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## Do Italians Communicate it Better? Exploring Public Organizations Professionals' Skills in Learning Environments

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# *Do Italians Communicate it Better? Exploring Public Organizations Professionals' Skills in Learning Environments*

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## **Abstract**

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically altered the way organizations work, as well as technologies, skills and knowledge required to adopt these new disruptive methodologies. While firms have found themselves prepared to cope with this need because more sensitive to their employee's digital competences, this considerably differs for public organizations, where turnover and professional trainings are often delayed or non-existent. These difficulties particularly occur in communication sector, where professionals must keep up with several threats in an unstable scenario.

The role played by digital techniques in this critical period has brought new forms of knowledge exchange among both professionals and scholars, spurring new methods of inquiry in qualitative and exploratory research.

The aim of this article is to investigate which are the new digital communication skills required to professionals in public organizations, and what issues arise in acquiring or applying them during the working daily life. To meet this goal, a digital focus group on Microsoft Teams among professional communicators from public organizations was carried out. The findings of the focus group have been discussed to address a twofold need: mapping hard and soft skills of digital communicators in Public Administration; evaluate the relevance of virtual focus groups in organizational studies within the pandemic scenario.

Keywords: communication, public organizations, organizational learning.

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## 1. Introduction

The current pandemic scenario has handed the world of organizations a disruptive picture in the way they approach their processes (Werron, Ringel, 2020). Never so much as in nowadays routine, working methodologies are being pervasively affected by digitalization (Suckert, 2021). In fact, unlike in the past, spatial and temporal contexts in which professionals' interactions and communication take place (Addeo, Masullo, 2021) affect the organizational environment. The consequences spurred by social distancing and the adoption of remote working processes have been disruptive and, in some cases, have marked a tipping point in individuals' professional experiences (Verma, Gustafsson, 2020). Several international organizations have extended the adoption of working methods beyond the timeframe imposed by national policies to deal with COVID-19 threats (Butera, 2020), showing great sensitivity towards organizational changes resulting from crises (Graham, 2020).

Private organization and businesses have found themselves ready to cope with this challenge (Respi, Gerosa, 2021). because more sensitive to their employee's digital know - how improvement. Particularly, middle managers (de Jong et al., 2021) were pivotal in leading towards digital change in terms of training and continuous improvement within firms (Capolupo et al., 2021; Luo, 2021). This approach allowed to meet the needs of employees, who have in fact withstood the threats of the pandemic and leveraged digital technology to keep their organizational performance intact (Watson, 2017; Kronblad, Envall Pregmark, 2021). Both organizational (Hansen, Flyverbom, 2015; Lee, Lee, 2021) and sociological literature (Miele, Tirabeni, 2020) has consistently emphasized the correlation between the adoption of new technologies and improved performance, shedding lights on their role towards firms' financial success.

While this revolution finds confirmation for businesses, this considerably differs for public bodies (Canel, Luoma-aho, 2018). To contain COVID-19 spreading, Italian Public Administrations were asked to increase the use of agile working, identifying simplified and temporary methods to implement digital technologies at all organizational levels (Todisco et al., 2022). Therefore, smart, and agile working has become an ordinary working method in PA, since office presence has been limited where only necessary (Caballini, et al. 2021). These measures went over the original perception of smart working, which envisaged merely to some extent the service being provided remotely. Nevertheless, Italian PA fabric is currently largely affected by limitations like turnover and the lack of digital know-how (Wolf-Fordham, 2020). Keeping up with new technologies, new digital social contexts (social networks), acquiring the know-how and knowledge to be able to manage them is a highly complex process that requires

adequate adaptability, experience, and willingness to organizational change (Mori et al., 2021). Professionals in communication sector must keep up with Social Media updates, graphic software's tool, their institution needs, and the lack of budget available in such an unstable scenario. Gaps that, as emphasized by the literature (Cepiku et al., 2017), use to affect organizational performance to some extent (Garnett et al., 2008).

Therefore, the urgency of understanding the communication phenomenon in its complexity (methods, techniques and skills needed to manage them) has been put under the lens of the academic debate (Addeo et al., 2021) alongside the need to understand whether the same technology may also produce better results in research methodologies employed to address these phenomena. In social sciences, there still is an urgent need to address, both theoretically and empirically, the social impact of issues related to COVID-19, as well as to the new methodological approaches to address individuals' opinion considering social distancing and remote life. Ward (2020) clarified this urgent need, which has been carried forward to understand how effective technological research methodologies may be when imposed rather than a free reasoned choice.

Literature, in this sense, holds different positions. The first stream concerns optimism: optimistic scholars (Lazer et al., 2009; Mayer-Schonberger, Cuckier, 2012) argue that the digital transformation in research methods can lead to more accurate results. Contrarywise, critics (Savage, Burrows, 2007) believe that big data and merely digital approach impoverish social sciences and their method (Boyd, Crawford, 2012). A point of agreement has been reached by new critical optimism, the perfect balance between traditional research methods and the disruptive changes brought about by digital methods (Amaturo, Aragona, 2021).

In a nutshell, the need to investigate the evolution of communication in Public Administration in lights of the pandemic goes hand in hand with the aim of finding a point of agreement between technology as a mediator of the human being interaction in social research.

Therefore, to meet these aims, the following Research Questions (RQs) inform this paper:

*RQ.1: Which are the most useful communication skills that professionals in Public Organizations need to learn to cope with the pandemic scenario?*

*RQ.2: Which are the strengths and weaknesses of conducting technology-mediated social research in the light of the new normal pandemic?*

This article is structured as follows: after a brief introduction of the topic, a theoretical background on communication and organizational learning from a sociological perspective is presented to introduce the field of research. The third chapter consists of the methodology employed to address the topics, i.e., a synchronous online focus group conducted with n.18 Public Administration

employees enrolled to the Higher Education program “*Comunicare la PA*”, from University of Salerno, Italy. The aim of the FG is twofold: mapping hard and soft skills of digital communicators in the current Public Administration; evaluate the effectiveness of online focus groups in educational studies within the pandemic scenario.

The fourth chapter discuss the results and provide some useful considerations for both PA and research methodologists. Lastly, conclusions provide limitations and future research developments.

## **2. Research**

### ***2.1 Organizational learning and training***

The relationship between organizational processes and learning practices has long been the focus of both managerial and sociological literature. This issue has raised criticisms and discussions that are expressed through the contrast between the notion of learning and that of teaching. Van der Krogt (1998) argues that organizational learning consists of what trainers do, i.e., contents and programs definition through courses and modules; still, he notes that learning is the activity of an individual who interact with its personal environment, both familiar and professional.

That is the reason why learning is fundamental in organizations. According to Senge (1990), the learning organization is one that encourages lifelong learning and knowledge generation at all levels, sets up processes that can easily spread knowledge among the organization where needed and can quickly translate it into changes in the way things are done both internally and externally. Organizational knowledge can be defined as the set of cognitive resources, developed in the context of a given organizational system, that enables the functioning of the system itself, continuously increasing its capacity to create value, thus enabling its survival and development at macro-system level (Laudadio, Fiz Pérez, 2010). On the other hand, training is closely linked to organizational learning, while representing an intangible asset that simplifies the internal interaction between organizational components (Lam, 2000).

Training - that should be continuous, particularly in organizations that innovate their processes (Sung, Choi, 2014) - requires high costs, which are no longer addressed as a burden, but as an investment in human capital (Patzina, Wydra-Somaggio, 2020). Consequently, training-oriented organizations should try to keep negative turnover as low as possible, as the outflow of staff leads to a loss of and a need for new investment in newly recruited human resources.

The role of training within organizations has always been impactful since it represents the engine for their value growth (Means, 2018). The degree of



education, training and experience of employees determines the competences available for the organization, and training functions may be transformed from knowledge, skills, abilities, and personal experiences into resources to be invested within the working environment (Watkins, Marsick, 1992; Basten Haamann, 2018).

Training provides learning that can be fruitful not only for the recipient, but for the whole organization and its stakeholders, especially in public bodies (Tran, Pham, 2019). Training is understood as a process:

- intentional to provide a response to identifiable needs and requirements;
- intentional, in order to respond to specific needs and requirements;
- to be planned according to well-defined methods and stages that reflect the approach of the problem solving process;
- which mostly occurs in each learning environment

A training program provides the worker not only with information and notions, but also opportunities to reconsider its role and functions within the society by promoting a proactive career growth spirit (Bloch, Richmond, 2015). In other words, training programs also possess the ability of generating new queries, stimulating renewed motivation, and opening new horizons to those who actively take part in it (García-Sánchez, et al., 2018).

Training in organizations is an essential tool for building competence at individual, group, and organizational level. It acts on knowledge, skills, and attitudes, producing shifts that should improve individuals' action effectiveness in organizations (Pisanu, Fraccaroli, 2007). The distinction between knowledge, skills and attitudes recalls the key differences between knowing, knowing how to do, and knowing how to be. Knowledge refers to the process of acquisition; the term competence takes on various meanings according to the different definitions. According to Campbell and Kuncel (2002), skills are learned and reflect the application of cognitive resources in solving problems or producing results. They also reflect the methods and procedures used to generate successful solutions or results. Organizational skills provide advantages from quality and efficiency of cognitive processes since organization knowledge is more than the sum of its members 'one. This happens for two reasons: on the one hand, organizations learn from their members through routine training (Haas, 2018); on the other hand, the organizational structure corresponds to a knowledge architecture (Denaux et al., 2017), i.e., a system of relations between individuals (and between individuals and artefacts) that facilitates the functioning of cognitive processes. With regard to observable competences, Spencer and Spencer (1993) represent competence as an iceberg (Iceberg Competency Model), in order to highlight the duplicity of components present in its detection: a visible and tangible component expressed through observable and measurable performances, which refer to the heritage of knowledge and

skills possessed by the individual; a latent, implicit component, which requires an exploration of inner dimensions connected to motivational and socio-emotional processes of the individual. Problem solving corresponds to the so-called transversal competences (Oksana et al., 2020), that is the ability of a group of individuals (in case of an organization) to solve a problem by discussing each other and sharing information, solutions, as well as the tools necessary to implement them.

Lastly, attitudes constitute the subject general orientations, belief systems and the surrounding social and organizational context (Tab.1).

TABLE 1. *Organizational learning levers.*

| Organizational Levers  | Description  |
|------------------------|--|
| Knowledge              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• basic (tools, classifications, events, etc.)</li> <li>• process knowledge</li> <li>• disciplinary and specialist knowledge</li> <li>• self-knowledge</li> </ul>   |
| Organizational skills  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• organizational procedures, standards, and rules</li> <li>• organizational plans and objectives</li> <li>• processes, events, and technologies</li> <li>• system of relationships and leadership</li> <li>• roles and tasks</li> </ul> |
| Observable skills      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• cognitive</li> <li>• psychomotor</li> <li>• physical</li> <li>• interpersonal</li> <li>• emotional</li> <li>• expressive</li> <li>• self-regulation</li> </ul>  |
| Problem solving skills | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• means-end analysis</li> <li>• application of heuristics</li> <li>• metacognition and control over one's own learning processes</li> </ul>   |
| Attitudes and beliefs  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• self-efficacy</li> <li>• organizational attachment and sense of belonging</li> <li>• acceptance of differences in the organization</li> <li>• organizational values</li> </ul>  |

Source: Campbell and Kuncel (2002).

## ***2.2 Organizational Learning: a sociological shift toward practice***

The sociological contribution to Organizational learning (Gherardi, Nicolini, 2001) seeks to investigate this topic from a cultural perspective: OL is a metaphor, rather than a structured procedure, that enhances the development of system of representations with which configure managing and organizing working daily life as if it were an ongoing and constant practical learning process. According to Gherardi (2001:132), there are several definitions of learning:

[...] "Learning is an interpretative device. It enables the construction of a representational system that can be used to analyze the organizational processing of knowledge: how it is produced, how it circulates, how it is institutionalized, and what emancipatory (or otherwise) contribution it can make to society. A constructivist ontology, therefore, is appropriate. If learning is not to be synonymous with other concepts, it requires an object that marks it out and which is empirically circumscribable. Learning is enacted within the boundaries of a domain of knowing and doing: a practice. Learning cannot be compartmentalized into levels and divided up among different scientific disciplines to produce areas of individual, group, organizational and inter-organizational learning. These may be heuristically useful distinctions as long as we bear in mind that knowledge circulates among and unites these various leels, and that any distinction into levels is purely arbitrary"

Research on organizational learning started to be associated to the concept of practice as a unit of analysis (Easterby-Smith et al., 2000) at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s. This has enabled a shift from knowledge to knowing and, more specifically, to practice (Cook, Brown, 1999). When closely correlated to organizational learning, practice assumes a manifold meaning (Gherardi, 2011:48):

- (1) *Practice as a learning method.* The learning - by - doing approach (Longmore et al., 1996) constantly repeats own activities and discussions on collective doing, until "perfect".
- (2) *Practice as an occupation or field of activity.* The practice consists of the activity carried out in individual working life, and the skills and knowledge related to it (Tynjälä, 2009)
- (3) *Practice as the way something is done.* Practice reproduces the context in which the learning situation occurs, that of "practicing" in everyday working life (Geiger, 2009)

This framework presenting organizational learning from a sociological perspective cannot be separated from the learning environment. According to Billett (2001; 2004), a workplace is designed for learning when it enhances

opportunities for professionals to be supported in learning in their working daily life. An enabling learning environment is designed as such when some conditions occur. Ellström, et al. (2008) are consistent in defining a panel of attributes of the enabling learning environment (Table 2):

TABLE 2. *Enabling learning environment taxonomy.*

| Attributes                            | Description   |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| Task orientation                      | Orientation towards the needs of the care recipients and a focus on tasks derived from those needs (“professional orientation”)                                 |
| Perceived work content                | Rehabilitation and treatment tasks in addition to practical and social tasks  |
| Leadership and managerial work        | High accessibility  |
| Organizational readiness for learning | Emphasis on formal training as well as informal learning through work. Managers initiate learning activities based on the assessment of the care workers’ needs |
| Individual readiness for learning     | Care workers showed an active engagement in specific learning activities  |

Source: Ellström, et al. (2008: 91).

Although designed for the personal care sector, the proposed attributes can also be identified and applied in other learning environments in the public sector. Learning is translated into practice only when the context of the practice (i.e the workplace) is configured as “an equipped context in which the main handholds for regular performance of the practice are known” (Gherardi, 2011:56). In other words, enabling learning environments are places in which the practice of learning takes place in all their threefold meanings.

To put it in simple words, in Enabling Learning Environments emphasis is given to both formal and informal training and meetings, as well as to managers’ focus on employees’ skills and knowledge levels. Learning, in those environments, is considered effective if it succeeds in fostering organizational development, i.e., that the skills learned in training courses are successfully transferred to the work context and produce benefits for the organization (Fraccaroli, 2007).

This panel of attributes can be applied to all working environments where learning is a continuous and innovative practice. The communication field, with its continuous evolution in skills, knowledge of platforms, and communication tools, is no exception.

### ***2.3 Communication as a learning practice in Public Administration. An ongoing revolution***

Communication is one of the most immediate practical acts in organizations, without which the organization would not exist. In sociology, since Luhmann (1982), communication has been configured as the act through which the organization communicates its decisions to the outside world since it is made up exclusively of them. By communicating, each organization not only reproduces itself but, like any social system, also reproduces society (2005). Theories and concepts evolved in the approach of the Canadian school of CCO (Communication Constitutes Organization), where communication is the act that constitutes the organization, divided into several processes: self-structuring, activity coordination, institutional positioning, and membership negotiation (McPhee, Zaug, 2000).

Particularly in the public sphere, communication refers to the idea of two-way and horizontal information flows between users and the Public Administration and is characterized not only by the intention of the sender to communicate something but also by the ability of the receiver to assimilate it (Fielding, 2006). In this bipolarity, any shift in communication activity, which concerns the means employed, the kind of information supplied, the chosen communication style, the strategies adopted, staff skills and capabilities, etc., inevitably entails a revolution in the relationships of both the actors (Miani, 2005).

Communication in the Public Sector is not merely associable with the internal and external activity of any administration, but it also concerns the general interests of the community and goes beyond the area of profit or exclusively private interests. It refers to the concept of notice understood - according to Habermas (1981) - as a public discussion within civil society on problems and topics of general interest. Therefore, it concerns the administration's readiness to show openness and transparency towards the public and availability to provide information of general interest.

The act of disseminating information consists of practical routines which employ the use of multiple channels, tools, access, and consultation, never stopping, however, constant shifts in the organizational framework (Tangi et al., 2021).

Where organizational dynamics are complex and subject to sudden change, so are the changes required to keep up with the means used for intra - and extra-organizational communication. (Aufderheide, 1999). In fact, communication in the Public Administration is a complex moment composed of different elements:

- (1) organizational processes and management of communication through the various departments;
- (2) instrumental communication resources;
- (3) economic resources to be allocated;
- (4) communication ecosystems (digital and traditional);
- (5) skills required (hard & soft) to manage the communication process.

The pandemic context has spurred even more the organizational change (whereas implicitly structural) in the working methods of PA communication professionals. They, in fact, have been called upon to manage (a) critical information (b) exclusively via remote (during the lockdown) and in mixed mode (from 2021) (c) through totally new (digital) semantic and semiotic means and spaces (d) lacking updated technical skills [digital competences (Casalino et al., 2020).

Since Organizational learning is a practical act, communication requires constant training to cope with periods of instability which calls for, above all, new professional skills to manage complex ecosystems and processes (Zito et al., 2021).

In fact, in the organizational setting, communication as a practical act assumes a twofold role: on the one hand, it allows to manage of organizational decisions and procedures internally, coordinating work in the best possible way and avoiding waste of time and resources; on the other hand, it allows more profitable management of relations with users, if there is no information asymmetry. For this to happen, employees must possess communication management skills that keep up with the systemic changes in the ecosystem that requires them. Several studies have analyzed communication in the Public Administration during the pandemic (Chevtaeva, Guillet, 2021; Ducci, Lovari, 2021). Still, if managerial and sociological literature focused on healthcare administrations or private companies, much remains to be done to contextualize the skills required by communication professionals in different PA at the local level.

### **3. Methodology**

#### ***3.1 Research Design***

To meet the research aims, a synchronous Online Focus Group (OFG) was employed. Online Focus Groups are the closest approximation of traditional face-to-face focus groups and involve real-time discussions led by one or more moderators (Poynter 2010; Liamputtong, 2011).

The sample involved n.18 Public Administration employees enrolled in the Higher Education program “*Comunicare la PA*”, from CIRPA -

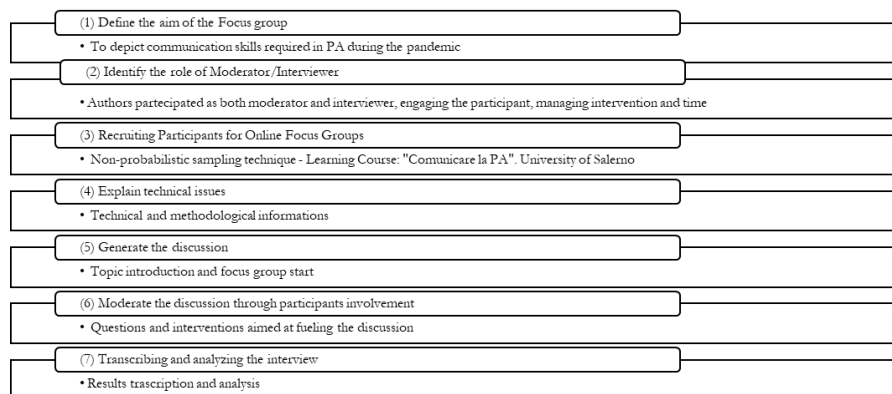
Interdepartmental Centre for Research in Law, Economics and Management of Public Administration University of Salerno, providing learning practical courses for public administration staff in various organizational areas. Participants were asked to join the Online Focus Group as part of one organizational training seminars and chosen through the logic of non-probabilistic sampling (Guest et al., 2013) to reach more competent opinions from communication professionals on the chosen issue.

Participants' age was from 35 to 55 y/o, from several Campania Region local Public Administrations. Only 9 of them (5 men, 4 women) actively participated and contributed to the discussion, with an average participation of 50%.

An Online Focus Group was conducted via *Microsoft Teams* and lasted 60 minutes. This choice is in line with many of the Online Focus Groups conducted during the pandemic to address topics related to social sciences (Menary et al., 2021; Wichanpricha, 2021).

The focus group scheme was inspired by Stewart and Shamdasani (2017), and it was ad-hoc structured as follow (Figure 1):

FIGURE 1. Online focus group structure



Authors' adaptation of Stewart and Shamdasani (2017).

Once the goal of the Online Focus Group had been settled, i.e., to understand what skills are required of Public Administration communicators to manage the organizational "new normal", the second step consisted in identifying interviewers and moderators (in this case, they coincided with the authors), and their relative roles and codes of conduct. In the third phase, participants joined the focus group through an access link to a *Microsoft Teams* ad-hoc channel, sent via email by CIRPA secretariat. They have been provided

with the guidelines to intervene and the technical issues to participate in the Online Focus Group, avoiding overlapping, and guaranteeing both anonymity and freedom of speech. The interviewer began to introduce the topic with a series of observations, using examples and images to facilitate participant comprehension. The moderator, on the other hand, oversaw the discussion, intervening if it was excessively polarized towards certain participants.

The Online Focus Group lasted 1 hour and was manually transcribed and analyzed via narrative analysis.

### 3.2. Findings

Findings were summarized using *coding techniques*, labeling, and organizing responses to identify different themes and the correlation between them (Yin, 1994). Open-ended questions elaboration followed a rationale focused on investigating the dimensions depicted from both Organizational Learning and Public Administration Communication literature.

The following tables (Tables 3 and 4) contain the main observations on participants and interviewer/moderator information, interactions, and behaviors during the entire Online Focus Group. Findings were illustrated through narrative analysis following Stewart and Shamdasani (2017).

#### 3.2.1 RQ1

As suggested by Macri and Tagliaventi (2001), answers were summarized, removing irrelevant information, and reporting only those pieces of information which could be useful for understanding the research step and narration.

TABLE 3. Questions & Answers report.

| Open-ended question<br>Q: Question MI: Moderator<br>Intervention   | Answers<br>P: Participants M: Male F: Female  |
|--|---|
| (Q.1) Literature identifies communication skills that today's PA employees should possess around 4 hard skills: social communication; press release writing; graphic and videomaking skills; SEO & advertising skills (Solis and Breakenridge, 2009). Do you agree?<br>(MI.1.1) P3F, that's interesting. Why don't you want to learn more about communication in PA? | P1F: "I think it's correct. I always work with social media Tool in my job"<br>P2M: "I am a traditionalist, and I oversee press releases, I can't do anything more» (Laughing)<br>P3F: "My colleague is a joker; we also take care of social media. We share posts, of course unprofessionally".<br>P1F: "Precisely, they think we know how to do it without even training us. What we know, we know because we experienced by doing it!"<br>P8F: "In our Administration we have turned the lack of financial resources into an incentive |



|  |  |
|--|--|
|  | to improve technically. Through self-learning and the learning-by-doing approach we were able to manage to some extent the organizational tasks assigned to us. Obviously, they fall largely within the competences you mentioned”   |
| (Q.2) What difficulties do you find in applying these methodologies in your work?<br>(MI.2.2) P2M: Can you explain to your colleagues what do you mean by Organizational Coordination?<br>(MI.2.3) Do you all agree, everyone?   | P6M: “Time to spend in learning activities»<br>P9M: “Competence and skills which we do not possess, and administrations fail to provide with training”<br>P1F: “Also money, you need the budget to structure SEO plans”<br>P2M: “Organizational coordination with different offices. I mean, the speed with which news spread between the various departments and must be transmitted to citizens. Timeliness is essential, especially in the COVID era”<br>P7M & P3F: “Totally agree” |
| (Q.3) What soft skills should travel together with these operations?<br>(MI.3.1) Does COVID emphasize some of them? Look at this graph. PM8 If your microphone is not working, you can write through chat<br>(MI.3.2) So you're a patient man at work, P2M. Good to know! P7M, are you, patient, the same? | P1F: “To me, timeliness of communication, availability of answers in non-working hours (offline chat), proximity and sensitivity. The graph shows a picture of what I have done in this period!”<br>P8M: “Closeness and sensibility” (wrote in chat)<br>P3F: “Humanity and commitment for sure”<br>P2M: “I swim against the tide and add a new one: patience”<br>*Everyone laughs<br>P7M: “Well not really. I rather focus on responsiveness”.   |
| (Q.4) Would you rather have more time to explore on your own tools better and more, or funded training programs that explain how to use it?  | P1F: “I think I speak for all colleagues stating that we rather have targeted training programs. Alone we can come to understand only a small part of the possibilities that communication technologies offer”.<br>P2M: “And I add. We have acquired these tools, with COVID we were even forced to adopt them. We were not professionally born with them. Doing it by ourselves, you know what trouble could happen!”<br>All participants agree.                                      |

Source: Authors' elaboration.

A panel of four open questions has been submitted to participants. The results, therefore, were presented by analyzing the single question including all types of interactions (Table 3)

- The first question was formulated with the specific aim of going to confirm what a stream of communication literature in the PA considers to

be the mainstream skills that its professionals should possess. From a Hard skills point of view, all four factors (social communication; press release writing; graphic and videomaking skills; SEO & advertising skills) find confirmations in the daily activities' respondents are called upon to perform. Nevertheless, the first criticism rises when organizational learning challenges occurs: lack of time of employee's time, overloaded with tasks and responsibilities; lack of ad hoc and specific training plans; lack of economic resources to support them. In this case, organizational learning takes place through the learning-by-doing approach, whereby employees are called upon to find innovative and creative solutions to the challenges dictated by the pandemic. To this question, n.4 participants on 9 nourished the debate, with n.1 intervention from the moderator in engaging the user on the role of learning.

- Since this tendency to address systemic anomalies in learning to acquire these skills has already been stressed by the participant before, the second question aimed to get more specific about the experiences of professionals to try to understand the hidden reason. In this case, time, resources for training and the lack of willingness on the part of the administrations to generate specific training courses have been confirmed. However, interesting is the observation made by one of the respondents: lack of coordination with different offices. In this circumstance, a real problem of organizational process emphasizes the issue. Offices often do not communicate with each other, preventing the information flow necessary to communicate the required information to the users of the public service. In this case, participation was higher, with as many as 6/9 participants included in the discussion. The moderator, to clarify the answers given, intervened twice as a facilitator of the interchange between the Online Focus Group members.
- According to HR Management, hard skills must always go hand in hand with soft skills, especially in a perspective of the continuous search for solutions to complex problems. The third question asked the respondents what soft attributes they felt would enhance these skills, and how they exercised them during their working life. Five out of nine users took part in the debate, leading to the identification of a series of skills that were mapped and graphically represented in a conceptual tag cloud. The arrangement of the keywords in the graph is conveyed by the number of times these skills were mentioned:

FIGURE 2. Tag cloud of Soft Skills.



Authors 'elaboration

In such an unstable scenario, certain skills are key in communication: a sense of humanity and proximity to the individual (3 times); availability (2), adaptiveness to the new normal (2); timeliness and sensibility ((2); commitment and responsiveness (2). Performance (1) is less important compared to users' needs when coping with a pandemic. Even in this circumstance, the moderator intervened twice, the first to spread the discussion, and the second to find a solution to the technical problems of one of the participants.

- The last question was aimed at understanding an organizational learning lever. Given the lack of training courses for PA personnel provided by the administration itself to empower employees in these hard skills, participants were asked whether the learning-by-doing approach was preferred over a more traditional one. Surprisingly, professionals preferred targeted training programs since, by themselves, they would come to understand "only a small part of the possibilities that communication technologies offer". In this regard, all the participants nodded and agreed on the statement, reversing somehow what emerged from the first question

### 3.2.2 RQ2

The second part of the focus group results focused on analyzing the performance of the Online Focus Group during the pandemic period, imposed by social status rather than a reasoned choice. Table 4 summarizes the overview of the methodological results achieved:

TABLE 4. *Methodological results of Online Focus Group.*

| Observations                             | Description   |
|--|---|
| Participant recruiting process           | It started at 12.00 am, and ended at 1.00 pm, via a mailing list. The invitation was sent to n.18 professionals, n.9 of them positively responded and joined an ad-hoc Microsoft Teams channel managed by CIRPA.<br>self-knowledge  |
| Cooperation rates                        | The participation rate was around 50%. Slight male predominance, age range 35-55 years.   |
| Technological challenges & observations  | Participants do not totally master Microsoft Teams. They often logged off and on.<br>They tend to not put the camera on and, sometimes, even the microphone.<br>They prefer writing through chat rather than speaking. They took time to answer questions, sometimes pressed by the moderator             |
| Moderation and stimuli employed          | Moderation level was quite high. Moderator had to:<br>(1) Stimulate the discussion with open-ended questions;<br>(2) adopt stimuli (Images, infographic, video, case studies on PA) to facilitate the dialogue;<br>(3) involve those who were not participating;<br>(4) solving technical issues.         |
| Participation & sensitivity to the topic | Active participants showed interest to share their personal working experiences in a very comfortable way, not hesitating to express the difficulties they were facing  |
| Incentives                               | No incentives were used, and participants were overall satisfied with being involved in this new digital experience.  |
| Transcriptions                           | The Online Focus Group was recorded via Microsoft Teams and once downloaded, after a first missing attempt of being transcribed with <i>Google Live Transcribe</i> , was analyzed manually by authors (language was difficult to catch up, and the meaning of the sentence has often been distorted etc.) |

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Over an overall satisfactory performance, some issues emerge.

Participants have not totally mastered *Microsoft Teams* during the Online Focus Group. Although lessons had already been delivered, a clear difficulty for some of the participants in managing successfully the tool rose. They often logged off, or put the camera off and, sometimes, even the microphone. Many of them preferred writing through chat rather than speaking with their voice. That is why they took time to properly answer questions, sometimes pressed by the moderator.

Accordingly, its role has been fundamental in fueling the discussion. The moderator has stimulated the discussions through stimuli (Images, infographics, video, and case studies on PA) to foster a better comprehension of the questions; it engaged passive participants in discussion and, lastly, it solved technical issues.

Concerning participants' views, if they were on the one hand more skeptical or less ready to face the technological nature of the Online Focus Group, much more confidence was shown in telling their personal professional experiences with inconveniences and complexity. Therefore, the Online Focus Group has been a place for meetings and discussions between professionals in this sector.

#### **4. Discussions**

Discussions of the results were dually presented in accordance with the RQs.

##### ***4.1. Perspectives in digital research methods***

Indications provided by the methodological results of the Online Focus Group conveys a less than complete picture of the exclusive use of digital technologies for qualitative social research.

Participants showed no perfect knowledge of *Microsoft Teams*' usability and, more generally, of smart working tools. (Homburg, 2018). This is broadly in line with some of the studies on public administration e-skills that highlight the technology/digital gap among PA professionals. (Christian, Davis, 2016).

Knowledge gaps were related to usability and technical issues like Internet connection, audio, video, microphone, and screen sharing. In some steps of the Online Focus Group (Steps 4 and 6) mediator intervention allowed not to stop the discussion (Lunt, Livingstone, 1996).

Nevertheless, while the methods of involvement can be widely discussed, contrariwise the willingness of group members to participate has always been high and widely shared. Participants who possess advanced computer literacy skills usually dominate the discussion, if they are quicker in delivering their answers and conveying their point of view. According to the literature, this dominance might generate power imbalances (Lobe, 2017). Nevertheless, in this case, participants were proactive, as long they make use of communication tools and means in their daily working life, and they still found ways to compensate for some technical shortcomings through several different solutions (chat, reactions, just nodding in video, etc.). This finds evidence in IT literature (Lang, Jarvenpaa, 2005), and still marks the usefulness of the Online Focus Group to gain some indications from participant willingness.

This interest can be further explained by the dualism between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. In fact, further evidence of employees' willingness was drawn from the fact that no incentive was employed to engender participants to take an active part in the debate. The extrinsic motivation, i.e., the drive that

comes from external motives and therefore behavior is generated by a reward or recognition (Farivar, Esmaeelinezhad, 2021), rather leaves room for the intrinsic motivation, which starts from the self and from one's own experience or will. In this sense, behavior has value and simply for the pleasure it generates in performing it (Rheinberg, Engeser, 2018)

Furthermore, participants' interactions in synchronous Online Focus Groups determine conversation threading (Gaiser, 2008). Usually, one group member directly refers to another discussant's comment, when they are focused on a new discussion.

When this happens, data analysis is more difficult since is still challenging to track which comment is referring to which questions (Hinkes, 2021). Since direct interaction is lacking and conversation is subject to pauses, this issue may sometimes complicate the use of automatic information transcription and decoding systems, as happened in this case.

Authors, in fact, used their own expertise to compensate for the chaos of information returned by the software.

Complicate the use of automatic information transcription and decoding systems as happened in this case. The authors used their own expertise to compensate for the chaos of information returned by the software.

Although this may corroborate technological criticism in research methodologies (Groves, 2011; Groves, Lyberg, 2010), it must be taken into consideration that these same tools allowed participants to express themselves more freely than they would have done in an in-person focus group (Schneider et al., 2002; Woodyatt et al., 2016; Tran et al., 2021).

Critical optimism, in this sense, can be the most appropriate methodological stream to contextualize this research, as it can act as the needle of the scales in human-computer interaction in social research (Triberti et al, 2021). Moreover, the multidisciplinary nature of scientific domains allows cross-contamination that may enrich methodologies with new ways to address social phenomena, using investigative tools - both qualitative and quantitative - open to metacognitive scenarios.

#### ***4.2 Communication skills in PA: a future perspective***

Nowadays, uncertainty and its consequences in work organization and in social communication have gradually become part of everyday professional life. New and different languages are increasingly being adopted, such as technology and media, to transform different aspects of people's private, public, and social lives. Communication has become a key element for Public Administrations. Platforms have changed, social media has taken the scene and PA has moved

towards slow digitization of procedures, spurred not by chance by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Today, social media are used, particularly by local authorities, only as a showcase for communicating events and reporting press releases, but the citizen on the other side of the screen demands more interaction and more efficiency.

This is what the focus group demonstrated, employees' awareness that possessing technical knowledge defined as hard skills is no longer enough, and that these must be implemented with behavioral and personal attitudes of each individual to generate value for citizens and for the organization (Guimarães et al., 2019).

This finds confirmation in literature. Organizational Learning must be geared towards enabling each to acquire their own autonomy and cognitive flexibility, to make them autonomous in mastering the skills they possess in the everyday life, and to use them strategically in the working environment (Gherardi, Strati, 1988).

Italian fabric is witnessing an increasing demand for workers who are increasingly being asked to master soft skills, a different mix of capabilities than in the past (Fettes et al., 2020). The term "soft skills" is often associated with other concepts like "transversal", "social", "relational" etc., which generate ambiguity as they are often mistakenly considered synonyms.

This complicates the effort to provide a clear and unambiguous definition of them. In Enabling Learning Environment, therefore, those who demonstrate to possess soft skills, such as cognitive flexibility, problem-solving, teamworking, or leading team members through specific goals, are more likely to remain employed or find new employment (Shalini, 2013). In addition to basic skills such as literacy and numeracy, employees need skills such as collaboration, creativity, and problem-solving, and qualities such as persistence, curiosity, and initiative (Fregola, 2016: 53).

Therefore, the relationship between learning, environment, and skills allows identifying sustainable research hypotheses that focus on soft skills and how they can be acquired, trained, or mastered by individuals (De Pietro, 2019).

In Public Administration, this aspect is crucial: if it is true that practitioners agree with the literature that aims to identify the four hard macro-skills of today's public sector communicators [(social media communication; traditional media communication; graphic and videomaking communication; SEO & advertising communication) Solis, Breakenridge, 2009; Plowman, Winchel, 2015; Feeney, Porumbescu, 2021] much remains to be done to associate to each of them a soft conceptual dimension that strategically supports for leverage.

Communication in Public Sector as a service to be delivered should be the goal of every PA who possess all the necessary digital tools and skills to move from pure information to dialogue (Gil-Garcia et al., 2014). Still, as pointed out

by participants in the Online Focus Group, new digital means alone are not enough to build an authentic interaction with citizens and to turn theory to practice.

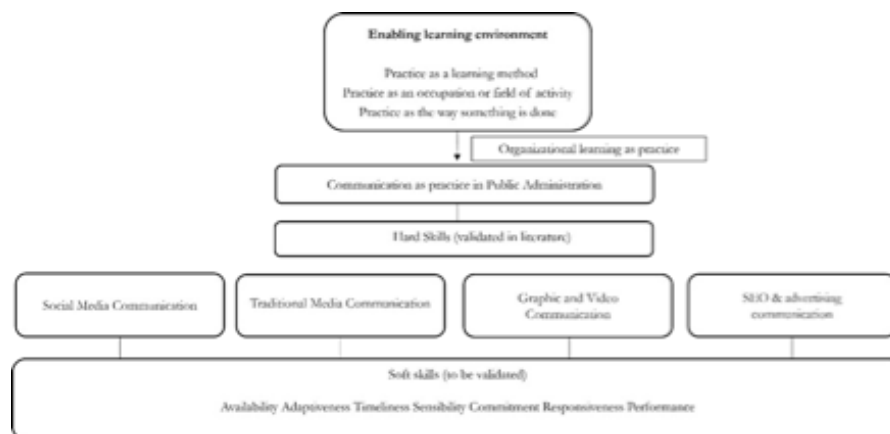
Therefore, some practices should be implemented:

- a communication strategy based on principles pivoting on innovative digital marketing and advertising techniques;
- an internal reorganization of the communication team and administrative offices spurring their Organizational Learning on Digital Capital (Ragnedda et al., 2020; 2022);
- a paradigm shift in the PA-citizen relationship using a less entangled and self-referential communication but predisposed to build a direct, bidirectional, courageous relational system

Despite these considerations, what is missing in organizational studies for PA is the association of soft factors with hard skills in the communication processes among public professionals.

Nevertheless, this study pioneered this skill mix perspective in Public Sector communication through a definition of the professional learning environment, thanks to the contribution of its practitioners, and began to elaborate a conceptual framework which can be summarized as follow (Figure 3):

FIGURE 3. *Conceptual framework of the communication process in Enabling Learning Environments.*



Source: Authors' elaboration.

This framework is intended to be an embryonic guideline to contextualize the skills required to communication professionals in PA as an Enabling Learning Environment, i.e., an organization capable of fostering Organizational



Learning at all levels. The diagram shows that only an enabling learning environment can transform knowledge learned from organizational training into practical action. Training as practice consists of action-intervention programs aimed at developing a series of skills that meet the needs required by the ecosystem in which the organization operates. In simple terms, the proposed framework confirms the need to configure organizational learning as the result of a need for the stimuli of the external environment.

In Public Administration, more than in the business environment, this need is fundamental, since services to citizens - particularly in this historical moment - are subject to systemic conditioning. Organizational learning required by the ecosystem translates into new skills to be assimilated into each organizational setup. That of communication, as a practice, makes use of several “hard” components that can be depicted from the literature on both public and private communication. However, they are not enough to generate that value for the citizen and the organization, as pointed out by the Online Focus Group. The mere technique does not serve to generate value for the citizen if not accompanied by the set of knowledge, attributes, and qualities that individuals do not know they have, or much more often than they do not train.

Therefore, the hard components must be able to make use of “soft variables” (soft skills) which, intersecting with them, contribute to fostering learning (as it is forged, reproducible and accessible) and to fully empower employees.

Skills resulting from the literature review are divided into four main areas: communication via social media, management of traditional media for communication, graphic and videomaking skills, and Seo & advertising skills. Nevertheless, these techniques need to be combined with a series of soft qualities that employees must possess to put them into a value system for the citizen: availability, adaptiveness, timeliness, commitment, sensitivity, responsiveness, and performance.

This process will enable the development of a new form of learning within and outside the organization.

#### **4.3. RQs overview**

The results of this research led to a preliminary answer to the Research Questions:

*RQ.1: Which are the most useful communication skills that professionals in Public Organizations need to learn to cope with the pandemic scenario?* Hard and soft components have been depicted. On the one hand purely oriented to the communicative process, and on the other to individual characteristics useful for improving the individual. The combination of them led to the development of

a framework that, especially on the soft side of learning, needs further studies to be completed.

*RQ.2: Which are the strengths and weaknesses of conducting technology-mediated social research in light of the new normal pandemic?* Many threats were encountered in employing the Online Focus Group. Technology, knowledge of tools, and interventions from remote remain the bottlenecks for engaging participants in an effective focus group.

## **5. Conclusions**

Several limitations affect this research. The sample of professionals interviewed is not quantitatively relevant to replicate the answer given to the proposed RQ. Moreover, the literature review has been carried out in a non-systematic way, and it does not contemplate the full range of contributions to contextualizing Organizational Learning and Public Sector Communication. In addition, the questions chosen to set up the focus group, even if based on the existing literature, followed discretionary criteria.

This study is based on empirical research that makes use of synchronous Online Focus Groups as a tool to map and recognize communication skills required by communication professionals in the Public Sector, particularly considering the pandemic. From a theoretical perspective, this study on the one hand shed a light Organizational Learning process under the lens of sociological approaches to practice; on the other, contextualizes the practice of communication in Public Administration. Furthermore, it tests the effectiveness of synchronous Online Focus Group to nourish the debate on research methodologies in the digital age. Lastly, it presents a hybrid framework of the skills required to communication professionals in Public Administration. Therefore, its adoption could be considered to further investigate both qualitatively and quantitatively the communication skills even after the pandemic.

To overcome these shortcomings, a research agenda informs this paper:

- 1) a systematic literature review of the current hard and soft communication skills required of the public administration employees;
- 2) an exploratory study (with semi-structured questions) to confirm or disconfirm the skills found with a panel of experts;
- 3) a quantitative empirical survey that measures the competence of the members of the organization for those specific skills.

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