et la manière dont les résultats d'une étude qualitative doivent être rapportés. contribuer à l'efficacité d'un plan de communication stratégique.

**Mots clés:** communication stratégique, audit de communication, recherche qualitative, gestion des ressources humaines

### **Rezumat**

Diversitatea internă din cadrul organizațiilor și constrângerile tehnologice ale competiției din multinaționale determină o creștere a interesului pentru dezvoltarea comunicării organizaționale. Auditurile de comunicare sunt un instrument eficient pentru atingerea obiectivelor de business ale organizațiilor, însă acest articol argumentează faptul că auditurile de comunicare pot fi mai utile de atât, ele răspunzând nevoilor de comunicare actuale ale gestionării resurselor umane.

Pentru început, articolul clarifică obiectivele comunicării strategice și limitele acestui domeniu. Ulterior, este discutată natura termenului „strategic” și se argumentează faptul că rezultatele unui audit de comunicare reprezintă primul pas către un plan de comunicare strategică. În acord cu această perspectivă, principalele întrebări de cercetare ale articolului sunt: care este legătura dintre comunicarea strategică, auditul de comunicare și managementul performanței? cum măsurăm și raportăm situația în care se găsește organizația din punctul de vedere al performanței comunicării organizaționale?

Concluziile acestui studiu conceptual subliniază rolul pe care auditurile de comunicare îl au în furnizarea de informații pentru procesul de comunicare strategică și pentru managementul resurselor umane prin clarificarea tipurilor de date calitative care sunt utile pentru comunicarea strategică și felul în care ar trebui raportate rezultatele unui studiu calitativ pentru a contribui la eficacitatea unui plan de comunicare strategică.

**Cuvinte cheie:** comunicare strategică, audit comunicare, cercetare calitativă, managementul resurselor umane

### **Introduction and key terms**

Effectiveness and efficiency are the two major objectives for success in the business world. Management science and consultants have developed many instruments, theories, concepts and patterns that aim to improve the business

management, organizational culture and workflows. Whereas many corporate units have incorporated those tools into their daily routines and practices, communication managers often still endeavour to apply management tools to their field of action.

Having a management approach towards communication processes is a challenge for many reasons. It is difficult to have an efficient and effective organizational communication because of the quick deadlines and the key performance indicators' pressure that burden the possibility of any group to build relationships (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1998). In the past, individuals and organizations had more time to adapt to and to understand the changing environment of the workplace and business world (Anton et al., 2020, p. 29). The past two decades, however, have brought about increased needs and requests for the availability and fastness of goods and services because of the leverage of introducing technology in global business environment, through fostering time restraints that obstruct individuals from having the time needed to network and maintain relationships within an organization (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002).

*Strategic communication* is generally set out as 'the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission' (Mahoney & Qian, 2013). The word „strategic” means to communicate the best message, through the appropriate channels, and to measure against organizational-specific goals. Communication is strategic when it is methodically aligned with the organization's goal, mission, values, and is able to reinforce the strategic positioning and effectiveness of the organization.

As a consequence of the new business environment, a multitude of new tools, resources, and training programs have been developed for organizations to have a better understanding of the concept of strategic communication, and establish their own communication plans and strategies. But while organizations are learning how to promote and to implement a strategic communication perspective, questions remain about their actual follow through in practice and organizations' overall capacity to enable their strategies given their immediate priorities. In this regard, organizations need tools to acknowledge in detail their ongoing strategic communication achievements and opportunities, and to acquire a realistic sense of what it can be done in terms of improving their communication functions. Strategic communication audits are an instrument that can provide answers to this need.

Therefore, *a communications audit* is defined as „the process whereby the communications within an organisation are analysed by an internal or external consultant, with a view to increasing organisational efficiency” (Booth, 1989, p. 56). The communication audits offer useful answers for both the accountability and development purposes of the organizations. In order to have a strategic communication plan, communication audits are particularly needed and they are concerned primarily with communication effectiveness in terms of motivating employees towards organisational goals. The other major goal of communications

audits is oriented towards an evaluation of the external communication activities of the organization.

A *strategic communication audit* is an analytical evaluation of the organization's capability in terms of communication activities. It ascertains what is functioning well, what is not, and what might be improved. One can identify two dimensions of strategic communications audits: evaluative and formative. The evaluative perspective provides a „snapshot” of where an organization presently stands in terms of its communication capability or performance. The formative goal is to advise on the areas in which the organization can strengthen its performance. Audits are most often carried out by external communications experts, but can also be operated internally.

### **Literature review**

The current academic organizational communication research is focused on five notions: communication media, channels for organizational communication, networks analysis, organizational climate, and superior–subordinate communication (Putnam & Cheney, 1995). Organizational communication benefited from interest within European universities maybe even more than in the United States. Consequently, it is not surprising that organizational communication has lost favor to new domains, such as corporate communication and public relations.

The development of strategic communication as a unifying model for studying goal-oriented communications by organizations yields an important opportunity to update and refocus the study of organizational communications onto how organizations perform and promote themselves and engage with their audiences (Hargies & Tourish, 2009). Many authors argue in favor of ‘putting communication back into the study of communication by organizations’ (Bazeley, 2015). This refocus on communication is significant for two reasons: (a) disciplines such as management, advertising, and public relations, theoretically, without their communication science roots lose their conceptual and methodological background (Creswell, 2008); and (b) such a perspective emphasizes the interest towards fundamental processes at a time when some domains have lost sight of their primary focus (Hargie & Tourish, 2009). This is an intense debate within organizational communication field and various authors point out to advertising, for example, which have become more interested in marketing than in marketing communications. Furthermore, some argue that public relations scholars have chosen to focus on relationships and relational outcomes (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000) at the cost of studying the communication process through which relationships are established.

As a concept, communication has been widely defined, but two major classical communication patterns dominated the debates within professional and academic circles. Both are significant to strategic communication and communication audits. First is the so-called transmission model of communication,

which theorizes communication as the one-way transmission of information. The classical Shannon and Weaver's model is an extensively cited one-way model of communication pointing out the transmission of signals through a channel with a limited feedback capacity (Shannon & Weaver, 1949). Critics of this pattern state that such a perspective on communication is too sender-oriented and minimizes the important role of receivers in the communication process. A second model, the interactive one, argues that communication involves the production and exchange of meaning between the actors in a communication activity. At the bottom of this interactive approach are the symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) as well as Wiener's (1948) cybernetics theory, which presented how communication processes can be understood in terms of action and response. On the same lines, Bauer (1964) emphasized the role of audiences as dynamic processors of information, while other scholars drew a difference between synchronic and diachronic assessments about the concept of communication (Tyson, 2004). The interactive model is comparable to the ritual model of communication. In the latter model, communication is a symbolic process whereby, according to Carey (1989), reality is produced, preserved, restored, and changed. Bell et al. (2002) briefly described the differences between the transmission and ritual models of communication as follows:

“The transmission model asks questions about how we get information from here to there across distances. The ritual model asks questions about how we manage to get along together over time. The ritual model helps us explain how we build shared reality and culture in social groups, including in organizations, even as we account for constant change”. (Holtzhausen, 2002, p. 5)

To decide whether a particular topic is recommended to be approached by quantitative or qualitative method, Taris et al. (2010) consider that qualitative research is preferable to quantitative research in the following situations:

- When the central objective of research is the context;
- Whether the central objective of the research is based on the interpretation given by the subjects;
- Whether the depth and richness of the analysis are essential to the research objective;
- When research has an exploratory character.

A solution that gains more ground in research practice is the combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches, which Barker, Pitrang and Elliot (2002) call „methodological pluralism”. This can happen in several situations (Barker et al., 2002; Frost, 2011b; Krahn & Putnam, 2005):

- When you start studying a new, less well-known field with a qualitative pilot research, whose data may be about the concept's operationalization, the generation of hypotheses and the initiation of a subsequent quantitative research;
- Building quantitative research based on some qualitative, previously performed;

- Using a qualitative study to gain surprising or difficult to quantify quantitative results;
- Using quantitative research to elucidate qualitative results.

Quantitative and qualitative methods in communication research are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Both methods can be used in a single, step-by-step process to highlight a certain truth while preserving scientific rigor (Hanson et al., 2005; Lu et al., 1999). In either of these situations, we can predict that results will be more complete as the reality under investigation is approached from several perspectives. Some authors are not concerned with the distinction between research methods and data collection techniques, while for others this classification is important (Mertens, 2005). Even when dealing with the distinction between methods and techniques, we are faced with divergent views. Thus, for example, while some authors place the interview among qualitative research methods, others consider it a data collection technique. And the example of the interview is not singular. Some authors do not make a difference between data capture methods and techniques (Frost, 2011a). There are authors who approach qualitative research only from the perspective of the „narrative method”, which they consider to be the almost exclusive expression of qualitative research (Clinchy, 2003; Gergen & Davis, 2003; Josselson & Lieblich, 2003).

### Strategic Communication Audits: main steps and objectives

The synthesized theories and practices regarding communication audits identify five steps in conducting a communications audit within an organization: 1) identification of current strategic communication practices, 2) classification of levels of practice, 3) evaluation of current performance and capacity, 4) determination of areas for improvement, 5) improving the practice and replication of the process as needed. In practical terms, the communication expert in charge with the communications audit has to detect the essential strategic communication actions. These are organized into three clusters (: a) strategy, b) implementation, and c) support. Each of these clusters can be operationalized into strategic communication practices that should meet some quality criteria. Table 1 integrates the indicators pertaining to the *strategy cluster*.

**Table 1.** *Strategic Communication Audit Indicators for Strategy Cluster*

STRATEGY	
Strategic communication practices	Indicators for quality criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Define visions, goals and outcomes</li> <li>▪ Target audiences</li> <li>▪ Create messages</li> <li>▪ Create communication mechanisms</li> <li>▪ Analyse context and competition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ The communication vision is distinct but aligned with the organization's overall mission.</li> <li>✓ Messages are specific, clear, and credible, reflect audience values, and include a solution or course of action.</li> </ul>

<b>STRATEGY</b>	
<b>Strategic communication practices</b>	<b>Indicators for quality criteria</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Audiences are specifically described and targeted, and include key decision makers or individuals with influence on the issue.</li> <li>✓ Outlets (e.g. disseminated on different channels) are selected for their access and availability to target audiences.</li> <li>✓ Risks and contextual variables that can influence communication's success are taken into consideration and factored into planning.</li> <li>✓ Goals and outcomes are precisely defined and measurable, and help guide a defined plan for action.</li> </ul>

After identifying the indicators for the strategy cluster, it is important to have an instrument that measures and clarifies where the organization stands in terms of its performance. That instrument might be a „practice maturity scale”. This scale proposes a continuum of potential performance levels for any given practice. The most common scale is the one with five levels. Higher levels on the scale denote higher levels of organizational commitment to, integration of, and performance on the practice. Each practice may be categorized as 1) ad hoc, 2) planned, 3) institutionalized, 4) evaluated, and 5) optimized. The practice maturity scale might be used for both the strategy cluster and the implementation cluster. The indicators of the latter are synthesized in Table 2.

**Table 2.** *Strategic Communication Audit Indicators for Implementation Cluster*

<b>IMPLEMENTATION</b>	
<b>Strategic communication practices</b>	<b>Indicators for quality criteria</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Develop effective communication materials</li> <li>▪ Build beneficial partnerships</li> <li>▪ Train the communicators</li> <li>▪ Conduct extensive outreach</li> <li>▪ Monitor and evaluate the communication processes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Outreach and dissemination to audiences through multiple channels is regular and sustained.</li> <li>✓ Communication materials are developed in engaging, accessible, and diverse formats in order to ensure exposure and visibility.</li> <li>✓ Internal and external messengers are trained in key messages, understand the organization's vision and are consistent in their delivery.</li> <li>✓ There is a network of internal and external stakeholders who can help align with and advance the message.</li> </ul>

IMPLEMENTATION	
Strategic communication practices	Indicators for quality criteria
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Activities and outcomes are regularly monitored, evaluated and adjusted for purposes of accountability and continuous improvement.</li> </ul>

Once the evaluations are made, the next phase is to find areas in which the organization is able to progress. The assessment of where the organization should be must be based on an accounting of the organization’s genuine capabilities with respect to communication. For example, it may not be reasonable to expect that all funding that comes into an organization will have amounts reserved for communication. While an organization can make communication a priority and demand specific resources for it, the outcome also depends on what founders are disposed to support. The indicators of support cluster, that need to be ascertain, are integrated in Table 3.

**Table 3.** *Strategic Communication Audit Indicators for Support Cluster*

SUPPORT	
Strategic communication practices	Indicators for quality criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The leadership level supports communication processes</li> <li>▪ Earmark resources</li> <li>▪ Communications are integrated throughout the organization</li> <li>▪ Staff at all levels is involved in communications</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Dedicated resources for communications practice.</li> <li>✓ Management understands and supports communications (concrete support measures).</li> <li>✓ Most of the staff members have some knowledge and/or engagement in communications efforts.</li> <li>✓ Communications is seen as an integral part of every organizational project or strategy.</li> </ul>

The main goals for the communication audit are to collect data about communication practices and to use that data in order to make evaluations of organizational performance and capacity. The assessment should be structured in a matrix form. At this point, a common set of methods are needed to collect and integrate data for the assessments of communication practices. The most common ones are interviews, surveys, critical incident analysis (case studies), network analysis, participant observation. The next part of the article details these qualitative methods that can provide valuable insights for communication audits.



## **Qualitative Research Methods for Communication Audits**

Although quantitative data can also provide a useful insight into communication practices, this paper focuses on the data that can be provided by qualitative research. Auditors should decide from the very beginning what qualitative research methods are appropriate and what are the necessary techniques. It is important for a communication audit that research methodology is rigorous and well-founded, otherwise the audit results can be easily challenged and will not be considered valid.

The researcher/auditor might choose between the most common methods and techniques (observation, interview, focus group, document analysis, analysis of audio/video materials) which are described in the following pages.

### **The case study**

The case study is a method that is defined mainly by circumscribing research to a particular entity, which may be individual (an employee or manager, for example) or collective (a particular organization) (Taris et al., 2010). The variety of perspectives from which the subject of research can be approached makes the case study sometimes perceived as an underlying species of the biographical method, and sometimes as a particularization of the ethnographic method (Mertens, 2005). In general terms, everyone seems to agree that case study is a way of intensive research of a particular individual or collective entity, using various means: interview, questionnaire, observation, study of documents, etc. Of all the qualitative methods, the case study is the least circumscribed to a theoretical view or rules of approach. This is justified by the uniqueness of each case, whether it is a person or a collective entity. Some authors do not regard the case study as a method of study, but rather as a „study object”.

Shinebourne (2011) considers that the case study offers the opportunity to get a great deal of information about a particular person and how it responds or adapts to a specific situation. Sometimes, a case-specific approach may be part of a wider study involving a larger number of participants. The details of a single case can bring a lot of insight into a common feature for a wider category of people.

### **Participant Observation**

Participant observation is one of the most accessible ways and, therefore, the most used in qualitative research. The advantages of observation can be synthesized through several major features:

- allows a direct relationship with the reality investigated;
- allows contact with the natural environment in which the studied phenomenon manifests;
- allows real-time contact with the phenomenon studied.

Regardless of the research objectives and the nature of the phenomenon that is subject to observation, there are four major problems (questions) the auditor needs to solve to ensure that collected data are systematic and meaningful:

- a) What is the subject of the observation? It can be extremely varied: linguistic verbal behavior (content of verbalization) and extra-linguistic (formal aspects of verbalization, such as speed, clarity, intensity of interruption, etc.); non-verbal behavior (body and facial expression); dynamics and spatial relationships between observed individuals; professional activities (individual performance, cooperation, etc.)
- b) Where and when will the observation process take place? It is necessary to select a „temporal sample” which may be continuous or discontinuous. The choice of moments should be made in such a way as to allow, on the one hand, to capture significant moments in relation to the research objective and, on the other hand, to avoid the loss of relevant moments. When observing „standardized” situations that have certain predictability, temporal sampling is not a difficult issue, but there are also situations where fluctuation and unpredictability are occurring, which makes the observation dependent, to a certain extent, on hazard.
- c) How will the data be recorded? The observer is usually confronted with an avalanche of information and their registration for further analysis is crucial. Depending on the nature of the situation and the resources available, any recording methods, from written notes (verbal or graphic) to audio or video, can be used.
- d) How large is the auditor's inference in the reality subject to observation? This is one of the most delicate issues related to the observation method. From this point of view, Creswell (2008) describes five levels of observer involvement: an observation as a participant; participation as an observer; a more participant than an observer; a more observer than a participant; an observer in the first phase and then a participant in the second phase.

### **The interview**

The interview is, along with the participant observation method, one of the main ways to address reality in qualitative research. Unlike the forms used in quantitative research, the qualitative interview is often unstructured or poorly structured. This allows for the free exploration of the universe under investigation, without any constraints on the form, number or order of questions (Blanaru & Medeleanu, 2017). Moreover, if in the case of a quantitative interview the researcher is mainly interested in the „truth” of the answers; in the case of qualitative interviews the answers are relevant in themselves as an expression of the perceptions and experiences of the subjects. The researcher is interested not in „what the subject says”, but in the „springs and motives” behind his words. For this reason, the qualitative interview is often labeled as „in-depth” or „comprehensive” (Krahn & Putnam, 2005).

The advantages of this type of interview derive from (i) the possibility of exploring attitudes and emotional characteristics expressed in a natural form, specific to the investigated person; (ii) the structure and motivational dynamics of the person in relation to certain situations; (iii) the possibility to study phenomena or events whose complexity is not easily accessible by standardized methods; (iv) fostering proximity and trust between the researcher and the investigated person, which allows addressing sensitive topics.

### **The Focus Group**

The focus group has been initiated in the field of sociology since the first half of the 20th century, and is currently one of the methods commonly used in qualitative research but also in organizational intervention programs. The definition of the focus group oscillates between different alternatives: group interview (Hughes & DuMont, 1993), a carefully planned discussion group to obtain information on a subject proposed by the researcher (Smithson, 2008); an informal discussion group among selected persons on a particular topic.

The focus group method has a number of advantages, of which the most important are:

- ✓ The relative ease of organization and the flexibility of format and questions that allow for adaptation to a rather large variety of research issues.
- ✓ Can be used even with any type of participants.
- ✓ The recording of discussions allows the analysis of the contributions of each participant.
- ✓ Provides a lot of information due to various interactions during sessions.
- ✓ It favors the spontaneity of the participants, as well as the opportunity for each of them to manifest themselves within the limits of their availability or competence in relation to a certain aspect discussed.
- ✓ Stimulates the development of interactions and interpersonal relationships.

### **Documents' Analysis**

Qualitative research can find an important source of information in a variety of public documents (newspapers, magazines, official records, archive documents, etc.) or private (memos, personal journals, notes, communication materials etc.). The most important advantage of documentary sources is that they present situations and events as they were recorded in the author's/organizational language and without being affected by researcher-induced guidelines. Among the disadvantages is the difficulty of locating and accessing them, especially the personal or classified ones; the fact that they can often be inaccurate or incomplete.

## Analysis of audio / video materials

With the emergence and proliferation of audio-visual technology, a large amount of public or personal information has begun to be stored in audio or video formats. Moreover, it is to be expected that this trend will increase more and more in the coming decades. As a result, attracting these sources for qualitative research can become extremely useful. We include audio sources (audio tapes, computerized files) or visual (videos, photos, sketches) in this category. One of the ways to use images, for example, is to be shown to study participants as a support for memories or comments.

The advantage of audio information is similar to documentary. As far as visual information is concerned, they excel through concrete. As for disadvantages, we must mention the difficulty of transcribing, in the case of audio sources, and interpretation problems for visuals. When using photos, research findings may be affected by the way they are selected when only a fraction of a large number is selected.

## Discussion

Each stage of the communication audit involves the collection and systematization of certain data and, subsequently, their interpretation. This is why communications audit experts should attach great importance to research methodologies. In the case of communication audits, „methodological pluralism” can be used, but the prospect of qualitative queries is more appropriate for the type of data required in a communication audit.

The table below summarizes the type of information provided by qualitative and quantitative research.

**Table 4.** *Comparative synthesis of qualitative and quantitative methods*

<b>Quantitative Research</b>	<b>Qualitative Research</b>
Purpose: classification, quantification, statistical modeling, in order to explain a certain reality.	Purpose: Full and detailed description of a certain reality.
Data are presented in numerical-quantitative form.	The data is in the form of words, images or ideas.
It is focused on testing hypotheses that were issued prior to data collection.	It is primarily oriented towards descriptive objectives and it generates hypotheses based on data.
It operates with statistical analyses, which exclude or limit the subjectivity of the researcher	It operates with subjective interpretations
Quantitative data are „poorer” but more accurate, reason for which are suitable to undergo test procedures.	Qualitative data are richer but less accurate, more difficult to generalize

**Quantitative Research**

The researcher uses different tools and techniques for data collection.

**Qualitative Research**

The researcher himself is the data collection tool.

The methodological mix will be applied to three processes that may be indicative of the extent to which there are communication difficulties in the organization. Firstly, the communication expert must consider the *inclusiveness* that encompasses the extent to which all the employees take part in the communication network. It allows the auditor to see whether certain networks function organization-wide, or whether certain (groups of) employees are excluded. The second concern of the auditors is the *density* which characterizes the extent to which network participants are connected with each other. It is designed by dividing the total number of relations in the network by the total number of the possible ties. It gives a hint of the number of communication lines in the network and the degree of participation in the network by all the employees. The third indicator relevant for the auditors is *centralization* that includes the extent to which the network members are spread. When a network is extremely centralized, there are only few people who have many relationships with each other. This may be significant, as some networks (for instance when decision-making is involved) might profit from a more decentralized network structure, and a high level of centrality can thus contribute to the employees' discontent with decision-making processes in the organization (Hargie & Tourish, 2009).

In the previous subsection, the main qualitative research methods and techniques were described. The option for one or another research method is determined by the type of data needed to find answers to the 5 steps of the communication audit and the three clusters of indicators (Table 1, 2 and 3). However, some considerations are needed about the incidence of research techniques in the practice of communication audits. Interviews, most likely the common audit method, allow the auditors to better understand communication-related work processes. Interviews provide a productive qualitative sense of how activities are performed and how the organization values the communications. They can also be conducted with the organization's external stakeholders or target audiences. Surveys or questionnaires are second most common audit technique. They can be managed cheaply to all organization's members within a short timeframe, and they allow for a standardization and comparison of answers.

Then we have critical incident analysis – that is the case study, when employees are asked to describe, through an interview or questionnaire, specific effective and ineffective experiences regarding the communication. The purpose is to collect examples of experiences that staff find memorable in order to „see” how communications practices are performed within situational contexts.

Network analysis has extended in recent years as a method for examining information stream, or the channels and relationships through which information is transmitted. It asks individuals who they communicate to and for what purpose. It

reveals an organization's communication structure, which may be very different from its organizational structure. It also reveals where obstacles are occurring and possible opportunities that are presently unexploited.

## **Conclusion**

As argued in this paper, strategic communication audits are, essentially, an evaluation tool. This article advocates that a new pattern for analyzing organizational communications is developing that focuses on the purposeful communication activities by organizational leaders and members to promote the organization's vision. These activities can involve the varied planned actions in which an organization participates in order to communicate with members and they might cross traditional communication disciplines. The two keywords that include the term strategic communication are mostly relevant. First, these actions are strategic, not accidental or unplanned communications - even though unintended effects of communications can unfavorably impact the capability of an organization to accomplish its strategic aims. It is essentially that strategic must not be defined narrowly. Instead, strategic is a vast, multidimensional concept that requires to be scrutinized broadly. Second, the concept of strategic communication stresses the fact that communication should be the central interest of communication learning. The significance of such a perspective is readily apparent if communication is defined as the constitutive activity of management. The communication managers/researchers/auditors have an important chance to revitalize their interest in analyzing and understanding what organizations do in fact to generate and exchange meaning with others. This encompasses the circumstances in which communication processes take place and the communication outcomes.

Qualitative research is an extremely complex field, as any scientific field, which experiences a theoretical and methodological expansion but it also requires a lot of theoretical and methodological rigor, and the approach to this field undoubtedly involves a special training and a thorough specialization.

If in the case of quantitative data, the analysis and interpretation of data uses a variety of statistical procedures (Manolache & Netedu, 2017), in the case of qualitative data, the situation is completely different. Essentially, qualitative data analysis is a process of identifying meanings and interpreting different sources of information. In theory, the approach can be based on a continuum that goes from a pure holistic approach (the intuitive and reflexive interpretation of the collected material as a whole) to the detailed analysis of the collected information, broken down into significant, codified and structured elements, in accordance with a theoretical model, in category classes or relational structures (Creswell, 2008; Mertens, 2005).

The communications audits are still a fairly new concept. This paper argues that communication audits provide an excellent making sense mechanism in organizations, yet they are not used nearly often enough. Although communication audits are conducted from time to time to help impart knowledge, implement

widespread change, and motivate teams, they are still not part of the organizational communication mainstream priorities. Perhaps the area of communication audits is an excellent opportunity for future growth.

The main aim of a strategic communication audit should be more than the documentation of areas or practices that need to be enhanced. At the same time, the audit should highlight practices that are current organizational assets and generate detailed recommendations for how actual communication practice can be improved. To raise the chances that audit outcomes will be used and actual practice improved as an effect, the audit should determine through data how communication problems are triggering other problems in the present (not just to speculate about their future impact). Data need to be linked to concrete actions. The communication audit needs to make clear the organizational advantages of adopting those activities, as well as the weaknesses they are designed to address. Also, the communication audit report should prioritize recommendations so organizations are not immobilized by the prospect of implementing them.

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