

ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION IN TECHNOLOGICALLY ADVANCED COMPANIES: A STUDY ON FREEDOM VS CONSTRAINT

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary corporate landscapes, the pursuit of employee satisfaction and the influence of technology on organizational communication are pivotal considerations. Companies increasingly promote an organizational culture centered on freedom and minimal constraints, yet this abstract evaluates the authenticity of these assertions amid the technologically evolving workplace. The Introduction emphasizes the dichotomy between the perceived freedoms facilitated by technology and the potential constraints it imposes on employee communication. The impact of technology on communication within companies in Romania is a focal point of investigation. While technological advancements offer expanded access to information, real-time collaboration across global teams, and flexible work arrangements, the Conclusion underscores the risks associated with excessive surveillance and communication restrictions. It highlights the adverse effects of closely monitored communication, leading to reduced privacy, employee anxiety, and compromised performance. The abstract delves into the delicate balance between technological integration and employee freedom. It addresses the need for companies to critically reflect on their communication policies to prevent the erosion of trust and loyalty among employees. Notably, it identifies the pivotal role of individuals in fostering or limiting communication, stressing the significance of an open and supportive communication environment. This study, involving 76 companies across multiple counties, examines the interplay between technological advancements and organizational communication. It reveals the importance of fostering an environment where employees feel encouraged to communicate without infringement on their rights, crucial for building loyalty and enhancing workplace effectiveness.

KEYWORDS: *communication, communication liberty, technology.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Organizational communication within companies in Romania, in an increasingly technologized environment, must be first and foremost examined from the perspective of constraints and freedoms (Goldhaber et al., 1978). Numerous researchers have attempted over time to centralize both the constraints and the freedoms of employees in companies (Papa et al., 2018). Unfortunately, due to an ever-changing environment, and because of the increasingly advanced technologies and their level of coverage, studies quickly become the foundation for future research.

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Many researchers (Walther et al., 2015; Şişcan & Cristafovici, 2021; Means et al., 2000) have identified as a primary freedom for an employee working in a technologized company the access to information in an expanded format. Technology allows operational staff and managers to access a multitude of online information and resources, which enables more efficient decision-making, while also enhancing the level of knowledge (Porkodi & Bhuvanewari, 2014). This efficiency can also be found in communication as technology facilitates real-time communication, through digital conferences, email, or other online methods. This allows for teamwork among employees situated at considerable distances across the globe (Hauser et al., 2015).

There are also other elements to consider when presenting the benefits of organizational communication in a technologized company. The fact that there is communication between teams from all over the world indicates geographic and temporal communication flexibility. Technology enables employees to work anytime, anywhere. This can be perceived by many employees as a significant advantage, a clear plus when choosing their future workplace, and a high level of freedom.

Other researchers see in strongly technologized companies another less debated public space advantage – the personalization of the workplace and the way activities are carried out (Alias et al., 2017). Communication with the help of technology can be highly personalized according to the needs of the employees, which shows the openness of companies and, at the same time, increases employee commitment and effectiveness.

However, researchers also have well-argued viewpoints demonstrating that a company's extensive openness to technology indicates many constraints for employees. Perhaps the most interesting consideration is the isolation and fragmentation of teams. The freedom to work from anywhere, anytime, with just internet access has only led to the isolation of some employees and the fragmentation of teams which, ultimately, have affected collaboration and cohesion. For example, there are agile teams created for product management (Chaudhri & Wang, 2017). Members of these teams can work from all over the globe using technology, which is not a bad thing, but team fragmentation can seriously hinder certain activities. Furthermore, certain team members may develop introverted characteristics because of separation from the team and remote work.

On the other hand, constraints such as depersonalization can appear because virtual communication within a company can lead to a loss of empathy, overburdening employees with tasks to be completed, etc. At the same time, issues of confidentiality and security arise because the use of technology can create certain vulnerabilities in data security and working methods. To prevent these issues, companies use many security filters that most often prevent employees from using certain parts of the internet, using devices in certain parts of the world, or communicating with certain people on service devices, even if the discussion is not work-related (UL-Hameed et al., 2019).

Considering all these arguments for and against organizational communication using technology in companies, there is also a powerful desire for human resources to use highly monitored technologies, which do not allow people to take breaks longer than the company considers necessary. There are numerous examples of companies abusing technology to monitor employees and punish them in case of minor violations of conduct. Thus, the issue arises of identifying those fields of activity within companies that present the highest level of freedom concerning organizational communication and those companies that constrain employee activity, violating certain rights.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Frequently, the process of organizational communication may appear simple from the outside. Theoretically, it involves communicating both vertically and horizontally at the workplace (Gan & Saleh, 2018). In practice, however, the process is much more complicated and, sometimes, extremely difficult to comprehend even by the company's employees. One of the most logical frameworks for determining the importance and the system behind organizational communication can be observed in figure 1.

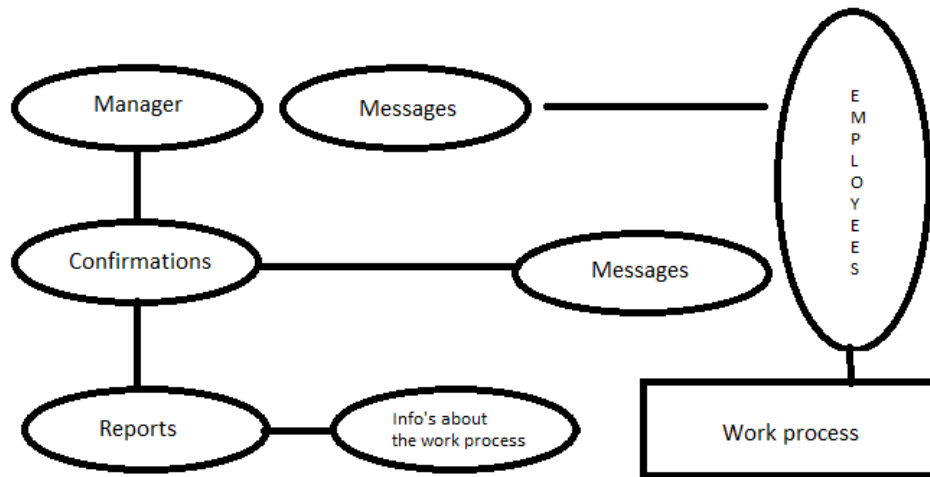


Figure 1. The Organizational Communication System

Source: authors

In organizational communication, two parties are involved: managers and employees. Managers send messages to employees through various channels. The latter analyze the message and incorporate it into the work process. If clarifications are needed, they communicate certain confirmations back to the managers. In turn, confirmations can either go back to managers, forming a new loop of Manager – Employee – Confirmation, or exit the loop, resulting in work processes or reports.

For years, many processes within the organizational communication system have been digitalized, resulting in an extremely rapid flow of messages through informational channels. While speed can represent a competitive advantage in a company's daily activity, accelerated technologization can lead to issues concerning human resources. Many processes conducted by human resources have been replaced by technology, and communication has not been overlooked either. There is less face-to-face communication and an increasing amount of digital communication. This can be observed in a report made public by a major auditing company (Culture Partners, 2022), which analyzed all companies in its portfolio, as it can be seen in figure no. 2.



Figure 2. Communication in the Era of Technology on the Employee-Manager Axis
 Source: Processed by the authors, based on KPMG Romania reports

According to the study, there are five predominant types of communication within a company: meetings, instant messages, online conferences, phone calls, and emails. The largest share of total communication is represented by meetings, emails, phone calls, and online conferences. Online meetings are preferred more by managers who, wishing to communicate quickly with as many subordinates as possible, tend to use, and sometimes even abuse, meetings. Meanwhile, employees often do not prefer meetings as they frequently perceive them as a waste of time.

The second largest share is communication through emails, which is predominantly preferred by employees and less so by managers. Data and information travel through the information system at an unprecedented speed, and employees need to rapidly and timely send reports, data, and information via emails. On the other hand, managers prefer to communicate over the phone and less so in writing.

Even though the situation may seem perfect at first glance, various managerial abuses and a totally inefficient use of technology for communication are hidden behind the scenes. In more restrictive companies, meetings also serve the purpose of keeping employees connected and seeing who is actively participating in them. The same is true for online conferences. In the case of emails, employees often abuse them by sending too many messages. On the other hand, there are companies that have policies in place to measure how many daily emails an employee sends. The same applies to phone calls.

Taking all of these into consideration, with all the technology in mind and used daily by all employees, the question arises – is there freedom of communication within companies, or is this violated by hierarchical superiors for the employees?

3. METHODOLOGY AND STUDY

To develop a model for determining the level of freedom and constraint within each company, based on its specific characteristics, a study was conducted on a sample of 76 companies from three counties in Romania: Buzău, Bucharest-Ilfov, and Giurgiu. Geographically, all companies are located in the historical region of Muntenia, and the study included 203 employees from various industries. The necessity for a large number of employees stems from the need to determine a national pattern at the end, describing the situation within companies.

The realized sample, which can be analyzed at: <http://www.isondaje.ro/sondaj/697846521>, was distributed to companies between August 15, 2023, and October 20, 2023, via the email addresses

of these companies. Subsequently, they chose to disseminate the questionnaire to their employees, who were expected to respond honestly and without restraint to all necessary questions. The questions were formulated in an easily understandable manner so that everyone could respond. In the end, it was observed that all 203 employees responded to all the questions. The responses can be observed in figure 3.

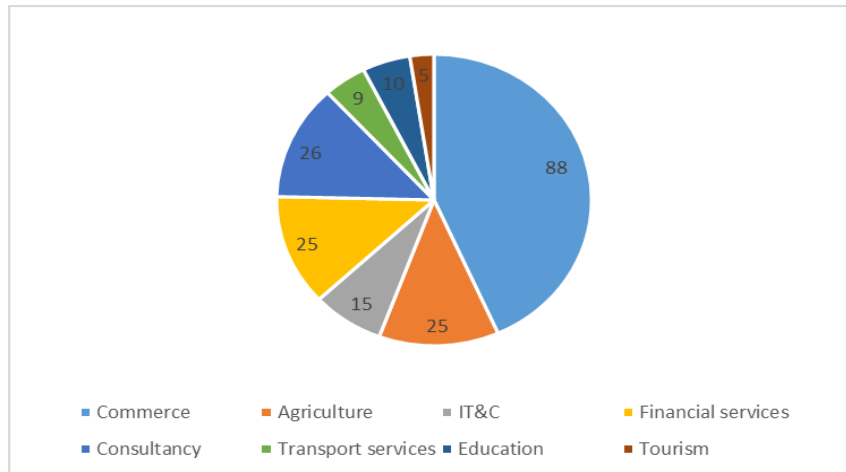


Figure 3. What is the field of the company's activity?

Source: Survey processing by the authors

Based on the consolidated responses, there are people from all fields in this questionnaire. It can be observed that the majority are those working in commerce, agriculture, financial services, and consulting. The others are minority fields. This distribution is easy to understand given the fact that in these counties commerce (all three) and agriculture (Giurgiu and Buzău) predominate.

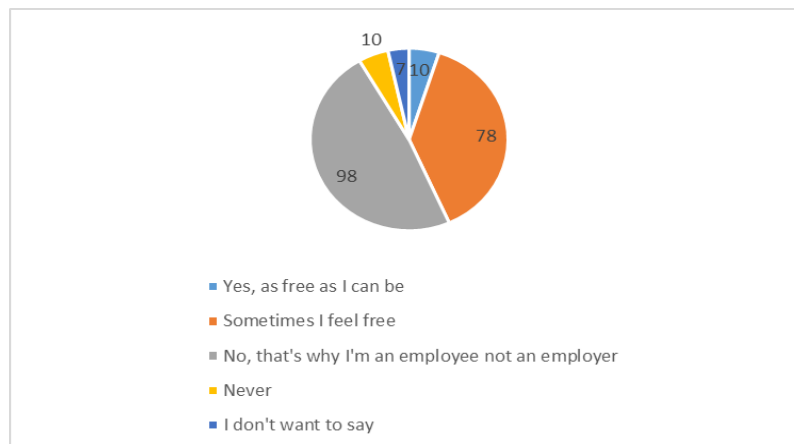


Figure 4. Do you feel as a free employee?

Source: Survey processing by the authors

As can be seen in figure no. 4, there are two predominant groups. The first is the group of those who do not feel free because they are employees and not employers, accounting for 98/203. The second group is represented by those who have moments when they feel free, accounting for 78/203.

As it can be seen in figure no. 5, it is evident that the workplace communication is predominantly monitored by superiors (89/203). Very interestingly, among the duties of the IT department is also the control of employees (45/203). They check both discussions between employees and what they are doing. Finally, there is strong monitoring through certain elements such as time cards (32/203).

It can be seen that, regardless of the company's specificity, people are closely monitored in various ways.

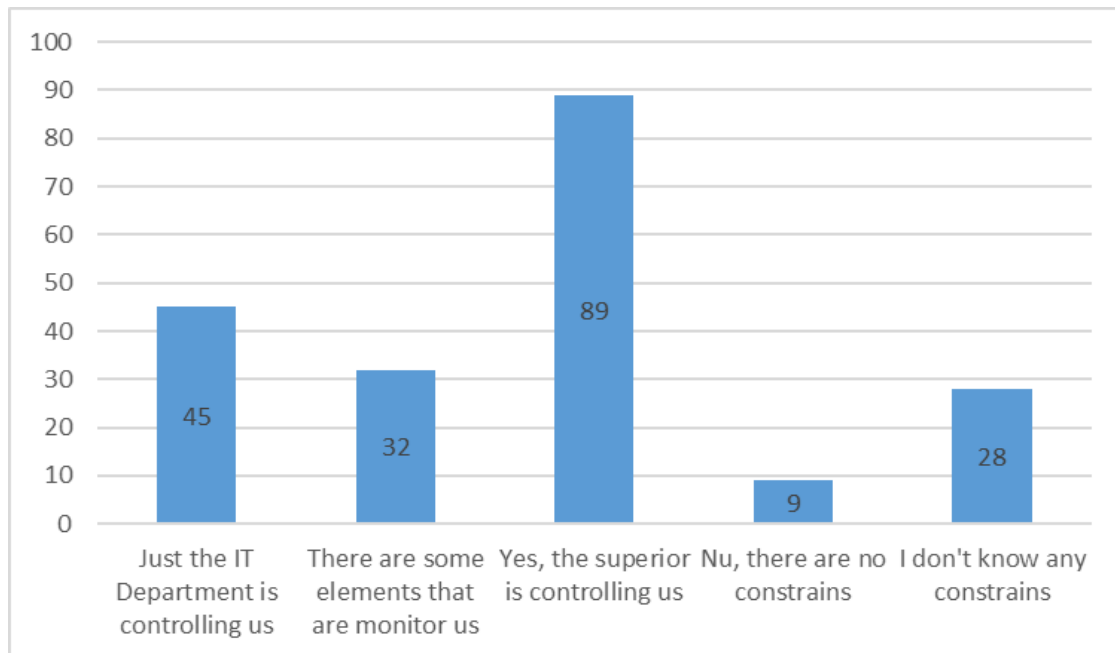


Figure 5. Is communication at the workplace monitored?

Source: Survey processing by the authors

As it can be seen in figure no. 6, it is clear that regardless of the company's specificity, reprimands from hierarchical superiors are present, especially because subordinate employees communicate a lot, regardless of the means. This shows that all companies have a limit of tolerability regarding organizational communication. Additionally, the most interesting aspect is that all these employees have been reprimanded for communicating, a fact worth considering.

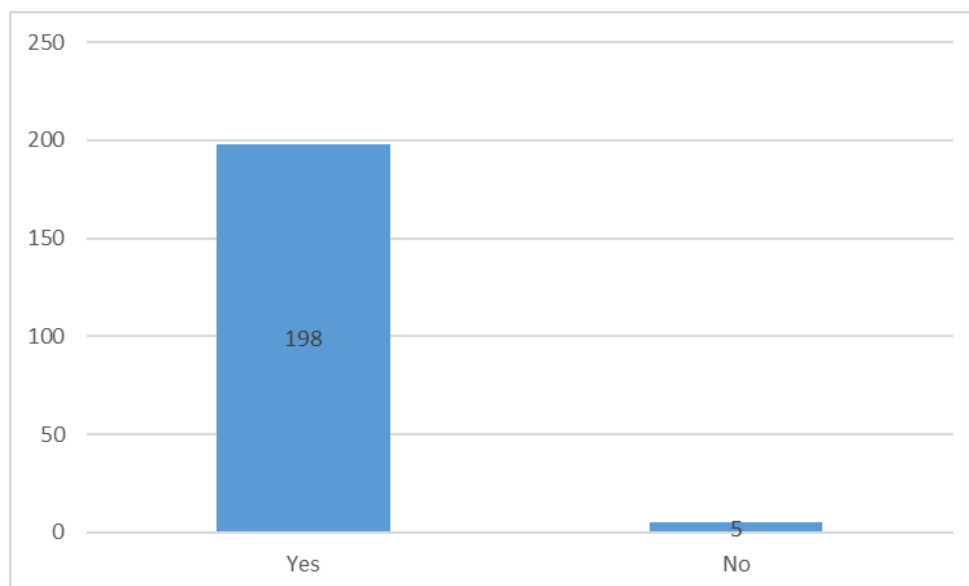


Figure 6. Have you ever been reprimanded for socializing?

Source: Survey processing by the authors

Another aspect to consider is related to the frequency with which meetings for open discussions and communication within the entity are held (figure no. 7). It can be observed that, regardless of the company category, there are two major groups. There is the group of those who have such sessions rarely (65/203) and the group of those who have these sessions sometimes (98/203). Thus, it can be concluded that these types of dialogues exist, but companies do not place great emphasis on them and do not give them the necessary importance.

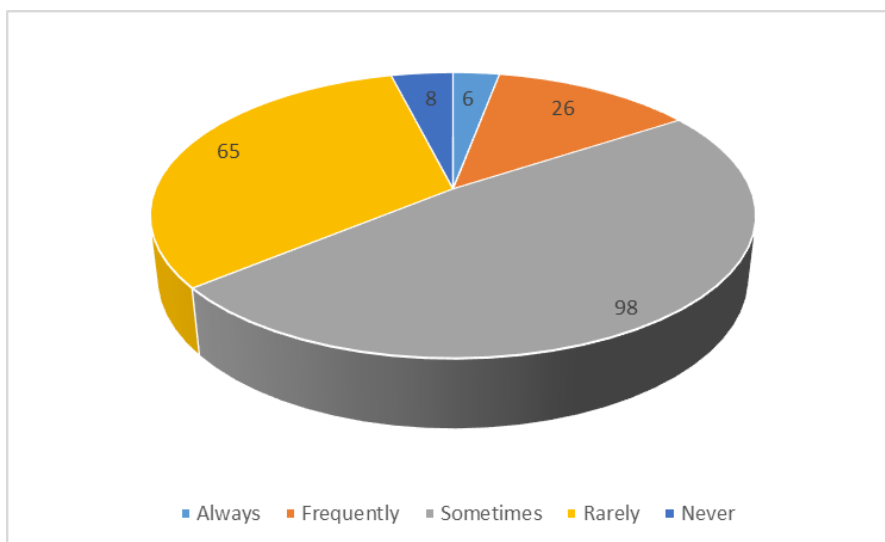


Figure 7. How often are meetings held for open discussions and communication within the company?

Source: Survey processing by the authors

According to the questionnaire results, 184 people indicated that there is no internal communication policy that allows employees to express their opinions (figure 8). Only 5 people stated that there is such an internal communication policy. This indicates a significant need to develop and improve internal communication channels to provide employees with the opportunity to express their opinions and concerns. This can be crucial for improving the work atmosphere, resolving issues, and increasing employee satisfaction.

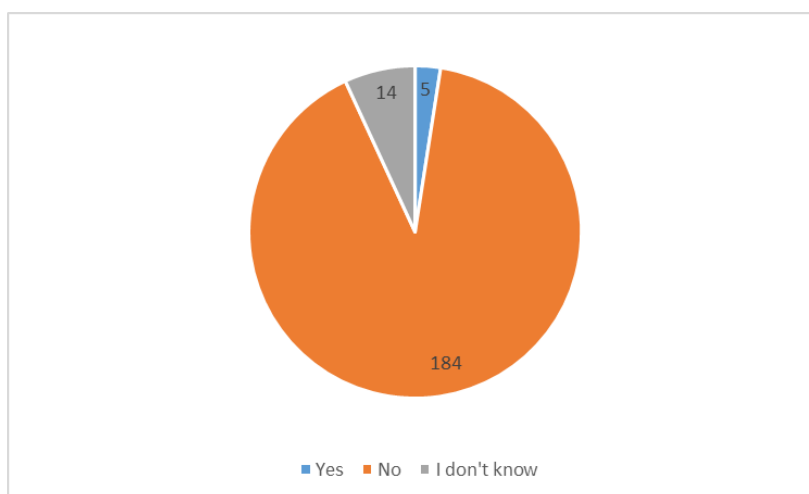


Figure 8. Is there an internal communication policy that allows employees to express their opinions?

Source: Survey processing by the authors

As it can be seen in figure no. 9, it is noticeable that 109 respondents do not feel free to communicate and collaborate with colleagues from other departments. This indicates a significant issue of interdepartmental communication and collaboration within the organization. Furthermore, 68 out of 203 feel free to communicate with colleagues from other departments, which represents positive progress, yet there is still room for improvement, and 26 out of 203 do not feel the need to collaborate with colleagues from other departments. This could reflect a sense of satisfaction with their work domain or the necessity for additional clarification to understand the benefits of interdepartmental collaboration.

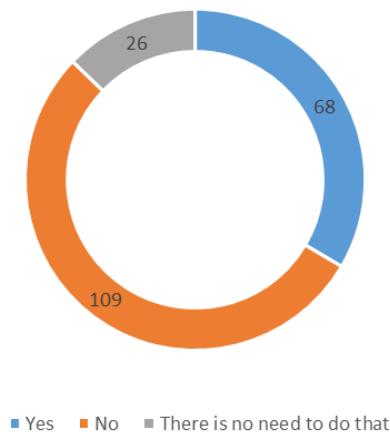


Figure 9. Feel free to communicate and collaborate with colleagues from other departments/teams?

Source: Survey processing by the authors

According to the figure no. 10, it is evident from observation that, 147 out of 203 respondents (approximately 72.4%) state that there are no dedicated channels to facilitate communication between employees and management. This suggests a significant issue regarding employee access to management and communication with it. Another 42 out of 203 respondents (approximately 20.7%) state that there are dedicated channels for communication with management. This represents a promising start for promoting transparent communication between employees and management. Finally, a minority, 14 out of 203 respondents (approximately 6.9%), do not know if there are dedicated channels to facilitate communication with management, which could indicate a lack of information or transparency in the organization regarding these channels.

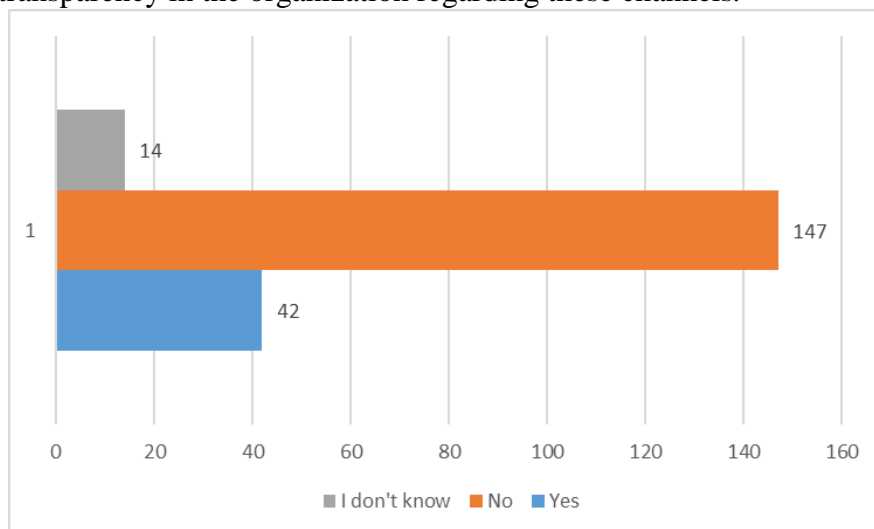


Figure 10. Are there dedicated channels to facilitate communication between employees and management?

Source: Survey processing by the authors

Based on the responses, which can be easily seen in figure no. 11, it can be observed that 194 out of 203 respondents (approximately 95.5%) feel constrained by the company or managers to communicate. This may suggest that there is pressure or expectations from the management or organization regarding employee communication. There are also 9 respondents who do not feel constrained to communicate. This small group of respondents could reflect employees who feel freer to express their ideas or concerns without feeling significant pressure from management.

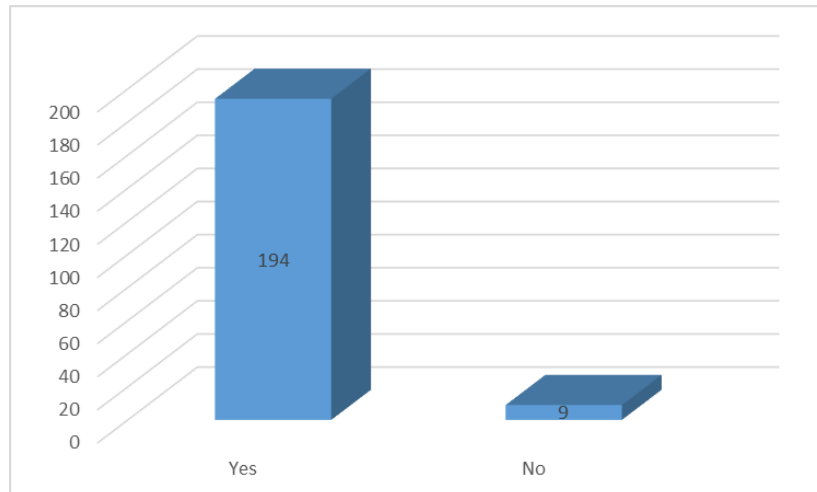


Figure 11. Do you feel constrained by the company/managers to communicate?
Source: Survey processing by the authors

It is observable, in the figure no. 12, that 100 out of 203 respondents (approximately 49.3%) believe that the organizational culture does not favor intraorganizational communication. This could indicate a significant issue regarding the communication and collaboration environment within the organization. Another 98 out of 203 respondents (approximately 48.3%) believe that the organizational culture favors intraorganizational communication. This group of respondents appreciates the fact that the organization encourages openness and collaboration among employees. The minority – 5 – do not have a clear opinion or do not know if the organizational culture favors intraorganizational communication, which could indicate a lack of clarity or ambiguous information regarding this aspect.

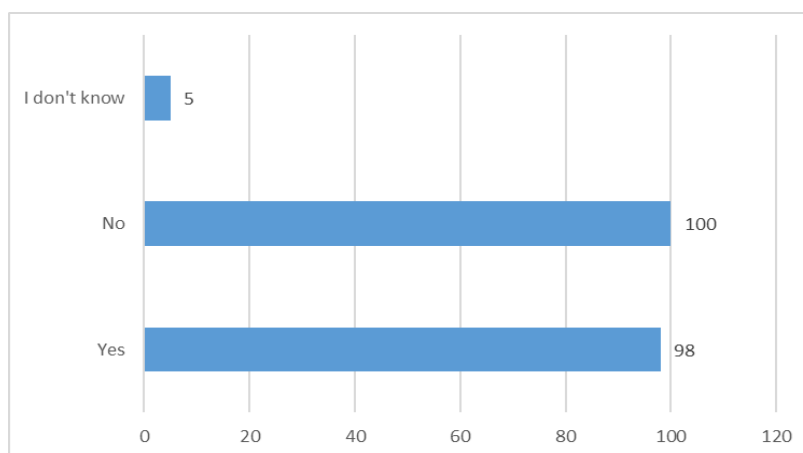


Figure 12. The organizational culture favors communication within the company
Source: Survey processing by the authors

Upon careful analysis of the responses provided by the sample, it was possible to create a model to observe which companies are the most restrictive when it comes to communication. This model was created based on a value scale applied to all analyzed companies. Employees had to choose a certain level of openness, and at the end, all responses were centralized in the following graph: There are two major areas where communication freedom is highly valued: agriculture and tourism. In tourism, people communicate, and in agriculture, employees form friendships. If communication within the entity were restricted, this would negatively impact work performance. In terms of medium freedom level, there are three fields: education, commerce, and transport services. By the nature of their activity, people need to discuss, but communication is restricted by management.

At the bottom of the figure are those fields where there are serious constraints on organizational communication. These constraints are implemented by all possible means. This can be understood in terms of the importance of the field of activity. Extensive intraorganizational communication, through all necessary channels, could lead to security breaches that endanger projects of very high value, as it can be seen in figure no. 13.

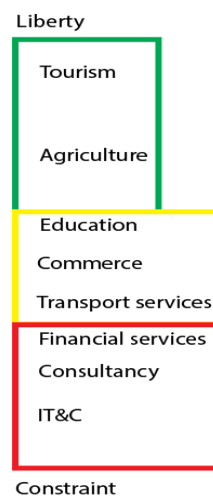


Figure 13. Characterizing the main industries in terms of communication freedom-constraint

3. CONCLUSION

The study highlights the fact that technologically advanced companies can implement policies or practices that encourage the restriction of employee communication. This could be detrimental to the development of an open and collaborative working environment. If employee communication is closely monitored, it could lead to a lack of privacy and might affect the trust that employees have in the company. Employees might feel watched and restricted in their free expression.

Employees who sense a limitation in expression or an excessively high level of surveillance become anxious, and their work performance becomes increasingly difficult to maintain. Considering these aspects, every manager should reflect thoroughly and understand what they expect from their employees. Employees who have a pleasant working environment, where they can communicate freely, are much more efficient. On the other hand, employees who do not have a friendly environment perform their tasks out of fear and due to the salary they receive, and not at all out of loyalty to the company.

Furthermore, it is observed that, regardless of the level of technological advancement of companies in Romania, there are certain filters through which employees are vetted, and their communication is checked. Romanian companies still do not realize how important intraorganizational

communication is and how important it is to build loyalty among these employees through simple measures. The degree of technologization of a company does not define how this technology is actually used. It can be used to prevent certain unpleasant situations, but when abused, the environment becomes toxic. A toxic environment is one that employees flee from, and loyalty does not exist.

Each company is free to implement as many systems as it needs as long as it does not infringe upon the rights of the employees, and the latter should have the necessary openness to communication and be encouraged by their superiors. Therefore, we can draw a single conclusion, namely that it is not technology that constrains the freedom of communication within a company. It is people who constrain communication between individuals.

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