

The Restructuring Of Human Resource Management (HRM) Through The “Intranet” As Part Of ICT: A Case Study On Internal Communication In Cameroonian Banks

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ABSTRACT

The objective of the present paper is to study the impact of the Intranet on internal communication in organizations, with specific reference to Cameroonian Banks. The study highlights the changes brought about by the "Intranet" in internal communication in the sample banks. The theoretical study focuses on concepts and previous studies done by other researchers on the stakes of Intranet in communication. The empirical study follows a methodology that presents sample cases and analysis. Using interviews and questionnaires, the researchers collected facts and analyzed them. The results of the study revealed that the Intranet makes internal communication more transparent, increases its speed and makes administrative management procedure lighter on the one hand, but on the other hand, despite the many advantages of the Intranet, traditional means of communication are not so obsolete and they are still being widely used as a means of communication in organizations.

Keywords: Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Intranet, Human Resources Management, Internal communication, Cameroonian Banks

INTRODUCTION

Certain companies die under competitive pressure not because their business is not profitable, but because their internal organization is handicapped by a poor human-resource management. The present paper is mainly interested in internal communication since it is impossible to manage people without communication. In many companies, internal communication is obstructed by slowness, disinformation and rumors.

To the question : *"In what manner is the enterprise dysfunctioning, and what do you think are the causes for the dysfunctioning?"* Augendre (1997) had an answer: *"Lack of communication brings in much trouble and is a prominent cause for the dysfunctioning of the organization"*¹. Since information is very important for the management, this answer shows the importance of the circulation of quality information in a company.

With Intranet, IC has improved and many researchers have worked on the impact (effects) of ICT on HRM in general and on internal communication in particular.

According to Matmati (2001), Intranet brings together all the structures of a company, putting aside some discontinuities due to hierarchy. This idea goes with the idea of Goncalves (2000), who thought that intranet brings in more direct communication than ever, reducing intermediaries and structural controls.

Other studies made by Laval, Guilloux and Kalika (2001) had the same conclusion. For instance, Laval thought that Intranet makes people think again about HRM and makes the organization of companies more transparent. However, all the afore- mentioned studies were made in Europe. In the African context in general, and that of Cameroon in particular, it is not evident that Intranet can ameliorate HRM. Cultural diversity can bring in many problems as far as transparency is concerned in a company. In the Cameroonian context, the researchers raised the following questions:

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¹ From AGADAME's DEA Dissertation (2002), University of Abomey - Calavi, Benin.

- ❖ Can the Intranet abolish useless waste of time in communication or can it rather bring in slowness in internal communication ?
- ❖ Does Intranet make internal communication more transparent or obscure ?
- ❖ What is the intranet's influence on the administrative procedure ?
- ❖ What is the Intranet's importance in internal communication in companies ?

To answer these questions, the researchers will present how Cameroonian banks work (the context), some concepts, the methodology and the interpretation of the results.

THE CONTEXT

Banking activity in Cameroon is characterized by a competitive environment (there are about 9 secondary banks in competition). As in many other enterprises, the new ICT is mostly used in banking.

CONCEPTS

Under this title, the researchers explain the concepts used in this research.

1) Communication : External communication includes external partners (clients, suppliers, state institutions, etc.). Internal communication in this study concerns internal agents in a company.

Communication can be of various types, and it focuses on certain objectives, follows given and precise criteria, has some supports and may also face obstacles.

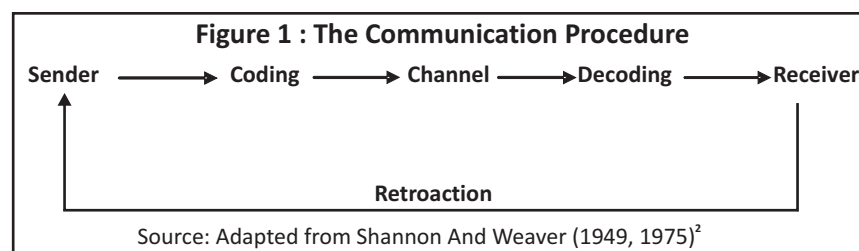
❖ **Definition :** In "Petit Larousse" dictionary, the word "communication" is defined as the action of communicating something - a message. It is also the transmission of an information in a group.

In the present study, the researchers define the term "communication" following Bonnet and Degryse's diagram. They start with the definition of "Information" to highlight the significance of the word "Communication". Information has a unique way, even if it can take many ways: Information only spreads.

It can be:

- ❖ Ascending (base-hierarchy)
- ❖ Descending (hierarchy-base)
- ❖ Lateral (among peers)
- ❖ Diagonal

Information concerns facts - present, future and passed events. It can explain and rectify. Communication (itself) follows a "to and fro" way. It implies exchange either between two persons or among many people. It's a dynamic process among people who give or receive information. It is, therefore, interactive and, in any case, there will be a sender and a receiver as shown in the Figure 1 below :



❖ **Nature of Communication :** From its nature, communication can be either formal or informal:

- ❖ It is formal when the information circulating is in accordance with the established structure. e.g. : A written report.
 - ❖ It is informal when it is spontaneous, not well structured and not official. It may, therefore, create rumors.
- e.g. : exchanges (communication) among employees.

² Adapted from Shannon And Weaver (1949, 1975), in « *La théorie mathématique de la communication* », Paris, CEPL Retz .

❖ Communication can also be either internal or external. Internal communication can contribute to the growth of productivity of the enterprise and its efficiency. External communication integrates the company in its environment.

❖ **The Concept of The Intranet** : To understand this concept, the researchers define the concept and explain how it functions.

❖ **Definition** : Intranet is an application that concerns exchanges of computerized information in all the computers of the enterprise (Peyrat-Guillard; Samier, 2001). According to Coulon (1999), Intranet is a private internal channel in an organization, based on internet technology. When it becomes extended (on specific agreement) to clients, suppliers or employees, it becomes the "Extranet".

FUNCTIONALITIES OF THE INTRANET

The different functionalities that can be developed nowadays on the intranet are given in the Table 1.

Table 1: Developable Functionalities On The Intranet	
Functionalities of intranet	Example
Information : Consultation of information online	HTML, downloadable files
Collaboration : interactive group work	Individual consultation of documents
Communication	Electronic message
Coordination	Follow up on projects
Automatization	Workflow
Source: Deltour; Sargis Roussel; Tixier, (2001), Adapted From Courbon And Tajan (1999).	

THE LINK BETWEEN INTRANET AND COMMUNICATION: FORMAL RESEARCH

Matmati (2001) said that intranet facilitates and increases the exchange of information among collaborators and the enterprise. It is a powerful communication tool, a tool that permits the extension of information, enables group work and develops knowledge exchange etc.

According to Laval, Guilloux, Kalika (2001), intranet is very useful because it makes the information pertinent. It not only helps to inform the employees about information regarding the organization, but it is also useful to automatize some aspects of the management. All employees have access to the intranet. It brings conviviality, proximity and cohesion in a group with many occupations. It develops competencies and mobility of workers.

Goncalve's research (2000) showed the importance of gathering information concerning the structure and organization of an enterprise at the same place to facilitate its access to many people. Intranet permits a large diffusion of information within a short time, which ameliorates the efficiency of the information. It makes the management's procedure more direct without intermediaries or controls. He quoted Bitouzet et al. and said that by using the intranet, workers of different services can work together without passing through their hierarchy and work becomes more efficient.

METHODOLOGY: SAMPLING, COLLECTION OF DATA AND ANALYSIS

The objective of the present paper is to understand the modifications that occurred in the internal communication processes of Cameroonian Banks with the use of intranet. To reach this objective, the researchers studied many cases. In this section, the researchers expose the sampling procedure, the techniques of data collection and analysis.

❖ **Sample Case: Selection Procedure, Justification And Number Of People Interviewed** : The selection of the sample was done at two levels: the choice of the banks and the population of each selected bank.

First of all, the researchers selected three banks, two of which are subsidiaries of French groups and the third one is the subsidiary of an American structure. The main criterion was the longevity of the intranet. In fact, the intranet must have been used in the structure for a period of at least 3 years. This was done to eliminate structures that have used the

intranet for a short period.

Secondly, at the level of each selected bank, the researchers' attention was focused mainly on the “mother population” of the structure, i.e. , the internal actors who used the intranet as a tool, salaried employees as defined by Mintzberg (1986, p. 64), Pichault and Nizet (2001).

So, in a given bank, the researchers' considered the members of the human resource direction, those of the ICT direction, the staff and employees of the operational centre. The main goal of this combination was to have representatives of all categories of actors following Mintzberg's organizational structure.

The sample constituted of 166 persons, i.e. 150 employees and 16 executives and directors. They were given the questionnaire and only 137 answered it completely (from all the 3 banks³). The researchers also conducted 16 interviews. The Table 2 illustrates the sample:

Table 2: Structure of The Research Sample				
Banks \ Data Collecting Techniques	ALPHA	BETA	GAMMA	TOTAL
Interviews	7	4	5	16
Questionnaires	34	42	45	121
Total	41	46	50	137
Source: Authors' Research				

The selection at the level of the Directors and Executive Staff was not ambiguous since they were not too many. At the level of employees, the researchers chose those respondents who had worked in the structures before the intranet was brought in. Only this category could better explain the changes.

❖ **Techniques of Data Collection** : The data collection was based on interviews and questionnaires. For all the 3 cases, the researchers interviewed the General Managers and Executives of the selected banks. The researchers also personally met the employees who answered the questionnaires.

❖ **Interviews** : The researchers interviewed the General Managers, HR managers, ICT staff and other Executive staff. They asked them open questions on various themes. The researchers finally had 16 interviews from the 3 banks (7 from the first, 4 from the second and 5 from the third).

More precisely, in the “Alpha Bank”, the researchers interviewed the General Manager, the Manager of Administrative and Financial matters, the ICT Manager, the Chief of Service of Exploitation, the Chief of Service of Staff and Means, the Chief of Service of Operations and the Management Controller.

In the “Beta Bank”, the General Manager, the Vice GM, the Manager of HR and the ICT Executives were interviewed. In the “Gamma Bank”, the researchers interviewed the General Manager, the Vice GM, the Manager of HR, the Director of Finance and Accounting, and the ICT Executives.

The researchers used a tape recorder to gather and record the information. They also took down some important details. At the beginning of each interview, the objectives of the research were clearly explained to the respondents. The interviews lasted for a time period of 1 hour and 30 minutes.

❖ **Questionnaires** : In human resource management, questionnaires are the main and the most commonly used investigation technique (Igalens and Roussel, 1998). The questionnaire that was used for the present study follows the 7 steps (Likert type) and the questions were Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs).

This concerns Likert's ladder in 7 points (steps):

1. I don't agree at all ;
2. I don't agree somehow ;
3. I don't agree ;
4. I neither agree nor disagree ;

³ To protect the identity of the banks, the researchers named them respectively as ALPHA Bank, BETA Bank and GAMMA Bank .

5. I agree ;
6. I agree somehow ;
7. I completely agree

The researchers administered a total of 150 questionnaires: 45 for “Alpha Bank”, 50 for “Beta Bank” and 55 for “Gamma Bank”. This was done orally and in person since the three structures were not geographically too far from each other.

❖ **Method of Treatment Of The Data :** The researchers sent out 150 questionnaires to the 3 banks. Only 121 were answered completely, that's 81 %. The Facts were treated in two steps :

❖ The first step focused on the treatment of interviews. The researchers started with the transcription of the interviews, and this enabled them to have a hard copy of the work. The real treatment consisted of an interpretation of the interviews (verbatim), knowing that each question had an objective. All information put together confirmed the impact of intranet on internal communication.

❖ The second step consisted of going through the questionnaire. Once the opinions of the respondents were gathered, the researchers could calculate the average of each proposition of each agreement. This is when they could say what the users thought about the intranet and classify the means of communication in order of priority.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATIONS

The researchers intention in this study was to understand the changes introduced in internal communication by the use of the intranet. At the end of the investigations, it was inferred that intranet makes the information fluent, transparent and rapid. It makes administrative procedure lighter.

❖ **Transparency Of The Information (With Intranet) :** The respondents were of the opinion that with the intranet, information is available to everyone. The Chief of Service of Personnel of “Alpha Bank” said: *“With intranet, it is possible to circulate information in the whole company within a short time.”*

This statement was reinforced by the Administrative and Financial Manager, who thought that *“with intranet, we have all information online. It brings about the real democratization of information. Moreover, information cannot be deformed in its content. It remains intact.”* That's why the Financial Executive added: *“Earlier, we had visibility problems regarding the population of our structure. Nowadays, intranet has permitted us to take a direct look at what happens in our agencies. They don't act as autonomous entities anymore.”*

All the employees in the enterprise had access to operational information kept in their colleague's computer. Strategic information could be only accessed by Managers and Executives. The second General Director of the “Beta Bank” said: *“The strategic information that we have are coded. I can, for instance, see what the cashiers do, but they can't have access to what I do. Let's understand ourselves: this concerns information that could pass, even if there was no intranet.”*

The questionnaires filled by the various respondents showed the same transparency of information with the use of intranet. For instance, on the Likert scale, the answer to the proposition *“information produced by the intranet is available”* was mainly *“I agree”*. To the proposition, *“The information produced by intranet is reliable”*, the most chosen answers were *“I somehow agree”*.

❖ **The Speed Of Communication Through The Intranet :** The adoption of intranet contributed to accelerate the speed of internal communication. In addition to the ordinal scale and the Likert ladder (scale) used to measure its variability, supplementary facts came from interviews. With the ordinal scale, the researchers classified the means of communication in terms of efficiency and time economy. This can be found in the following Table 3 .

From 121 respondents who answered the question, the numbers found in the Table 3 indicate the number of persons who classified the given means of communication.

Intranet occupied the 2nd rank after telephone. This means that with a telephone, we gain much time. In reality, telephone is used, but for verbal communication. Administration relies on written communication, and that's why the intranet is more efficient. Added to the gain of time, there is the diminution of hierarchical interactions.

Table 3 : Classification of The Means Of Communication In The 3 Banks (In Terms Of Efficiency And Time Economy)						
Means of com. \ Position	Telephone	Intranet	Hierarchy track	Liaison agent	Service notices	Meetings
1st	91	-	-	-	-	-
2nd	-	91	-	-	-	-
3rd	-	-	79	-	-	-
4th	-	-	-	79	-	-
5th	-	-	-	-	79	-
6th	-	-	-	-	-	79
Source: Primary Data						

The Table 3 was completed by interview sequences to illustrate the increase in velocity of communication through the intranet. The responding people were asked to give their opinion on the following statement: *"The Intranet sensibly reduces the time of communication."* Many of them answered *"I definitely agree"*. Truly speaking, with the intranet, there is no more wastage of time.

❖ **Making Administrative Procedure Lighter** : *"The Intranet makes administrative procedure lighter."* Many people gave a positive opinion for this statement.

The General Manager of "Beta Bank" stressed on the fact that the intranet is, first of all, an important tool for human-resource management. He said: *"With the intranet, we have all sorts of requests, mainly those oriented on our population management, either in their number or from the leaves obtained, in short, information or explanation on all staff movements, all entries, contacts."*

The HR Manager thought the same when he said: *"To treat certain files either from the hierarchy or from elsewhere, it is possible to remain here and make corrections or modifications. The Intranet permits us to act directly. For example, it can enable us to give proofs if, at a given moment, some doubt could arise on certain situations."*

❖ **The Place Of The Intranet In Communication** : To know what position the intranet occupies in internal communication, the investigations produced the following results, which are presented in the Table 4.

Table 4 : Frequency Of Using The Means Of Communication In The 3 Sample Banks			
Communication	Ascending Communication	Descending Communication	Lateral Communication
Means	Number of Answers	Number Of Answers	Number Of Answers
Service notices	-	38	-
Telephone	121	121	121
Liaison agent	79	79	50
Meetings	-	24	-
Intranet	86	86	86
Hierarchy track	57	57	-
Source: Data Analysis			

The numbers in the Table 4 indicate how often the means of communication are used, depending on the direction of the communication.

❖ In upward communication, information goes from the employees to the employees through the hierarchy of the company. Here, there are neither notices nor meetings, since employees can't initiate them. In revanche, other means of communication (telephone, liaison agent and intranet) were chosen because they were spontaneously used to send information to the "top".

❖ In downward communication, information goes the opposite way: from the higher hierarchy to the employees. In this case, all means of communication can be used to transmit messages. In lateral communication, the information circulates among the agents of the hierarchy. So, intranet, telephone and liaison agents are used and service notices and meetings become less current.

❖ It becomes obvious that there was intervention in all types of communications (upward, downward and lateral communications). It reinforces traditional communication, which is still in use (telephone, notices, etc.). The Likert scale shows the same thing. The coexistence of all these means of communication brings real communicative synergies in enterprises.

CONCLUSION

Whatever is the structure of an enterprise, its general functioning depends on the cohesion of the group, the cohesion of workers. To maintain this cohesion, efficient communication is of paramount importance. ICT becomes necessary in all the sectors of an enterprise. Intranet becomes very important in Human Resource Management through an easy internal communication.

For the present study, the researchers did their research in three Cameroonian banks. They defined certain concepts and showed the links between the intranet and internal communication. They then explained their methodology and exposed the sample case study. Through interviews and questionnaires, they made interpretations and calculations on the various answers using Likert's methodology. The researchers concluded that intranet increases transparency in information, accelerates its circulation, makes administrative management lighter. However, this doesn't make traditional means of communication obsolete: telephone, notices, meetings are still used in our enterprises. However, it can be said that there are some limitations, especially at the level of methodology as Igalens and Roussel (1998) said that interviews can be insufficient in such a study if the researchers (as HRM is concerned) have not been well trained in this methodology. Therefore, some information might have escaped the researchers. Moreover, the answers in an interview depend on the mood of the respondents. Despite this insufficiency, the researchers think that their research remains scientific and that the conclusions can open new fields of study on the impact of intranet on Human Resource Management in general.

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ANNEXURE

The three tables included in the Annexure explain the structure of the questionnaire used during the survey. The questionnaire was in the form of Tables in order to reduce the volume of the questionnaire.

Table 1: The Place Of Intranet As Compared To Other Means Of Internal Communication					
Information flow	Between employees	From employees to executives	From employees to the higher hierarchy	From executives to employees	From the higher hierarchy to employees
Service notices					
Telephone					
Liaison agent					
Meeting					
Intranet					
Hierarchy track					
Other means					
Source: Authors' Research					

Table 2: The Speed Of Communication With Intranet (Classification Of The Means Of Internal Communication In Decreasing Order Of Speed)	
Position	Means of communication
1st	
2nd	
3rd	
4th	
5th	
6th	
7th	
Source: Authors' Research	

Table 3: Organization of The Work (Smoothness Of The Administrative Procedure, Transparency In Information)							
Variables	Scale						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Source: Authors' Research							