

Why Communication Dimensions Matter: Change Readiness Under Workplace Stressors In SMEs

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PAPER INFO

Paper history:

Received 09 February 2026

Accepted 02 April 2026

Citation:

Cvjetković, M. (2026). Why Communication Dimensions Matter: Change Readiness Under Workplace Stressors In SMEs. In *Journal of Information and Organizational Sciences*, vol. 50, no. 1, pp. 157-175

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of internal communication satisfaction dimensions in shaping employee readiness for change in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Croatia. Although internal communication is important for employee readiness for change, there is still little empirical evidence showing how the flow of information within organizations relates to that readiness. To address this gap, the study observed internal communication satisfaction through its eight dimensions and tested their associations with readiness for change, while accounting for information overload and work demands as information processing constraints, and perceived quality of change communication as a potential mediator. The resulting model was tested using 32 hypotheses, based on survey data from 454 employees in Croatian SMEs. Direct and moderating effects were examined using regression-based analyses. Mediation effects were evaluated with structural equation modelling. The results showed that three internal communication dimensions were significantly related to employee readiness for change: satisfaction with information about the organization, communication in meetings and communication climate. Other dimensions did not show significant associations. Moderation roles of information overload and work demands were confirmed for several dimensions, while mediating effects were not confirmed. The findings offer theoretical and practical contributions.

Keywords: Internal communication dimensions, readiness for change, information processing constraints, SMEs

1. Introduction

Organizations now well recognize the importance of internal communication at all levels (Tkalac Verčič, 2025). It is a core organizational process that enables information flows, sensemaking, and coordinated action across all hierarchical levels and functional units (Yue et al., 2025). By using different modes of exchange of information, such as face-to-face communication for building trust, boosting collaboration, and resolving conflicts, or digital channels to transfer ideas fast to several recipients, internal communication enables co-worker interaction with the goal of achieving organizational objectives (Santoso et al., 2022). The growing significance of studying internal communication in theory and practice has been impacted by numerous elements, the main being the implementation of new information and communication technologies, which have shifted workplace dynamics into interconnected, open, and transparent environments (Yue et al., 2023). To keep track of all the company's processes, to transcend the vision, mission, and future plans, to unite all the employees and make them want to stay, to boost their motivation, engagement, and commitment, companies need to implement a strategic approach to internal communication (Cvjetković, 2024). This

particularly refers to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) whose internal communication processes are informal and less structured, mostly due to the lack of human and financial resources (Piwowar-Sulej et al., 2024). This can impact their organizational information processing capacity, make them vulnerable to external pressures and affect the successful adoption of change initiatives. Since SMEs are important for their national economies because they create new jobs, contribute to innovation development and to the overall GDP (Kazakov et al., 2021), they have been intensively studied from different perspectives such as entrepreneurship, market orientation, and business performance (e.g., Rincón Díaz & Albors Garrigós, 2017; Maseda et al., 2019; Šlogar et al., 2023). Existing research consistently shows that internal market-oriented behavior, that is, organizational practices focused on satisfying employees' needs, is linked to stronger performance in SMEs. This highlights the importance of investing into organization-employee relationships to achieve long-term competitiveness (Kazakov et al., 2021).

This study builds on earlier findings showing that internal communication satisfaction (ICS), treated as a single construct, is positively related to employees' readiness for change, both directly and through employees' perceptions of change communication quality (Cvjetković, 2024; Sun et al., 2021). Results further showed moderating effects of information overload in a way that it weakened the positive effect of internal communication satisfaction on readiness for change, whereas work demands did not significantly alter this relationship. Even though these findings provided initial evidence of the relevance of internal communication in change processes, they cannot distinguish whether all communication dimensions contribute equally to readiness for change. Similarly, it cannot be differentiated whether the observed effects of information overload, work demands, or perception of change quality communication apply equally for all eight ICS dimensions. Moreover, studies that empirically tested the effect of internal communication on employee change readiness in SMEs are limited. Existing studies mostly focused on larger firms (Yazici, 2002; Ahmad & Huvila, 2019; Sun et al., 2021) or specific industries (Robson & Tourish, 2005; Stoltenkamp & Kasuto, 2011), revealing the gap in the current literature (Abrantes et al., 2024; Cvjetković, 2024).

Given the above, the present study examines the associations between eight dimensions of internal communication on employee readiness for change (RFC) in small and medium-sized enterprises in Croatia. Internal communication is observed through the construct of Internal Communication Satisfaction (ICS), defined by Tkalac Verčič et al. (2009) as an important outcome of internal communication routines. It represents collective thoughts and feelings regarding various organizational relationships (Clampitt & Girard, 1993) at the individual, team, or organizational level (Tsai, Chuang, & Hsieh, 2009). The eight dimensions observed are: satisfaction with feedback, satisfaction with communication with immediate superior, satisfaction with horizontal communication, satisfaction with informal communication, satisfaction with information about the organization, satisfaction with communication climate, satisfaction with communication in meetings, and satisfaction with quality of communication media. Conceptually, these dimensions represent complementary aspects of organizational information systems. Feedback, supervisor communication, and horizontal communication refer to vertical and lateral information flows. Information about the organization and communication climate relate to the quality and openness of organizational communication. Communication media reflect the effectiveness of available channels, while informal communication mirrors emergent information networks.

The research offers several theoretical contributions to corporate communication, organizational information systems, and behavioral economics literature. First, it advances current insights on the impact of internal communications on employee change readiness by (1) observing it through its eight dimensions that represent different organizational information processes and (2) by positioning the research in the neglected context of small and medium-sized enterprises. Second, by taking into account workplace stressors as moderators and quality of change communication as a mediator, the study positions itself in the contemporary workplace arena and links change readiness to information processing constraints and the role of change-specific communication. It also recognizes that communication activities do not operate in a vacuum, but instead, their effects depend on the different pressures employees face (O'Connor et al., 2018). By testing 32 proposed hypotheses, the results, thus, bring new knowledge to the organizational change and organizational communication theories. As Piwowar-Sulej et al. (2024) note, the post-pandemic, rapid digitalization of business processes raises new questions about whether current theories on internal communication and change implementation still hold. Recent studies show that employees' internal communication preferences have changed and shifted towards communication that is more digital, interactive, and adjusted to their needs (Tkalac Verčič & Špoljarić, 2023). This new trend is now being recognized as hyper-personalization, and it has already been proclaimed as the future of workplace communication (Aspland, 2025). This suggests that companies may need to consider adjusting communication patterns to be more targeted and employee-specific. But, in order to fully utilize the power of internal communication, key people in SMEs need to be aware of what dimensions of internal communication contribute the most to successful change readiness.

The paper has six sections. Following this introduction, a literature review gives more detail on the theoretical approach and develops the hypotheses. Methodology presents sampling, data collection and processing, while the results section reports the findings of hypothesis testing. A discussion follows, together with theoretical and practical contributions, followed by research limitations and future recommendations. In the end conclusion summarizes the main findings.

2. The Role of Internal Communication in Change Management

Internal communication can be defined as a cooperative process between the employees of one organization aimed at achieving a mutually beneficial outcome and cultivating good relationships (Yue et al., 2025). It also represents a structured system of information flows through which employees receive, interpret, and exchange task-related and other important information. It comprises formal and informal communications, in upward, downward, and horizontal directions, with a focus on building a holistic and ethical communication network that considers the needs of every employee. The positive perception of internal communication practices is defined as internal communication satisfaction (Tkalac Verčić, 2021). By actively participating in the organizational communication processes, employees satisfy their personal needs for involvement (Anderson & Martin, 1995). In that way, they build good relationships with their co-workers and increase their intrinsic motivation to work (Gray & Laidlaw, 2004).

When internal communication fails to meet psychological and relational needs, the consequences can be significant. The outcomes of poor organizational communications (expressed as low internal communication satisfaction) include lower employee commitment, absenteeism, larger turnovers, and lower productivity (Jiang & Probst, 2014). At the individual level, poor internal communication can result in greater insecurity, increased stress, and burnout (Gray & Laidlaw, 2004). These negative effects can also transfer to change management processes. The doubt or uncertainty in new initiatives that arise due to the lack of change-related information can cause anxiety among employees and diminish their readiness for change. These behaviors can be positioned within Information Processing Theory (Galbraith, 1974), which perceives employees as cognitive agents with limited capacity to absorb and utilize organizational information. From this perspective, different dimensions of internal communication represent distinct organizational information structures that either support or constrain employees' capacity to process change-related information. The challenge-hindrance framework (LePine et al., 2005) serves as a complementary lens, explaining how workplace stressors interact with these communication structures and affect employees' reactions. When changes occur, employees make sense of it through communication. They also evaluate the impact of change on their own job position and their future within the company (Men et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2021). Transparent and open communication builds trust and reduces uncertainty, which in turn encourages greater openness to change (Yue et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021). This is especially relevant for SMEs because their internal culture is characterized by closer interpersonal relationships, as well as informal and direct communication patterns (Farr-Wharton & Brunetto, 2007).

Previous studies observing the internal communication in SMEs are limited and have focused on examining it either as a single construct (Fritzenschaft, 2014), or through its few isolated dimensions (Farr-Wharton & Brunetto, 2007; Arnaout & Esposito, 2018). Other studies conducted on organizations of different sizes have also mainly examined separate elements of internal communication, such as supervisor communication, communication climate, corporate information, or informal information exchange, and how they relate to various change outcomes (Rogiest et al., 2015; Rafferty & Restubog, 2016; Li et al., 2021). Studies most often focused on satisfaction with communication with superiors, emphasizing its importance in developing trust and encouraging positive employee reactions to change (Farr-Wharton & Brunetto, 2007; Men et al., 2020; Yue et al., 2023). The communication climate has also been frequently analyzed, showing that open surroundings increase affective commitment and boost change-supportive outcomes (Neill et al., 2020).

Other ICS dimensions have received far less attention. Studies on horizontal communication show inconsistent results, ranging from weak positive effects on readiness to change to more considerable links between peer relationships and employee support for change (Cunningham et al., 2002; Madsen et al., 2005). Informal communication has mainly been discussed indirectly, mostly through rumors, which have been proven to increase anxiety or resistance during transition periods (Rafferty & Restubog, 2016; Jiang et al., 2020). In studies on transparent corporate information, positive effects on reducing uncertainty and building employee trust have been demonstrated, especially during turbulent times such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Li et al., 2021). Satisfaction with communication on meetings has been linked with improved collective problem-solving and active participation in change initiatives (Ellis et al., 2023). Finally, communication media has shown to be important in how employees perceive the credibility of information, where personal

and direct communication channels have shown stronger positive effects (Men et al., 2022). These discrepancies across previous findings further motivate a multi-dimensional approach that independently tests each ICS sub-dimension, especially in small and medium-sized enterprises as little is known empirically about their communication practices, particularly when managing change. Taking the indicated into account, the first set of hypotheses is defined as:

H1.1: Satisfaction with feedback is positively associated with readiness for change.

H1.2: Satisfaction with communication with one's immediate superior is positively associated with readiness for change.

H1.3: Satisfaction with horizontal communication is positively associated with readiness for change.

H1.4: Satisfaction with informal communication is positively associated with readiness for change.

H1.5: Satisfaction with information about the organization is positively associated with readiness for change.

H1.6: Satisfaction with the communication climate is positively associated with readiness for change.

H1.7: Satisfaction with the quality of communication media is positively associated with readiness for change.

H1.8: Satisfaction with communication in meetings is positively associated with readiness for change.

Even though the defined hypotheses presume the positive association of all eight ICS dimensions with RFC, it is expected that not all dimensions will contribute equally to this outcome. Information Processing Theory (Galbraith, 1974) explains why. Some dimensions carry information about the broader organizational context, including priorities, goals, expectations and overall business direction. This makes them more proximal to readiness for change. Other dimensions are more pointed to relational and task coordinating functions and are therefore less directly tied to organization-wide change processes. This distinction is especially relevant in SMEs, due to their flatter hierarchies and informal internal structures. On this basis, organizational-level ICS dimensions are expected to show stronger associations with RFC than interpersonal ones. This is supported by previous research using the same instrument, which showed that ICS dimensions did not contribute equally to different organizational outcomes. For example, Sinčić Ćorić et al. (2020) found that although all eight ICS dimensions correlated with life satisfaction, only two (informal communication and climate) emerged as significant predictors in the regression model. Similarly, Pološki Vokić et al. (2021) showed that communication climate and supervisor communication were the strongest predictors of organizational trust. This is why multidimensional approach to internal communication is important to realize which concrete dimensions contribute most to development of employees' readiness for change.

2.1. Mediation and Moderation effects

Studies so far have acknowledged that the association between internal communication and change readiness is not exclusively linear, but can integrate additional mediation and moderation processes. Mediating effects, such as trust in management, organizational support (Cao & Le, 2024), or self-efficacy (Zainab et al., 2022) can be significant transmitting variables, while the leadership roles (Saeed et al., 2024), or employee emotional exhaustion (Raza et al., 2023) can strongly moderate the strength or the direction of the observed relationship. The role of moderators stems from the actual business contexts. The processes of globalization and digitalization have accelerated the dynamics of change acceptance in today's organizations, making the work environment more uncertain and unpredictable (Christensen et al., 2020). Digital communication has changed the way jobs need to and can be performed in traditional offices, and has influenced the formation of new job arrangements. Hence, today's typical workplace consists not only of the physical office but also of online spheres; both of which require employees' full presence and can blur work-life boundaries. In that kind of situation, in which employees are already overwhelmed with too many responsibilities, new changes can present an additional burden to them (Chênevert et al., 2019). Previous studies have shown that these stressors can negatively impact individuals' physical, physiological, and cognitive aspects, and lead to increased tension and turnover intentions (Hakro et al., 2022), diminished affective commitments (Chênevert et al., 2013), and burnout (Morić Milovanović & Cvjetković, 2024).

Work demands accumulate over time and deplete a person's physical or mental resources, leading to overtiredness (Presti & Nonnis, 2014). As a result, employees lack the energy to cope with constant job requirements (Bakker et al., 2023a), particularly when accompanied by tight deadlines, heavy workloads, or a perceived inability to meet organizational expectations (O'Connor et al., 2018; Chênevert et al., 2019). A similar effect has been shown with information overload, a very frequent stressor in contemporary business environments. It is defined as a condition in which individual effectiveness is reduced due to longer exposure to excessive information (Hoq, 2016). Although new technologies were expected to simplify workflows, they

often accelerate the generation and circulation of information, making it more difficult for employees to find and retrieve the data they need. Research has shown that information overload at work can lead to stress, job dissatisfaction, or anxiety (Bawden et al., 1999) and can negatively affect overall well-being (Edmunds & Morris, 2000).

When examining the mediating effects on the ICS-RFC relationship, previous research has shown that high-quality change communication can further strengthen the relationship between internal communication and positive change outcomes, because it justifies the necessity for change, and in turn, reduces uncertainty (Petrou et al., 2018). Perception of quality of change communication (PQCC) refers to employee assessment of specific change-related information; whether it is relevant, accurate, concrete, truthful and delivered on time. So, while ICS dimensions relate to employees' general satisfaction with different organizational communication practices, PQCC specifically comprises their evaluations of the quality of communication about concrete change. Previous studies have shown that the quality of change communication mediates the link between leadership communication and employee reactions to change (Rafferty & Restubog, 2016; Meyer, 2021). Similarly, its mediating role in the relationship between internal communication, communication climate, and positive employee responses to change, including identification and affective commitment, has been confirmed (Rogiest et al., 2015; Sun et al., 2021). However, these findings mainly come from studies conducted in large organizations, while evidence from SMEs is still scarce. In light of this, an additional set of variables is proposed:

H2.1 – H2.8: The relationship between each dimension of internal communication satisfaction: *satisfaction with feedback, satisfaction with communication with immediate superior, satisfaction with horizontal communication, satisfaction with informal communication, satisfaction with information about the organization, satisfaction with communication climate, satisfaction with communication in meetings, and satisfaction with quality of communication media*, and readiness for change is mediated by the perceived quality of change communication.

H3.1–H3.8: Information overload moderates the relationship between each dimension of internal communication satisfaction: *satisfaction with feedback, satisfaction with communication with immediate superior, satisfaction with horizontal communication, satisfaction with informal communication, satisfaction with information about the organization, satisfaction with communication climate, satisfaction with communication in meetings, and satisfaction with quality of communication media*, and readiness for change.

H4.1–H4.8: Work demands moderate the relationship between each dimension of internal communication satisfaction: *satisfaction with feedback, satisfaction with communication with immediate superior, satisfaction with horizontal communication, satisfaction with informal communication, satisfaction with information about the organization, satisfaction with communication climate, satisfaction with communication in meetings, and satisfaction with quality of communication media*, and readiness for change.

Since the literature holds limited prior evidence on moderating roles of IO and WD at the individual ICS dimension level, hypotheses H3 and H4 are formulated as exploratory. No directional predictions are made regarding the sign or pattern of these interactions, because the effects may vary depending on the specific communication dimension and the level of the stressor.

3. Methodology

This is a quantitative study, based on the data collected via a self-report questionnaire created in Google Forms. The research targeted employees working in Croatian small and medium-sized enterprises, excluding micro enterprises due to their specific communication patterns. According to the Croatian Financial Agency (2024), in 2022, there were 452,970 employees in 15,855 small and medium-sized enterprises. To ensure representativeness for large populations, the recommended sample size is 384 valid answers (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). The sampling frame was compiled using the Fininfo database (El koncept d.o.o., 2024). Respondents were selected using random sampling, more precisely, proportional stratified sampling which reflected the sectoral structure of the Croatian economy (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Within each stratum, firms were randomly chosen according to the national activity classification (Singh & Mangat, 2013). In case of missing email contacts, they were manually added by using information available on the company websites.

In the first part of the questionnaire, respondents had to answer a different set of demographic questions, such as gender, age, education, role, department, firm size, and industry. The second part contained the study variables. Independent variables included eight dimensions of internal communication satisfaction. Perceived quality of change communication was a mediator, while work demands and information overload were moderators. Readiness for change served as the dependent variable. All constructs were measured using Likert-type scales adapted from validated instruments. *Internal Communication Satisfaction dimensions* were

assessed using 32 items (4 items per dimension), measured on a 7-point scale. Questions were based on the instrument developed by Tkalac Verčić et al. (2009). The item order was partially modified to reduce common method bias. Cronbach's Alpha values were as follows: satisfaction with feedback ($\alpha = .89$), satisfaction with communication with immediate superior ($\alpha = .89$), satisfaction with horizontal communication ($\alpha = .87$), satisfaction with informal communication ($\alpha = .78$), satisfaction with information about the organization ($\alpha = .87$), satisfaction with communication climate ($\alpha = .94$), satisfaction with quality of communication media ($\alpha = .90$), and satisfaction with communication in meetings ($\alpha = .91$). *Perceived Quality of Change Communication* was measured with nine statements on a 7-point Likert scale, adapted from Sun et al. (2021) scale. Cronbach's Alpha value was 0.96. *Work Demands* were operationalised through eleven items from the third version of the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (Burr et al., 2019), measured on a 7-point scale. Cronbach's Alpha value was 0.89. *Information Overload* was observed through sixteen items measured on a 5-point scale (Misra & Stokols, 2012), with Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.91. *Readiness for Change* was measured with nine items (Bouckennooghe et al., 2009), using a 5-point Likert scale. Cronbach's Alpha value was 0.92.

Negatively phrased items were reworded into positive ones to avoid coding mistakes. The standard ethical standards and procedures were followed (Martin & Marker, 2007). The accompanying letter was sent together with the link to fill the questionnaire, in which the participants were informed of the aims of the study and the way their data would be used, ensuring their confidentiality and anonymity. Moreover, their rights regarding voluntary participation and withdrawal were clearly stated, notifying them additionally that their answers would be used in aggregate form.

3.1. Sample

The collection of data started in May 2024. The first wave lasted until mid-June, during which 4,100 emails were sent to the chosen sample, followed by one additional reminder. The survey closed at the beginning of July 2024. A total of 608 answers were received (14.8 % response rate). Next step included data cleaning: business owners and employees working in micro or large firms were deleted, as several dimensions of internal communication do not apply to their role (e.g., communication with supervisors). Boxplot analysis also revealed several outliers. After clearing up the data, the final sample consisted of 454 respondents, whose answers were used in the statistical analysis and hypothesis testing.

In terms of demographics, the sample consists mostly of women (64.8%). Majority of the respondents belong to the 31–50 age group (62.4%), have a higher education (75.5%), and perform either managerial (38.1%) or administrative (41.4%) positions within their organizations. Most respondents work in privately owned enterprises (90.7%). In total, 28.9% of the respondents work in medium-sized enterprises, while 71.1% are employed in small enterprises. Respondents are distributed across various departments and industries, which corresponds to the employment structure of SMEs based on the national classification of business activities (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2020).

4. Results

Before conducting the regression, mediation, and moderation analyses, sampling and nonsampling errors were examined. Non-response bias was estimated using the method of wave analysis (Phillips et al., 2016). The obtained difference of -0.11 showed no meaningful bias. Additionally, in the Harman test, the largest factor captured 29% of the total variance. This implies that common method bias is not an issue, as it is below 50 % threshold (Fuller et al., 2016). Moreover, regression diagnostics were examined, including linearity, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity (Hayes, 2022), all of which were within acceptable values. This allowed for further statistical analysis.

The first step included calculating descriptive statistics for all the observed variables (means, standard deviations, and internal consistency reliability coefficients through Cronbach's alpha). In the next step, Pearson correlation coefficients were obtained to explore the associations between the variables. Overall, the analysis showed moderate to strong positive associations among internal communication satisfaction dimensions. Readiness for change was positively related to all communication dimensions, with the strongest connection observed for communication climate, meeting communication, and satisfaction with organizational information. Perceived quality of change communication showed strong positive associations with communication satisfaction and a moderate positive relationship with readiness for change, while being negatively related to information overload and work demands. Both stressor variables exhibited predominantly weak negative relationships with most communication dimensions.

Following the correlation analysis, direct effects were first estimated using multiple regression analysis in SPSS (IBM Corp., 2019). In addition, moderation analyses were conducted to examine whether the two

stressor variables, information overload (IO) and work demands (WD), modify the strength of the relationships between each of the internal communication satisfaction dimension and readiness for change. For this purpose, all continuous predictors (SwHC, SwIO, SwCC, SwQM, SwIS, SwCM, SwIC, SwF, IO, WD) were mean-centered, and interaction terms were computed by multiplying each centered communication predictor with the centered moderator (Dawson, 2014). Moderation models were estimated using hierarchical regression. In the first step, the main effects were entered, while interaction terms were added in the second step to assess incremental variance explained (ΔR^2) (Dawson, 2014). To complement the SPSS results, significant interactions were visualised in R (R Core Team, 2023), where interaction plots were generated at low (-1 SD), mean, and high ($+1$ SD) values of the moderators.

A mediation analysis was conducted using structural equation modelling (SEM) in the R package lavaan (Rosseel, 2012) to test the mediating role of employees' perception of change communication quality (PQCC). The mediation analysis was based on the same mean-centered variables used in the moderation analyses. The mediation model specified paths from each internal communication satisfaction dimension to the mediator PQCC (a-paths), from PQCC to RFC (b-path), and direct paths from each internal communication dimension to RFC (c'-paths). Indirect ($a \times b$) and total effects were defined using lavaan's model constraint operators (Rosseel, 2012). Parameter estimation was performed using maximum likelihood (ML). Indirect effects were evaluated using non-parametric bootstrap procedures with 5,000 resamples, which is recommended in contemporary mediation research because indirect effect distributions are often asymmetric and bootstrapping provides more accurate confidence intervals (Hayes, 2022; Huh et al., 2022). Since the mediation model was just-identified ($df = 0$), global model fit indices were not interpreted. Instead, model evaluation focused on the interpretation of parameter estimates, indirect effects, and explained variance rather than overall fit statistics. Coefficients of determination (R^2) were therefore reported for both PQCC and RFC to indicate the proportion of explained variance. Results of multiple regression analysis on direct effects are presented in Table 1, while moderation and mediation analyses are presented in Tables 2, 3, and 4.

Predictor	M	S.D.	B	SE B	β	t	p	VIF
Feedback (SwF)	5,060	1,289	0.014	0.039	0.027	0.366	.714	2.87
Supervisor (SwIS)	5,420	1,361	-0.026	0.031	-0.052	-0.832	.406	2.11
Horizontal (SwHC)	5,502	1,047	-0.001	0.039	-0.001	-0.018	.985	1.93
Informal (SwIC)	4,823	1,157	-0.027	0.037	-0.046	-0.739	.460	2.11
Organizational (SwIO)	5,197	1,368	0.076	0.034	0.153	2.277	.023 **	2.44
Climate (SwCC)	5,330	1,342	0.093	0.039	0.183	2.381	.018 **	3.21
Media (SwQM)	5,303	1,230	0.028	0.038	0.049	0.715	.475	2.60
Meetings (SwCM)	4,997	1,334	0.071	0.040	0.139	1.785	.075 *	3.31

Note: $R^2 = .18$, adj. $R^2 = .16$, $F(8, 445) = 12.12$, $p < .001$. Durbin-Watson = 2.19, Max Cook's Distance = 0.064; $p < .05^{**}$; $p < .10^*$.

Table 1. Multiple regression results: direct effects

Table 1 presents the results of the multiple regression analysis of direct effects of internal communication satisfaction dimensions on readiness for change (RFC). The model is statistically significant and explained 18% of the variance in RFC ($R^2 = .18$, Adj. $R^2 = .16$). Results show that three predictors display positive and statistically significant associations: satisfaction with information about the organization ($\beta = .153$, $p = .023 < 0.05$), with communication climate ($\beta = .183$, $p = .018 < 0.05$), and with communication in meetings ($\beta = .139$, $p = .075 < 0.10$). The other communication dimensions exhibited non-significant associations ($p > .10$). Results of the IO moderation analysis are presented in Table 2.

Results show that the full model explained approximately 20% of the variance in RFC ($R^2 = .198$). After the inclusion of the interaction terms, there was a small, but statistically insignificant increase in explained variance ($\Delta R^2 = .023$). This pattern is not uncommon in moderation research, as the incremental variance of individual interaction terms is diluted when multiple predictors are tested simultaneously (Dawson, 2014; Hayes, 2022). Nevertheless, as many interaction terms were tested simultaneously, there is a higher chance of the occurrence of Type I error (false positive finding), which is why marginally significant interactions ($p < .10$) should be interpreted with caution.

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p	VIF
Information Overload	0.115	0.035	0.145	3.248	.001**	1.10
Interaction effects						
SwF × IO	0.039	0.043	0.064	0.889	.374	2.93
SwIS × IO	-0.085	0.038	-0.147	-2.263	.024**	2.38
SwHC × IO	-0.060	0.048	-0.079	-1.231	.219	2.30
SwIC × IO	-0.045	0.046	-0.071	-0.972	.332	2.97
SwIO × IO	-0.031	0.039	-0.056	-0.800	.424	2.75
SwCC × IO	0.004	0.047	0.007	0.091	.928	3.57
SwQM × IO	0.075	0.042	0.122	1.784	.075*	2.63
SwCM × IO	0.023	0.048	0.040	0.478	.633	3.97

Note: Model 1: R² = .198, Adj. R² = .182; Model 2: R² = .221, Adj. R² = .191, $\Delta R^2 = .023$, F change (8, 436) = 1.615. Durbin-Watson = 2.251. Max Cook's distance = .075; p < .05**, p < .10*;

Table 2. Moderation Effects of Information Overload

The same predictors identified in the direct effects analysis remained significant predictors of RFC, including satisfaction with information about the organization (SwIO), communication climate (SwCC), and communication in meetings (SwCM). In addition, information overload itself showed a positive and statistically significant main association on RFC ($\beta = .145, p = .001 < .01$).

Two interaction terms reached statistical significance. The interaction between supervisor communication and information overload (SwIS × IO) was significant ($\beta = -.147, p = .024 < .05$), indicating that the positive association between supervisor communication and readiness for change weakens as information overload increases. In addition, the interaction between satisfaction with the communication media quality and information overload (SwQM × IO) showed a marginal association ($\beta = .122, p = .075$), indicating that the quality of the communication channel becomes more important for RFC when employees experience higher levels of information overload. Graphical representations in Figures 1 and 2 support these results.

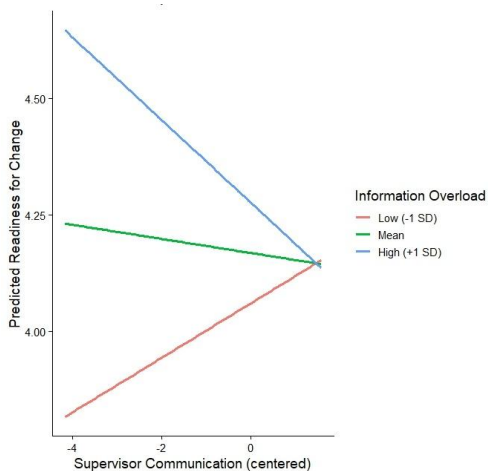


Figure 1. Interaction effect of IO 1

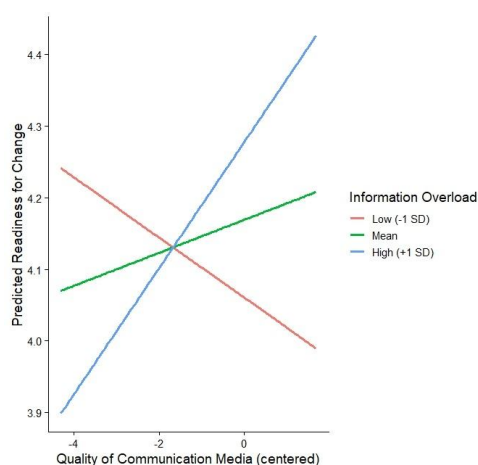


Figure 2. Interaction effect of IO 2

The interaction plot displayed in Figure 1 shows that satisfaction with supervisor communication is positively associated with readiness for change when information overload is low. But this relationship becomes weaker and turns negative at high levels of IO. Similarly, the interaction plot in Figure 2 shows that the relationship between the communication media quality and readiness for change also depends on the level of information overload. When information overload is high, a higher perception of the quality of communication media is connected to higher readiness for change. In contrast, under lower levels of information overload, this relationship is weaker and slightly negative. Next, the results of the WD moderation analysis are presented in Table 3.

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p	VIF
Work Demands	0.068	0.024	0.127	2.805	.005**	1.14
Interaction effects						
SwF × WD	0.014	0.029	0.035	0.486	.627	2.82
SwIS × WD	-0.056	0.026	-0.143	-2.135	.033**	2.49
SwHC × WD	-0.073	0.034	-0.140	-2.130	.034**	2.39
SwIC × WD	0.002	0.031	0.005	0.069	.945	2.94
SwIO × WD	-0.038	0.028	-0.103	-1.393	.164	3.01
SwCC × WD	0.065	0.033	0.167	1.990	.047**	3.91
SwQM × WD	0.010	0.031	0.026	0.336	.737	3.23
SwCM × WD	0.030	0.035	0.078	0.858	.392	4.59

Model fit: Model 1: $R^2 = .193$, Adj. $R^2 = .177$, $F(9, 444) = 11.813$, $p < .001$; Model 2: $R^2 = .216$, Adj. $R^2 = .185$, $\Delta R^2 = .022$, $F \text{ change}(8, 436) = 1.552$, Durbin-Watson = 2.218; Max Cook's Distance = .085; $p < .05^{**}$.

Table 3. Moderation Effects of Work Demands

As is visible in the table, Model 1, which tests the direct effects, explained 19.3% of the variance in readiness for change and was statistically significant. By adding the interaction terms, explained variance had a small, but non-significant increase ($\Delta R^2 = .022$). This means that work demands contributed modestly to the model. The main, direct effects remained unchanged compared to the previous analysis. Work demands (WD) showed a significant positive main association ($\beta = .127$, $p = .005 < .01$), meaning higher perceived work demands were associated with higher readiness for change. Three interaction effects reached statistical significance. The interaction SwIS × WD ($\beta = -.143$, $p = .033 < .05$) indicates that higher work demands weaken the positive association of supervisor communication on readiness for change. A similar pattern was observed for horizontal communication (SwHC × WD; $\beta = -.140$, $p = .034 < .05$), suggesting that its association with readiness for change weakens as work demands increase. In contrast, the interaction between satisfaction with the communication climate and work demands is positive and significant (SwCC × WD; $\beta = .167$, $p = .047 < .05$), suggesting that a supportive communication climate becomes increasingly important for promoting readiness for change under conditions of higher work demands. These interaction results are illustrated in Figures 3, 4, and 5.

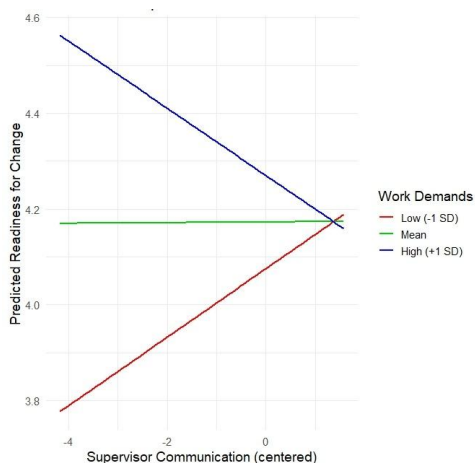


Figure 3. Interaction effect of WD 1

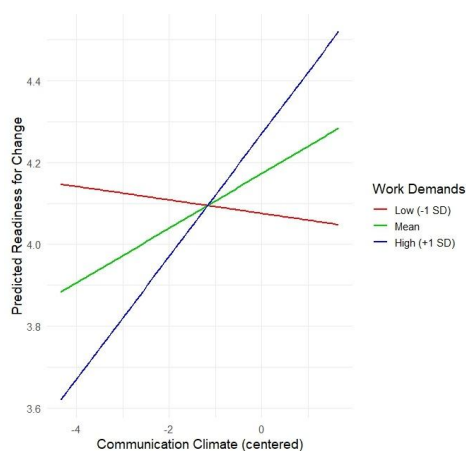


Figure 4. Interaction effect of WD 2

Figure 3 shows that when work demands are low, higher satisfaction with supervisor communication is associated with greater RFC, whereas under high work demands, this relationship becomes negative. At average levels of work demands, communication with the immediate superior is only weakly related to readiness for change, indicating that the association of communication with the immediate superior depends strongly on employees' workload. Figure 4 displays that the positive relationship between communication climate and RFC strengthens as work demands increase. Under high work demands, a supportive

communication climate is associated with a considerably higher level of readiness for change, whereas under low work demands, this relationship is weak.

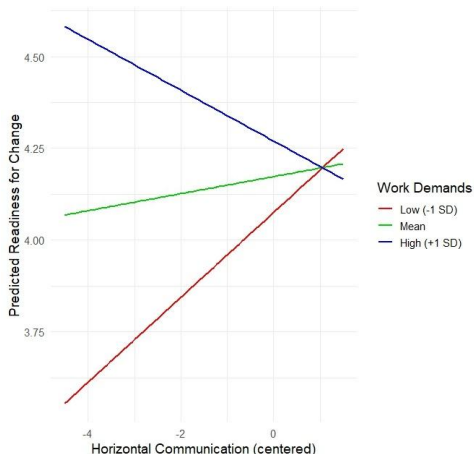


Figure 5. Interaction effect of WD 3

Figure 5 shows that the positive association between horizontal communication and readiness for change weakens as work demands increase. While better horizontal communication is linked to higher readiness for change under low work demands, this relationship becomes noticeably weaker and even turns negative when work demands are high.

To further examine the mechanisms linking internal communication satisfaction dimensions to readiness for change, the next analysis focuses on the mediating role of perceived quality of change communication, as presented in Table 4.

Predictor	ACME	95% CI (LL, UL)	P(ACME)	ADE	P(ADE)	Total	P (Total)
Feedback (SwF)	-0.001	-0.011, 0.009	.865	0.000	.998	-0.001	.987
Superior (SwIS)	0.010	-0.004, 0.024	.187	0.067*	.079	0.076**	.038
Horizontal (SwHC)	0.009	-0.007, 0.025	.262	0.084**	.043	0.093**	.024
Informal (SwIC)	0.010	-0.006, 0.026	.230	0.018	.681	0.028	.508
Organizational (SwIO)	0.014	-0.006, 0.034	.173	-0.040	.314	-0.026	.514
Climate (SwCC)	0.027	-0.006, 0.060	.108	0.044	.270	0.071*	.067
Media (SwQM)	0.005	-0.007, 0.017	.321	-0.033	.361	-0.027	.446
Meetings (SwCM)	0.002	-0.008, 0.012	.743	0.013	.769	0.014	.742

Note. ACME = average causal mediation effect (indirect effect); ADE = average direct effect; Total = ACME + ADE. Estimated from 5,000 bootstrap resamples. **p < .05, *p < .10.

Table 4. Mediation effects

Table 4 presents the results of the mediation analysis. The indirect effect (ACME) captures the extent to which each communication dimension is associated with RFC through PQCC, while the average direct effect (ADE) reflects the remaining influence of the predictor on RFC when PQCC is included in the model. Total effects represent the combined direct and indirect associations (Hayes, 2022). Direct effects (ADE) are reported for completeness, although the primary focus of mediation analysis lies in the indirect pathways (ACME). The results show that none of the indirect effects (ACME) reached statistical significance, suggesting that mediation was not supported in this sample and model specification.

5. Discussion

This study examined the associations between eight dimensions of internal communication satisfaction and employee change readiness in SMEs. These dimensions represent distinct components of organizational information infrastructures, capturing how employees experience information flows, channel effectiveness, and information quality during change processes. Since these variables have not previously been thoroughly empirically tested, the results fill the identified research gap (Angwin et al., 2016). The research framework also included information overload and work demands as moderators, while also testing the mediating role of employees' perception of change communication quality. This resulted in setting up a total of 32 hypotheses. In terms of direct effects, multiple regression analysis revealed that only three internal communication dimensions were significantly associated with change readiness for SME employees: satisfaction with information about the organization ($\beta = 0.153$, $p = .023$), communication climate ($\beta = 0.183$, $p = .018$), and with communication in meetings ($\beta = 0.139$, $p = .075$), which confirms hypotheses H1.5, H1.6, and H1.8. These findings align with recent research showing that transparent communication reduces uncertainty and strengthens organizational relationships (Yue et al., 2023; Li et al., 2021), while a positive communication climate enhances affective commitment to change (Neill et al., 2020). The significance of communication in meetings supports earlier findings that group meetings reduce change-related uncertainty (Bordia et al., 2004) and ameliorate information transfer (Reinig & Shin, 2002) by allowing for direct response and reaction. All three significant dimensions relate directly to organizational-level information structures: satisfaction with information about the organization reflects perceived information quality and transparency, communication climate represents the broader informational environment, and communication in meetings functions as a rich channel that enables sensemaking and mutual interpretation of provided information.

On the other hand, other dimensions of ICS showed no significant influence on change readiness, meaning the remaining hypotheses could not be confirmed. These results may reflect the specific characteristics of SMEs, which have flatter organizational structures and informal communication practices (Psychogios et al., 2019; Blakčori & Aroles, 2021) that coexist with greater employee autonomy in decision-making (Lucas et al., 2008). When compared to other studies, these results are partially inconsistent with previous findings. For example, in terms of communication with the immediate supervisor, Endrejat et al. (2021) found that only a certain type of supervisor communication, identified as restrictive communication, reduced readiness for change, whereas collaborative communication had no significant effect. Similarly, Morić Milovanović et al. (2022) reported no significant effect of supervisor and peer relations on change readiness among Croatian employees in a medium-sized enterprise. Partially inconsistent results gained in this study should also be observed from the perspective of the post-pandemic context. Evidence suggests that employee perceptions of internal communication dimensions have shifted (Tkalac Verčić & Špoljarić, 2023), which may further clarify why these results do not completely comply with studies conducted before. For example, corporate information and communication climate gained more in importance while feedback, informal communication, and media quality became less notable (Tkalac Verčić & Špoljarić, 2023). This points to a possible contextual interpretation. During crises, employees tend to prefer formal communication channels to reduce uncertainty (Luo & Jiang, 2014), which may offer one possible explanation of why formal dimensions demonstrated stronger associations with RFC while more informal dimensions did not. However, this interpretation is based on prior literature and was not directly tested in the present study.

The analysis further showed that information overload and work demands have complex moderating roles. Both information overload ($\beta = 0.145$, $p = .001$) and work demands ($\beta = 0.127$, $p = .005$) had significant positive direct associations with change readiness. This finding can be interpreted through the 'challenge-hindrance framework' (Podsakoff et al., 2023), which advocates that reasonable levels of demands and information may function as motivators rather than barriers (LePine et al., 2005). In dynamic SME contexts, employees who are accustomed to multitasking and rapid information exchange may perceive organizational change as part of their everyday work environment (Cavanaugh et al., 2000; Majid et al., 2017). This is why these two stressor variables are not directly (when isolated) perceived as a threat to change readiness. But, when in interaction with other elements, both moderators shaped how specific internal communication dimensions were associated with change readiness. Information overload moderated the effects of supervisor communication ($\beta = -0.147$, $p = .024$) and communication media quality ($\beta = 0.122$, $p = .075$), supporting H3.2 and H3.7. From an information processing perspective, these findings indicate that work demands and information overload act as contextual constraints on employees' cognitive capacity to absorb and utilize organizational information. Higher information overload weakened the contribution of supervisor communication, which is consistent with the cognitive resource depletion perspective (Eppler & Mengis, 2004; Karr-Wisniewski & Lu, 2010; Arnold et al., 2023). In contrast, high-quality communication

media became more effective under information overload, as it facilitates more efficient information processing (Lee, 2018). Work demands showed a similar pattern. Negative moderation effects were found for supervisor communication ($\beta = -0.143$, $p = .033$) and horizontal communication ($\beta = -0.140$, $p = .034$), while a positive moderation effect emerged for satisfaction with communication climate ($\beta = 0.167$, $p = .047$), supporting H4.2, H4.3, and H4.6. High work demands tend to reduce employees' capacity to engage with supervisory and peer communication (Eppler & Mengis, 2004; Arnold et al., 2023), whereas a supportive communication climate becomes increasingly important in sustaining change readiness under demanding conditions (Johnston, 2005; Bakker et al., 2023b).

The study also examined whether PQCC mediates the relationship between ICS dimensions and RFC. The mediation analysis did not reveal any statistically significant indirect effects. This finding suggests that, in this sample and model specification, PQCC did not function as a mediator. However, this result should be interpreted carefully. The full measurement model was not tested in the present study, which means that the conceptual proximity between ICS dimensions and PQCC may have influenced the findings. This is why there remains a possibility that the absence of indirect effects reflects the model-specific constraints or the overlap of the measurements, rather than the actual absence of mediation. Nevertheless, this result does not diminish the relevance of the PQCC. Prior research, in which ICS was observed as a one-dimensional construct, showed that PQCC is a statistically significant mediator in the relationship between overall ICS and RFC (Cvjetković, 2024). So, when internal communication is aligned in a coherent way and through an integrated system, the way employees evaluate and perceive change communication becomes an important mechanism through which communication supports readiness for change.

5.1. Theoretical and practical implications

The results of this study contribute to internal communication, organizational information systems, change readiness, and management theories in several ways. First, by observing internal communication satisfaction as a multidimensional construct and testing its eight distinct dimensions simultaneously, the research provides empirical evidence that not all of its aspects equally contribute to change readiness in SMEs. The findings show that only three dimensions, satisfaction with information about the organization, satisfaction with communication climate, and satisfaction with communication in meetings, are significantly related to readiness for change. This indicates that general organizational information structures and everyday communication practices are more relevant for change readiness than interpersonal or channel-specific communication dimensions. Dimensions that are often emphasized in the change management literature, such as management communication, feedback, and peer communication, were not found to be significant predictors in the present study (Angwin et al., 2016). This specificity reveals that formal communication practices may be more significant for change readiness than interpersonal communication channels in SME contexts. From an information processing perspective, the results indicate that readiness for change in SMEs is shaped primarily through communication structures that reduce informational uncertainty, promote transparency, and support employees' cognitive processing of change-related information.

Second, this study incorporates information overload and work demands as workplace stressors and information processing constraints that shape the relationship between internal communication satisfaction and readiness for change. The moderation analysis showed that information overload weakens the effect of supervisor communication while strengthening the effect of communication media quality. Similarly, work demands reduce the effects of supervisor communication and horizontal communication while strengthening the importance of communication climate. These results indicate that communication practices that require greater cognitive effort are less effective when employees are under pressure from too much work or information. Additionally, the study contributes to existing change management theories by showing that mediation through PQCC was not supported in this sample and model specification when internal communication is examined in a multidimensional manner. Although several dimensions exhibit significant direct effects on readiness for change, these effects occurred independently of employees' evaluations of change-specific communication. This does not mean that the change communication quality does not play an important role in employee change readiness. On the contrary, previous findings have proven that it is a significant mediator when internal communication satisfaction is conceptualized as a unidimensional construct. In broader context, it means that coherent and integrated internal communication may shape employees' interpretations of change messages at an overall level, while, at the dimensional level, specific communication practices influence RFC more directly.

The results also carry important practical considerations for SME managers. The different effects of communication dimensions observed in this research suggest that a "blanket" approach to change communication is not efficient, especially when employees face different levels of information overload and

work demands. The significantly positive effects of satisfaction with communication about organization, communication climate, and communication in meetings suggest that these formal, organizational-level communication practices should be the core of change communication strategies in SMEs. This means prioritizing transparency in sharing information about financial performance, strategic plans, and regulatory changes, and investing in a supportive communication climate characterized by openness, trust, and psychological safety (Neill et al., 2020). This will not only directly promote change readiness but also serve as a protective mechanism against the negative effects of demanding work conditions, which is particularly valuable in contemporary work environments where hybrid and remote work arrangements are common. Structured meeting communication should be encouraged as a primary channel for change initiatives, providing opportunities for two-way dialogue, immediate feedback, and clarity about roles and expectations. Thus, these findings emphasize the need for more targeted and context-sensitive communication approaches.

5.2. Limitations and future recommendations

The results of the study should be interpreted taking into account the study's limitations. First, the research design is cross-sectional (based on perceptions and experiences at a single point in time) and relies on self-reported data, which restricts the possibility of drawing causal conclusions. This particularly applies to the positive direct associations of information overload and work demands with readiness for change. Although interpreted through the challenge-hindrance framework, there is a possibility that reverse causality is also present, meaning that employees with higher readiness for change may inherently perceive stressors as more manageable, rather than stressors driving readiness. Future research is encouraged to focus on longitudinal designs that observe the impact of ICS dimensions on RFC over a certain period of time. Second, the study focused exclusively on small and medium-sized enterprises, excluding micro-enterprises. Future studies are encouraged to include employees from micro-enterprises and complement quantitative findings with qualitative approaches. In addition, the proposed model could be further extended by adding additional organizational and individual-level variables, such as trust, employee involvement, and specific communication channel usage, while individual characteristics, such as demographics or personality traits, could provide a detailed understanding of other factors contributing to RFC.

Additionally, although the sampling frame was constructed using proportional stratified sampling to reflect the sectoral structure of the Croatian economy, the voluntary nature of individual participation and the achieved response rate of 14.8% introduce a self-selection element at the respondent level. As some employees could possibly be nested within the same organizations, their shared work contexts may have introduced clustering effects that were not accounted for in the present analyses. Future research should apply multilevel modelling to address this. Even though all survey instruments were applied as originally validated, the absence of confirmatory factor analysis, discriminant validity assessment, and measurement model fit evaluation in the present sample limits confidence in the distinctiveness of the constructs. This can be especially relevant due to the multidimensional nature of ICS and the conceptual similarity among several sub-dimensions. For this reason, future research should include full measurement model testing to provide stronger evidence of construct validity. Another limitation is that the study focused on RFC as an attitudinal construct, without examining its behavioral or performance-related outcomes, such as actual change implementation. Future research could investigate these mechanisms. Other organizational barriers could also be added as moderators, such as message competition or information filtering.

Finally, a methodological limitation relates to the use of different software and analytical procedures. Regression and moderation analyses were conducted in SPSS, while mediation was tested in R. Although this approach allowed the use of appropriate tools for each analysis, it may have reduced methodological consistency and made the integration of results more challenging. In particular, examining direct, moderating, and mediating effects in separate steps does not allow all relationships to be tested simultaneously within a single model, which may limit a full understanding of the interdependencies among the study variables. Future research could address this limitation by applying integrative analytical approaches that enable the simultaneous estimation of direct, indirect, and interaction effects. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable empirical evidence on the complex and context-dependent role of internal communication in shaping employees' readiness for change, offering relevant theoretical insights and practical implications for managing change processes in small and medium-sized enterprises.

6. Conclusion

This research has shown that specific communication dimensions, particularly information about the organization, communication climate, and communication in meetings, play an important role in fostering employees' readiness for change, while this relationship is dependent on contextual factors such as information overload and work demands. Specifically, information overload weakened the association between supervisor communication and readiness for change, while strengthening the effect of communication media quality. Work demands reduced the effects of supervisor and horizontal communication, and strengthened the importance of communication climate. The findings indicate that in SMEs, where communication structures are less formalized, organizational-level communication practices have particular significance in preparing employees for change. This points to the importance of investing in structured, transparent, and climate-focused communication as a foundation for successful change management in small and medium-sized enterprises.

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