

Interview with Prof. dr. Ulrike Buchholz: Perspectives on the Use of the System's Newspapers and of the Intranet as Internal Communication Instruments in Big and Medium-Sized Companies in Germany

Georgia Vitca: *First, I would like to ask you to give me some details about the publishing of the first system's newspaper in Germany.*

Prof. Dr. Ulrike Buchholz: The first publications which offered information about the company and its employees cannot be called system's newspapers since they were many times individual pages, not bound, which offered pieces of advice to the employees on family life and on their health. In the specialized literature these publications are called „patriarchal forms of the system's newspaper”, as the owner of the company tried to exert a certain influence on the private life of the employees through their publication. This is the reason why the first forms of the system's newspaper were the subject of strong criticisms and accusations referring to the fact that they would be just some instruments of manipulation not serving at all to inform and to motivate the employees.

In Germany, the first attempts of conceiving some system's newspapers come from the years 1879 and 1883 when 2 publications appeared in some associations and which had as their purpose the contribution to the wellbeing of the employees. The first system's newspaper in the proper meaning of the word appeared in 1888 under the name of *Schlierbacher Fabrikbote (The messenger of the Schlierbacher factory)* and was used as a communication instrument in the factory. Its content was reduced to news about the factory, instructions of the owner, anniversaries, commemorations and obituaries. Until 1910 the number of system's newspapers printed within German companies is estimated at 180.

Georgia Vitca: *What themes were the first publications of this kind concentrated on?*

Prof. Dr. Ulrike Buchholz: As it results from the answer to the previous question, the system's newspaper in its initial form contained very few information referring to the company itself. Its purpose was to offer to the employees information as clear as possible about the expectations of the owner. At the end of the 18th century and the

beginning of the 19th century we have to deal with a strong increase of the number of employees in companies, and also an increasing specialization of the work processes. The need to make a bond between the leadership and the employees of the company was translated through the appearance of the first system's newspapers, having as an initial role exactly the presentation of the demands of the leadership in a form that was as clear as possible.

Georgia Vitca: *How did the content and the themes of the system's newspapers change with time in Germany?*

Prof. Dr. Ulrike Buchholz: An important moment in the evolution of this communication instrument was the appearance of some internal communication management models in the 90's which were aimed at reaching two important purposes: the optimization of the work processes which allowed the company to manufacture as fast and as efficient as possible and with low costs the products and services and secondly, the increase of the decision power of the employee and an increasingly smaller dependence of the latter upon the instructions coming from the leadership. As a consequence, the system's newspaper became a strategic communication instrument oriented towards the offering of information about the performance of the company and its structure and towards the building of an organizational culture which connects the employee to the company. The staff members become conscious of the importance of their position inside the company, but they also received information referring to the activity of other employees and departments, which helped them have a global vision of the company.

The content of the system's newspapers has evolved towards the discussion of the following themes: the motivation of the employees, the increase of the performance, the politics of leadership, the vision and the goals of the organization, corporate social responsibility, and the image of the company and of the employee.

Georgia Vitca: *How widespread is the system's newspaper as an internal communication instrument in the German companies?*

Prof. Dr. Ulrike Buchholz: Unfortunately, I cannot make any reference to an exact statistics on the number of such publications existent in Germany, because there isn't any institution or association responsible with their archiving or control. Some experts consider that there would be 9,000 system's newspapers and that approximately 90% of the companies which have over 100 employees publish a system's newspaper. But I can certainly say that it is the most widespread instrument used for internal communication in German companies, and the previsions show that their number is increasing.

Georgia Vitca: *In the last few years, the system's newspaper got a competitor in what the internal communication management is concerned, and that is the intranet. When did the first intranet networks appear and to what purpose were they initially used?*

Prof. Dr. Ulrike Buchholz: The intranet in its initial form could be developed only in the moment when technical conditions allowed this to happen, specifically,

towards the end of the 80's and the beginning of the 90's. At the beginning, the intranet was applied in a very small scale by IT departments in companies to make easier the transmission of information between the employees of the department. But as the leaderships of the companies became more and more interested in the application of new management models and they gave a big importance to internal communication, the idea of applying the intranet at a larger scale has spread. Then came "a fight" between the communication and IT departments, a fight which was based on the decision regarding which of the departments should be in charged with the transmission of the information through this new medium. It took approximately 10 years until the intranet got the informational and technical structure that we find today in companies. The intranet was initially conceived as a communication programme between the employees of a company, but with time this medium began to serve more and more the vertical and horizontal communication management, being oriented mostly towards offering information about the changing processes that happen inside the companies.

Georgia Vitca: *Do you consider that the intranet directs the communication flow inside a company better than the system's newspaper?*

Prof. Dr. Ulrike Buchholz: No, not at all. I would not consider the two instruments on opposite positions, in the sense of choosing just one of these. I believe that in the ideal case the intranet and the system's newspaper are used in symbiosis by the internal communication department, because each medium has its strong and weak points and can complete each other. Still, in what the consistency and the volume of the transmitted information is concerned, the system's newspaper holds the supremacy. But on the other hand, the intranet supports more powerfully the communication flow on the horizontal, between the employees, which the system's newspaper succeeds in doing just with difficulty, as it does not make a direct dialogue any easier.

Georgia Vitca: *Can factors such as the company's structure or profile have a role in the use of the intranet or of the system's newspaper with the purpose of internal communication management?*

Prof. Dr. Ulrike Buchholz: Of course. But in what the intranet structure is concerned, the profile or the size of the company does not influence in a very large measure its implementation as the intranet is mainly used as a work instrument and it can be successfully used also in companies of small sizes, with a simple structure. But these factors gain a great importance in the case of the system's newspaper, whose content and size are strictly connected to the number of employees and to the branches of the company. In the case of the multinational companies the system's newspaper practically transforms into a system's magazine, which can be edited in more languages and which contains information about all the international branches of the company. The system's newspaper must correspond to and represent the organizational culture.

Georgia Vitca: *What advantages and disadvantages do the two instruments of internal communication present?*

Prof. Dr. Ulrike Buchholz: If we consider the speed of transmission of the information and the facilitation of an open dialogue between the employees, the intranet has in these aspects an advantage on the system's newspaper. On the other hand, if we refer to the accessibility and the coverage of a large spectrum of themes, the system's newspaper fulfils better these functions without any doubts. The intranet is destined mostly to the horizontal communication; meanwhile the system's newspaper directs both the horizontal as well as the vertical communication. From the perspective of the company's leadership, the system's newspaper is essential in building the credibility and a positive image of the company in the view of the employees.

Georgia Vitca: *I know you are a jury member for the national competition "inkom. Grand Prix" organized annually by the German Society for Public Relations gives awards to the best system's newspapers in the German companies. Can you tell me a few words about this competition and about the winners?*

Prof. Dr. Ulrike Buchholz: The competition exists since 1995, when German companies started to make available the publications which serve as instruments of internal communication. The publications are evaluated based on criteria such as the orientation towards the employees, layout and content, in the sense of the journalistic quality of the articles. Any company or organization can participate, as long as they publish regularly a system's newspaper addressed to its employees. Amongst the last year winner there are the publication "BoschZünder", belonging to the Robert Bosch GmbH company, "Clartext", published by the chemical concern Clariant Verwaltungsgesellschaft mbH or „Autogramm", the publication of the Volkswagen AG company.

Georgia Vitca: *In the end I would like to ask you to give me some details about the archive with the system's newspapers, found at the Fachhochschule Hannover, which are also the biggest archives in Germany holding such publications.*

Prof. Dr. Ulrike Buchholz: This archive exists at the Faculty of Media, Information and Design starting with June 2007. The archives was created in 1979 by the professor Franz Klöfer as part of Fachhochschule Mainz II, which took care permanently of its extension, establishing lasting connections with companies in Berlin and Munich. When Professor Klöfer ended his teaching carrier and reached the retirement age, he tried to find someone to continue to take care of the archive. Taking into consideration the fact that at Fachhochschule Hannover there is a study line for Public Relations, where the gaining of knowledge referring to the internal communication is essential, I considered that it would have been a shame that such an archive got lost, and therefore the entire archive was moved from Mainz to Hannover. This contains newspapers and magazines from hundreds of German organizations and companies, published periodically with the purpose of informing the employees and structuring the internal

communication. The publications gather documentary evidence of a rich history, of almost 30 years of the German business environment, inside which the companies and the organizations changed their structures many times and tried to adjust to the globalization current. Before everything, these publications are a priceless base for the research of the internal communication history in Germany.

Georgia Vitca: Thank you very much.