КОММУНИКАЦИОННАЯ ПОДДЕРЖКА ИЗМЕНЕНИЙ В АКАДЕМИЧЕСКОЙ СРЕДЕ

COMMUNICATING CHANGE IN ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT

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Аннотация

Данное исследование ставит своей целью получение комплексного понимания действующих механизмов коммуникационной поддержки изменений в академической среде на примере НИУ ВШЭ. Работа ставит перед собой три вопроса:

1. Каково отношение студенческого сообщества университета по отношению к изменениям и процессу их приведения?
2. Есть ли взаимосвязь между уровнем осведомленности студентов о грядущих изменениях и их успеваемостью?
3. Какие методологические рекомендации могут быть предложены тем, кто занимается созданием коммуникативных моделей для академической среды?

Исследование выполнено с применением параллельной смешанной стратегии, где для сбора данных одновременно используются как экспертное интервью, так и опрос. Анализ собранных данных выполнен при помощи качественного контентного анализа и линейной регрессии.

Статья доказывает, что, на самом деле, существует значимая корреляция между осведомленностью студентов и их средним баллом. Кроме того, она предоставляет конкретные, основанные на данных, полученных на примере НИУ ВШЭ рекомендации для составления моделей коммуникационной поддержки изменений в академической среде.

Annotation

This research overall aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of the operational mechanisms of change communication in an academic environment on the example of HSE University. There are three research questions it answers:

1. What preexistent attitude is formed towards change and the process of its communication among the student community at the university level?
2. Is there a correlation between student's awareness about the upcoming change and their GPA?
3. What methodological recommendations may be drawn for those creating a change communication model for the academic setting?

The study is carried out with a concurrent mixed method approach with the use of both the expert interview and questionnaire to gather the data. The data analysis is carried out with qualitative content analysis (QCA) and the regression analysis.

The paper reveals that, in fact, there is a significant correlation between how well-aware of the upcoming change one is and their average mark. It also outlines some specific recommendations for academic change models basing on the students' preferences and HSE experience.

Ключевые слова: коммуникация, приведение изменений, академическая среда, трансформация, коммуникационные модели.

Key words: communication, change implementation, academic environment, transition, communication models.

Introduction.

Change is an unavoidable part of a contemporary organization's life and it affects various aspects and levels of the organizational structure. There are two primary objectives of organizational transformation: the increase of competitiveness and the strive for efficiency. The impulse for a more frequent transformation stems from the global processes that happen worldwide such as digitalization and globalization. It also creates a dense communication network between the organizations and, by that, facilitating the share of best practices. In the business environment, there are particular techniques that are used to introduce innovation. However, change is an as acute problem for educational institutions as it is for businesses. Therefore, some particular techniques and methods of change implementation have to exist here as well. Therefore, this particular gap in knowledge about the techniques used in academic environment calls for a deeper research.

Literature review.

Foremost, it is critical to settle the terminology. The first notion to be analyzed in this paper is the academic environment. According to the definition of the term 'academic' provided by the Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) specifies its meaning as: «relating to schools, colleges, and universities, or connected with studying and thinking, not with practical skills» [1]. In its turn 'environment' there defined as «the conditions that you live or work in and the way that they influence how you feel or how effectively you can work» [2]. However, these definitions provide nothing more than a notional understanding of the term, the area of study becomes quite clear. In their research on the topic, Hartnett and Centra (1974) provide an operational definition of the 'university environment: «a common, mutually perceived set of conditions that influence the members of the academic community» [3, p.161]. This one is rather close to the dictionary definition, however, specifically indicates that these common rules have to be passed on within the community to be operational. Otherwise, nobody would know of their existence.

The structural complexity of a university is another peculiarity worth mentioning. The study conducted by Ermilova & Mashtakova enlists the following range of academic activities: «education and research-related practices, academic writing and communications, professional training, academic management, supervision, student governments, unions, etc.» [4]. These activities suggest the interaction of three major groups: management, students, professors. In terms of roles, each of these parties possesses one, though, the task of management is more complex since it has to issue and renew the syllabus, rules and provide the necessary support.

From the communicational perspective, students and professors possess a very peculiar ethnological value as representatives of a particular subculture [5, p. 24]. It is due to the fact that by being a part of the student/professor community its members are involved in a communication structure and pass on the academic culture onto the further generations (e.g. freshmen, senior teachers, etc.).

The global tendencies have some definite impact on the academic culture as well. Fortunately, this topic has been thoroughly studied by scholars. For example, the paper by Singh & Papa advocates that globalization has put forward certain challenges of a previously unfamiliar kind to the governments, and much of the seemingly recent, permanent change in education is an obvious consequence of these challenges [6]. The problem has also been addressed by another scholar of this topic, G. Moodie (2007) which argued that globalized economics acts as a driver for change in higher education [7]. This idea is reinforced by the research carried out by Meyer et al.: «globalization changes how universities operate and create more effective, efficient, and accountable institutions» [8]. For the considerations described in this passage, organizational transformation becomes not only advisable for the educational institutions but an obligatory requirement for whichever prosperity and development.

Digitalization as a process also leaves its mark on the way how universities operate. It was proven in the research of Ludmila Mezentseva who suggests that online courses are no longer considered a second-rate education tool [9]. Tatiana Kuznetsova, another student of the subject points out the upraise of the change

communication is the marker digital society and digital culture's genesis [10]. This particular argument is easily perceptible on the example of HSE University. There, online systems are quite widely utilized (e.g. LMS, ELK, online libraries, etc.).

In terms of this paper, it is a question of the paramount importance of how one can characterize an academic environment. The study conducted by Dopson & McNay suggests an approach which allows describing any academic environment basing on two characteristics: policy definition and control of implementation [11]. They devised four archetypes of universities in accordance with this classification: collegium, bureaucracy, corporation, enterprise [12]. The description of these archetypes is presented in table 1. This taxonomy emphasizes the significance of academic culture in the process of change introduction. From this perspective, it is quite evident that the choice or creation of a relevant change communication model is determined by a major account by the type of organization.

Table 1.

Academic culture archetypes

Archetype	Characteristics	Description
1. Collegium	Loose definition, loose control	Individuals have an influence on the proposals of change. Consensus-based [12]
2. Bureaucracy	Tight definition, loose control	Not necessarily based on clear-cut policies but rather on practical precedents. Consensus-based, yet, formalized [12]
3. Corporation	Loose definition, tight control	It provides better managerial control and

		efficiency. Working teams based [12]
4. Enterprise	Tight definition, tight control	The main aim is the balance between the practice and policies. Commercial goals oriented [12]

Thus, this passage has revealed that the academic environment is constantly exposed to the change in its various aspects (syllabus, management, educational process, etc.) due to the ongoing processes of globalization and digitalization. Furthermore, a well-determined culture amplifies the university's competitiveness. It was also found that the organizational type and goals are also important aspects that have to be considered when elaborating on a change communication model.

The second central term for this paper is the notion of change. It is quite commonly confused with the transition which is also an essential part of change implication. The major distinction between these two terms is buried in the nature of the processes themselves. K. Berman describes the change as a creative act that «brings into existence processes that have not existed before» [13]. In practice, we may observe a change in practices, structures, rules, etc. Therefore, change is an external process. In its turn, the transition is a «psychological reorientation» that happens in a person's mind. This is an internal process that people go through while accepting change. Change implementation includes both the stages of change and transition since people who are the members of the environment must shift to the new order of things in order to work effectively.

Having understood the nature of the process, it seems rational to move towards the description of academic change drivers. The fundamental of them is «globalization, technology explosion, enrollment ascent, international competition, financial problems, and pressure for accountability» [14]. The fact that these incentives correspond with the various spheres of social life also defines the main types of

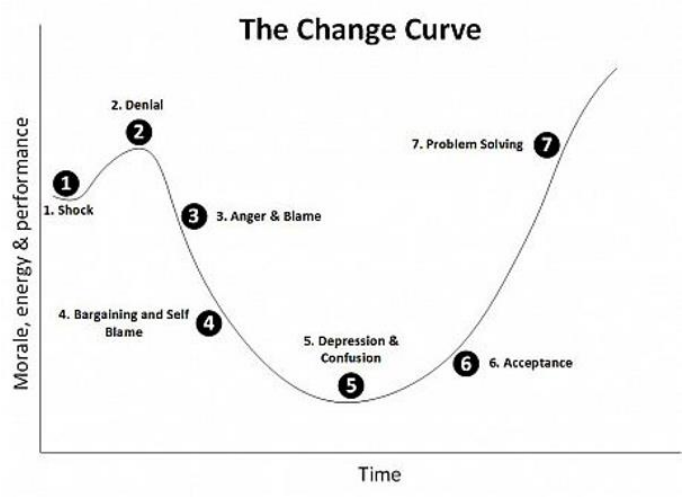
change: transitional, directional, fundamental, total, planned, happened, transformational, revolutionary, strategic, anticipatory, or reactionary, unpredictable [15, 16].

Various groups communicating in the academic environment play different roles in the process [17]. The first of them is management. They are responsible for the vision of change, deciding on which processes call for renovation and advancement. The second is the specialist department. It is responsible for informing the students about the transformation and providing the necessary informational support. The third one is are the project groups (e.g. student councils). This party reflects the students' response to change and acts as a means of reverse vertical communication.

For the aims of the research, the most popular change communication models by K. Lewin [18], Bullock & Batten [19], J. Kotter [20] were reviewed. It was found that they share the same 'stage' operational mechanism. They vary by the major account in the number of stages, and therefore, in the degree of control over each of these. In general, the core idea suggested by all of these suggests that the target structure ha to primarily be determined, then communicated to the community, and later anchored legally in the culture (e.g. code of conduct). However, facing a certain degree of criticism [21, Appelbaum], the model suggested by J. Kotter still remains the most popular one in the business environment. The probable reason for that is the fact it is the most thoroughly structured one which allows for better control and makes it more universal.

A few additional 'non-stage' change communication models were reviewed as well. The research by Daugrid & Spencer suggests that, however, not being devised for organizational purposes, the so-called "Circle of Grief" by Dr. Kübler-Ross [22] has found its application in this environment [23]. The suggestion is that people who deal with change undergo the same set of emotions as those who fight terminal diseases (shock, denial, acceptance, etc.). The relevance to the change implementation lies in the trick to using communication in order to help people through the extremely low points (see picture 1).

Therefore, it becomes evident, that the notion of change in the academic environment is quite a complex process, that includes various aspects of its communication system. Moreover, it was found that the models that are used for change implementation are not universal and have to be adjusted for particular goals.



Picture 1. Dr. Kübler-Ross's change curve [24].

Methods.

This research was conducted with a concurrent mixed methods approach for the fact that the aims of the research are quite different and called for both quantitative and qualitative analysis, however, are not sequentially attached. Moreover, it generally allows gaining a much deeper and complete understanding of the problem grasping both perspectives rather than just a qualitative or quantitative approach. The analysis of the qualitative part of the research was carried out with qualitative content analysis since it has studied the attitude of students towards various aspects of change communication. The quantitative part was conducted with the linear regression analysis aiming to test if there is a correlation between how well-aware students are about the upcoming change and their academic performance.

Two methods of data collection were utilized for this study. The first one was an online questionnaire sampling the representatives of the HSE's student community. The poll consisted of 28 questions divided into three sections. The first one contained questions about change as a concept. The second one about their

experience of going through change and the third one about their preferences in channels of communication. 105 HSE students have taken part in the questionnaire. The representation across the years of study turned out to be almost even.

The second one was the expert interview sampling the management of HSE University. The main objective here was to grasp how the process of change implementation is currently organized. It was later compared with the insight gained from the literature review and the poll analysis to form some practical recommendations for development. The set of questions was fixed for each participant and consisted of 9 questions about the processes of change implication at HSE. The questions were formulated in accordance with the findings of the literature analysis.

Results and discussion.

The qualitative part of the research has proposed several peculiar observations about the HSE student community and the environment itself. First, is that the process of change introduction may be called overall successful here since the students show very positive feedback. However, it is evident that empowering some more local leaders to communicate change could improve students' awareness (group heads, student council, etc.). Second, students show a profound shift in preference towards the online channels of communication (group/corporate/personal e-mail, messengers). Therefore, concentrating on these networks could also bring a positive result on the process of change implementation. Third, students show a slightly higher concern for local change (change of professor/ exam format, etc.) than for a university-level change (e.g. changes in the syllabus). Therefore, it may be suggested that some additional support is offered on a local level.

The quantitative part aimed to test for a correlation between the student's degree of awareness about the upcoming change and their GPA. The data was gathered from the questionnaire. The data for the analysis was taken from the poll. The calculations of the coefficients were carried out in MS Excel with its Data Analysis

tools. As the dependent variable (y) there was taken the GPA of the students. Also, two independent variables were involved as well. The first of them was the students' self-assessment of their awareness of the upcoming change (x_1). The second of them was the students' attendance and it was utilized as a control variable to increase model's precision

Therefore, the linear regression equation looks the following way:

$$y = b_0 + b_1 \times x_1 + b_2 \times x_2 \quad (1)$$

where: $y -$ dependent variable (10-point scale);

$x_1 ; x_2 -$ independent variables (value from 1 to 4);

$b_0; b_1; b_2 -$ a slope of a regression line;

Though, it is quite common in contemporary research to accept the null hypothesis if this number is higher than 0.01, here the cutoff point was decided to be 0.05 due to the rather small sample of the research (105 observations).

The regression statistics has revealed that the P-values of the predictors (x_1, x_2) vary tremendously. That suggested that significance of each predictor had to be defined separately. As may be seen from table 2, the P-value for x_1 equals 0.0121693. That means, that there is no reason to accept the null hypothesis and the variable may be considered significant. At the same time, it is clearly visible that the P-value for x_2 antecedent equals 0.7115402. That means that for this variable the null hypothesis has to be accepted.

The next step is to find out what percentage of the entry data is explained by the hypothesis. This analysis is based on the value of the coefficient of determination (R square). This number may vary from 0 to 1 and therefore, is usually presented in percentage. For this regression, this number equals 0.0612255. That means that the differences in one variable can be explained by the differences in another variable by 6%. Thus, it is not a strong correlation, again, due to the small scale of the research and the good overall significance level of the model it is acceptable.

Table 2.

Regression analysis output

Variable	Coefficients	P-value
Awareness (x_1)	0.2759891	0.0121693
Attendance (x_2)	-0.0514004	0.7115402
Intercept	7.448149	5.85E-23

The next step is to find out what percentage of the entry data is explained by the hypothesis. This analysis is based on the value of the coefficient of determination (R square). This number may vary from 0 to 1 and therefore, is usually presented in percentage. For this regression, this number equals 0.0612255. That means that the differences in one variable can be explained by the differences in another variable by 6%. Thus, it is not a strong correlation, again, due to the small scale of the research and the overall significance of the model it is acceptable. Moreover, the fact that the model is significant, yet explain a small percentage of entry data only enhances the necessity for further research of this problem aiming to conduct a confirmatory analysis.

The results of the analysis reflect the existence of a valuable correlation between students' GPA and their awareness about the upcoming change. It evidences that when awareness is at its lowest, the GPA of a respondent equals 7.45. With the increase of consciousness, the average mark was seen to improve by 0.28 for each point of awareness gained. A rather low explanatory rate of the model is an obvious restraint here. It could be due to the rather small scale of the research and, hence, calls for further research involving a greater number of participants.

Conclusion.

In conclusion, the previous research on this topic in both Russia and abroad has pointed out the necessity of change communication in academic environment. It largely concentrated on the theoretical aspects of the process and its thorough description. This research has revealed some fresh trends and preferences towards communication channels of the primary community at which change is aimed in academic environment – the students. Moreover, it provides the qualitative analysis of the process on the particular example of the HSE university that reflects the

applicability of business change communication models by the educational institutions. Lastly, it proves with the methods of statistics that there is a valuable correlation between students' awareness about the upcoming change and their academic performance. However, the small scale of the research puts a restraint on its applicability. Nevertheless, these outcomes of the research could be applied by the universities to ameliorate the processes of change implementation. It also provides a basis for the further research on this topic. It may be suggested that a deeper confirmatory research on a wider sample is carried out to put the outcomes of this research to the test.

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