

Internal Content Alignment in a Multinational Organisation:

Global Intranet Content Appreciation Within ING Group

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine the appreciation and preference of content published on the intranet portals of ING Group. In a large, international organisation, successful Internal Communication has direct influence on achieving the organisation's goals (Yates, 2006). With a new, centralised intranet to be introduced, ING Head Office in Amsterdam wanted to investigate the ways in which the published content was received by employees throughout the world.

The focus of this study is on the presentation of the content in terms of the formats and the content themes on the intranet page of Global Head Office, and the content themes on local intranet pages of the individual Business Units in all countries with an ING presence. 34 participants were orally interviewed by two researchers in a total of 19 interview sessions, either in person or via a conference call. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured approach and the participants' answers were analysed qualitatively.

On the Global Intranet, the visual presentation of content was preferred over textual formats. As for the content themes, *innovation* and *(financial) results* were preferred on the Global Intranet page. On the local intranet page, though, the *people* stories were most appreciated.

Ideally, the internal communication of ING should make (more) use of the visual presentation of content. Still, all formats should suit the type of content and the goal of the message.

1. Introduction

Globalisation creates many new opportunities for extending businesses and servicing customers in markets all over the world. Today's technological developments enable organisations to connect with customers, stakeholders, and colleagues much more easily, despite the geographical distances (Crane & Matten, 2016, p. 19). This makes the world smaller and more interconnected (Cummings & Worley, 2015, p. 5).

Globalisation thus brings many opportunities, but difficulties as well. Managing a multinational organisation with operations and branches in different parts of the world is not an easy task. It can become hard to service a multitude of specialised and culturally defined markets when the sum of the organisation's branches still has to represent one overarching organisation with central values, operating methods and shared goals. Both the national cultures of the employees as well as the organisational culture play a role in the organisation's operations and communications. The study in this paper did not investigate the influence of the participants' national cultures, but acted from a general, shared organisational culture between ING employees.

When expanding to other parts of the globe, serving customers personally might require a local office in the target market. Local departments controlling the organisation's operations in a specific country or region, commonly called Business Units (BUs), usually work with a certain autonomy, as they are the experts in the local market and know how to reach the intended audience. This balance between centralisation and decentralisation (Mintzberg, 1989) is found in many large, international organisations. The management of the organisation at Head Office has to balance the top-down control on the BUs with the degree of freedom these need to operate successfully locally. Operational differences between BUs of the same organisation are likely to occur. What might work in one country's local

market, is not also automatically successful in another market, even if overall organisational goals are all coordinated by a single global Head Office.

However, some strategies or projects affect every part of the organisation, no matter the location or size of the different BUs, such as overall corporate strategy. Corporate strategy has to be implementable in all countries, BUs, and cultures, which puts certain demands on the communication. These messages should be formulated in such a way that the intended audience, the employees all over the world, understand the strategy equally well. There should be (almost) no room for different interpretations of the message, which still has to be engaging enough for employees to take it to heart. Engaging internal communication is extremely important for the acceptance and application of the message. Furthermore, a correlation has been found between highly effective internal communication and superior financial results and organisational stability (Yates, 2006, p. 71).

In a broader sense, this applies to stories and other less formal messaging too, as both have the same intercultural audience and aim to inform, inspire or activate the readers. Such shared best practices, success stories, and challenges can instil a sense of identity and a common goal for the readers, rallying them behind the brand (Chong, 2007, p. 201).

This paper focusses on the digital intercultural and international content alignment of the internal communications of ING Group on the corporate's intranet portal. ING Group is a bank, operating in both Retail Banking (for private customers) and Wholesale Banking (for small to large organisations) in over 40 countries. The communication formats published on the Global Intranet portal are produced by the Content Team from the Corporate Communications Bank (CCB) department at the Global Head Office in Amsterdam. Their internal communication messages are accessible to all 41,000 employees worldwide. Having such a large and dispersed audience can make it difficult to make the messages engaging for all readers, to have them listen to one voice. During the time of this study, starting in May

2016, every ING BU had their own intranet page, where the local communication department published different messages of their own, mostly in their local language. Because the Global Intranet page was usually only accessible via a small link on the BUs' local portals and the most important global stories were often translated and published on the BU's local intranet page, it was hard to measure the traffic and actual reading figures of stories on the Global Intranet. The analyses that were carried out mostly resulted in low reading figures. For example, on average, the English version of a weekly top story was only read 750 times over the course of a month, whereas ING employs 41,000 people, most of whom have English as their native or second language.

ING introduced the "One Bank"-strategy on 3 October 2016, intending to create one single digital banking platform for customers. All BUs and branches with similar value propositions should eventually merge their customer service platforms and operate by the same structure and brand image. To empower this transition, the intranet had to adapt to that change. Instead of a multitude of intranet pages, a single intranet portal was to be introduced as the home page of all employees. The Minimum Viable Product (MVP) of OneIntranet was ready to be launched in October 2016 in a few countries, six months after the start of this study. Over the following months, the portal was rolled out to more BUs until all of ING used OneIntranet as their main internal portal. Here, content from Global Head Office will always be visible at the top of the page, no matter what BU the intranet is accessed from, and people can subscribe to other BUs' content below. For instance, under the five rotating most recently published Global stories, people can scroll down to any other BU's or department's communications, to be displayed in the exact same lay-out around the world.

An organisation is more successful when as many employees as possible are well-informed, motivated, and engaged in the organisation's operations, strategy, and goals. This study was conducted together with ING to investigate the sentiment of ING communication

professionals towards the content published on the Global Intranet page. The goal of the study was to work on making ING's Global Intranet content as interesting and inspiring as possible, and better tailored to the audience's needs and preferences. One to four communication representatives from every BU were interviewed for this qualitative research. The interviews were conducted by two researchers, both working in the communications department of ING Global Head Office. The author of this paper was part of the Content Team at the time and conducted this study as part of an internship research.¹ The second researcher, Researcher 2, was working in the Strategic Advice team and was also the coordinator of the International Communications Network (ICN). All participants of this study were members of the ICN at the time. The organisation chart in Figure 1 presents an overview of the departments in the Corporate Communication Bank of ING Head Office. Based on the results and insights, new approaches or communication plans were developed for the content on the new intranet portal that was in development at that time.

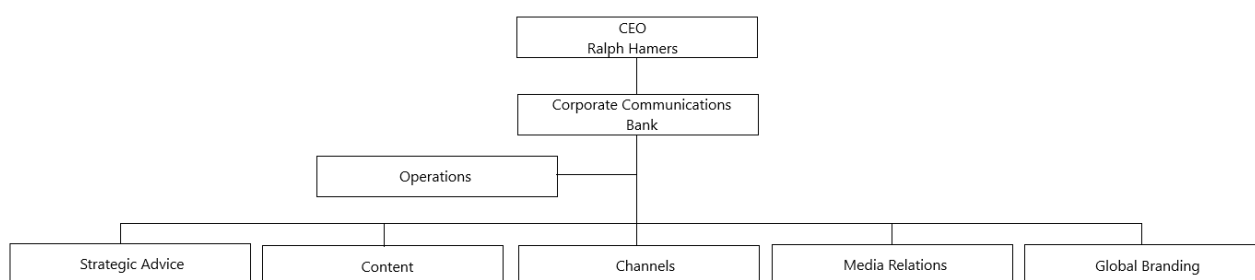


Figure 1. Organisation chart of the Corporate Communications Bank department of ING Global Head Office.

The next chapter covers the research already carried out in the field of internal communication. Relevant studies and their findings will lead to research questions. After that, the method of this study is described, followed by the results. Next, the results are reflected upon in the context of the relevant literature in the theoretical framework. Finally, the

¹ The internship of the author started 2 May 2016, until 31 October 2016. The interviews and analyses of the present study were conducted during these 6 months.

conclusion will answer the research questions, which will lead to recommendations for ING's internal communication on their intranet. Explanations of abbreviations and terms used in this paper can be found in Appendix 3.

2. Theoretical Framework

As mentioned above, Chong (2007) conducted a study on the importance of the internal audience with regards to Singapore Airlines' communication and branding efforts. He stated that "employees may be the most important audience for a company's organizational communication and corporate branding efforts" (2007, p. 201). Furthermore, the importance of effective internal communication was also investigated by Yates (2006). Yates analysed the studies by Watson Wyatt Worldwide on the positive effects of organisations' internal communications, conducted in 2003 and 2005. Yates stated that high performing corporations are different from less successful corporations in that their "secret weapon" of effective internal communication contributes to "impressive financial and organizational gains" (2006, p. 71). Moreover, Smith & Mounter (2008) state that "an engaged and informed workforce produces better results" (p. 2). The people have to know what the goals and ambitions of the organisations are, and what steps they have to take to get there, for the organisation to reach these goals (p. 2). The employees function as ambassadors for the organisation. Especially with news that shows the organisation in a bad light, well-informed employees are more inclined to see the brighter side. They also feel more appreciated when the news has been shared internally before it goes external, if the situation allows for it (Smith & Mounter, 2008, p. 3). Figure 2 depicts how effective internal communication practices benefit the whole organisation and help to achieve organisational goals.

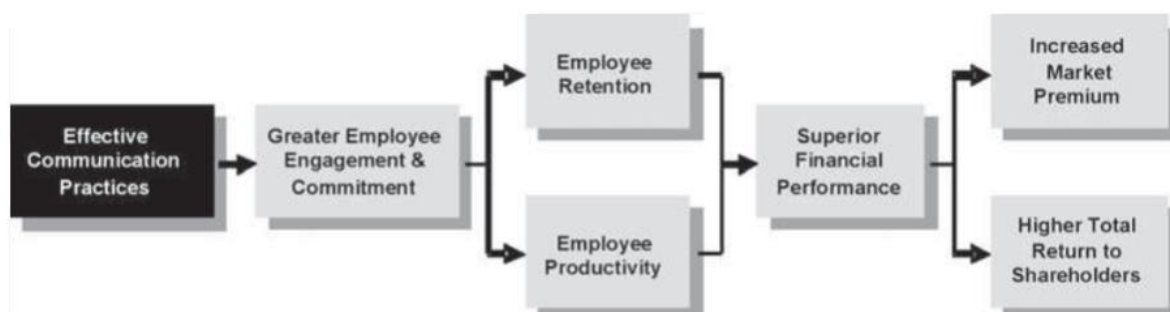


Figure 2. “Communication effectiveness drives superior financial performance” (Yates, 2006, p. 72).

Though the steps in Yates’s analysis seem clear, there are many other factors in Watson Wyatt Worldwide’s study that could play a role in the output of effective communication practices that Yates does not refer to. For instance, effective communication and greater employee engagement and commitment could also lead to more than employee retention and employee productivity. When employees are more well-informed about their own organisation and its operations, they could become spokespeople for their own organisation. If this is successfully achieved on a large scale, an organisation’s workforce could help in generating new customers and help in aiding existing customers with issues or questions, without the explicit use of marketing advertisements or customer service. This too, can lead to superior financial performance. Furthermore, Watson Wyatt Worldwide’s study was conducted using two analyses. In the first, the classification of the participating organisations’ communications effectiveness was only based on employee feedback, resulting in three groups of organisations with high, medium or low communication effectiveness. Next, the second analysis of the organisation’s performance was based on the organisation’s factual results and figures. The discrepancy between the solely subjective initial classification, and the solely objective second classification may have led to an imbalanced initial classification, thereby influencing the comparison and results of the second analysis. For example, the types of communications may be very dependent on the type of organisation and the employee’s communication needs. It is therefore very hard to accurately establish what effective communication practices are when comparing different organisations. Yet, it functions as the starting point in the analysis, as seen in Figure 2.

Effects of Globally Appealing Communication

What are the characteristics of successful internal communication that help an organisation achieve its goals? One of the defining aspects could be to make the communication as interesting and engaging as possible. When writing internal stories on the global corporate events, e.g. new strategies, sustainable projects, board appointments, employees' accomplishments, the message has to have a global appeal to interest as many members of its intended audience as possible, helping in creating the shared knowledge and goals of the organisation (Smith & Mounter, 2008, p. 2). However, having such a large and diverse audience as a target group can make engaging writing a challenging task. Despite common organisational goals, the "social relationships between employees and the consistent, sufficient communication are vital in generating collaboration and trust towards mutual gain" (Rosenfeld, Richman et. al, 2004, p. 30). An intranet is a suitable medium to realise this, as it functions as a single source of information and reaches a large audience. When, through clear and successful internal communication, all employees know in what direction the organisation is heading and what is expected from them, collaboration is easier to achieve as the shared goal is on all participants' minds. An organisation's intranet should aspire to do just that, as "broad and diffuse messages create distance between the employee and the organisation and in worst scenarios confusion in action" (Ahmed & Rafiq, 2003).

One of the ways to best reach an audience on an intranet lies in finding the correct balance in the messages, as proposed by Ahmed & Rafiq (2003). Employees do not have one single information need for the execution of their job (p. 1184). Rather, there are rational and emotional aspects to their needs. Internal communication must cover both to present the employees with the "subjective emotions and empathic awareness [so] that employees are able to make judgements that ... [realise] the corporate long-term interests" (p. 1184). Correctly balancing the communication delivery is a "managerial approach for co-ordination and integration" of corporate strategy (p. 1186; White, Vanc et. al, 2010, p. 66).

A limitation to a multinational organisation's use of a global intranet portal is that all employees can all read the same messages, though their communication needs are also culturally determined. Kessapidou and Varsakelis describe culture as "the acquired knowledge people use to interpret experiences and to guide their behaviour" (2002, p. 269). Parker and Bradly (2000) state that in organisational culture, "there is emphasis on values ... as a measure of organisational culture. (p. 127). With regards to the study in this paper, "the integration perspective views cultural change as process by which a set of unifying and homogeneous values replace a different set of previously held organisation-wide values. This approach suggests that culture can be managed to achieve organisation-wide consensus and shared values" (p. 127). Internal communication plays a vital part in shaping the organisational culture. Based on these statements, this study does not take the national culture of the participants into account, but draws on the shared organisational culture with regards to the internal communications.

Organisational culture is defined as the result of human enactment in an organisation (Smircich, 1983, p. 347). This means that the organisational culture comes from the cumulative input, and social and professional interaction between all employees. In ING, these interactions and work ethics are guided by the organisational Orange Code², which all employees have agreed to uphold in their work with colleagues and customers alike.

Next to the rational and emotional aspects of internal communication messages, there should also be a balance between top-down and bottom-up communication (Cornelissen, 2017, p. 189). Merely providing instructional or directive messaging can come across as giving orders, damaging employees' intrinsic motivation. Employees should feel understood

² The ING Orange Code consists out of the ING Values ("We are honest – We are prudent – We are responsible") and the ING Behaviours ("You take it on and make it happen – You help others to be successful – You are always a step ahead") (Retrieved from ING website, <https://www.ing.jobs/Global/Careers/Orange-code.htm>, 18-05-2018).

and be given a voice or opportunity to speak their minds about the messages they receive, to be actively involved in the organisation (p. 179).

Content Presentation

Understanding how internal messages should be best formulated can make for more effectively addressed readers and, consequently, a more engaged audience. Despite the various internal communication formats ING uses on their intranet, e.g. interviews in question-answer style, written stories, vlogs, blogs, infographics, videos, and more, all content should inspire, engage and/or inform. The narration of a message, especially when it comes to organisational change, “can be used as a means to motivate people and create a message memorable enough for employees to take ... action” (Gill, 2011, p. 25). The format and delivery of messages (personal / impersonal, long / short, textual / visual, frequency, etc.) are factors that determine the way a message is perceived, remembered, and acted upon.

After the launch and roll-out of OneIntranet in October 2016, the published messages have a greater reach than before. Furthermore, with the ongoing strategic changes of the “One Bank”-approach, internal communication could start to play a bigger role than before, with employees looking for the relevant types of communication for information. It is therefore of increasing importance that the content is created with the audience in mind and can be adjusted to their needs if necessary.

However, feedback from BUs on the Global content is only sporadically received. The new intranet portal presents the opportunity to evaluate if there are better ways to present internal communication that is informative, engaging, and of global appeal at the same time. This study aims to investigate that, by finding an answer to the main research question:

Research Question: What are the participants' views on the intranet communication supply from Head Office and how does this relate to the internal communications published on their local intranet pages?

Based on their answers, improvements to the communication supply on the new intranet can be made. The following sub questions have been formulated to understand what the communication and content needs of the participants are:

Sub Question 1: What are the participants' preferred content formats and themes on ING's Global intranet?

Sub Question 2: What are the participants' preferred content themes and reader engagement on their local intranet?

Sub Question 3: What are the participants' views on international content alignment?

Answering these questions in the following chapters will shed light on the different aspects of ING's internal communication. The outcomes will lead to a conclusion and recommendations for possible improvements within the global, digital, internal communication published by ING's Head Office on the global "OneIntranet" portal.

3. Method

The exact proceedings of the study will be explained in the following chapters. It is important to repeat that the interviews for this study were carried out by two researchers, namely the author and Researcher 2. They were also responsible for creating the questionnaire used for the interviews, together with the managers from the Content, Channels and Strategic Advice teams.

3.1 Participants

The participants of this study are all employees of ING, representing all BUs / communications departments within ING. There are two defining factors that connect them all as participants. The first is that they are communication professionals, working in the communication departments of their respective countries, BUs or branches. They are responsible for the internal and external communications in their respective areas, publishing on their own intranet and media channels. The second is that they are all active members of the ICN. Table 1 lists all participants, their BU or department and whether the interview was conducted in person, or via a conference call. The total number of participants is 34, interviewed in a total of 19 interviews.

Table 1.

List of all interview participants, their BU / department, and the format in which the interviews were conducted.

Interview code	BU / department	Participant code	Interview format
1	Poland	Poland 1 Poland 2	In person
2	Turkey	Turkey 1 Turkey 2 Turkey 3	In person
3	Italy	Italy 1	Conference call
4	Italy	Italy 2	Conference call
5	Australia	Australia 1 Australia 2	Conference call
6	United Kingdom	UK 1 UK 2	Conference call
7	Spain	Spain 1 Spain 2 Spain 3	Conference call
8	Spain	Spain 4	Conference call
9	France	France 1 France 2	Conference call
10	Romania	Romania 1 Romania 2	Conference call
11	Luxembourg	Luxembourg 1	Conference call
12	Belgium	Belgium 1 Belgium 2	Conference call
13	Germany	Germany 1 Germany 2	Conference call
14	Wholesale Banking	WB 1	In person
15	the Netherlands	Netherlands 1 Netherlands 2	In person
16	Operations Office	COO 1	In person

17	the Americas	COO 2 America 1 America 2	Conference call
18	Asia	Asia 1 Asia 2	Conference call
19	Austria	Austria 1	Conference call

No distinction was made between the participants in terms of seniority, years of experience or anything else. Their answers to the questions and their reasons why (when provided) were the input for this study, regardless of any other factors.

3.2 Materials

The interviews were conducted using a questionnaire. This questionnaire was created based on the questions ING wanted answered to improve their internal communication. The two researchers, as well as their respective team managers, delivered input for the introductory text, as well as for the 16 questions. Both can be found in the Appendix. The question topics were structured as follows:

1. Accessibility of the Global Intranet from the local intranet portals;
2. Preference for content formats on the Global Intranet;
3. Preference for content themes on the Global Intranet;
4. Appeal of the content on the Global Intranet and local information needs;
5. Local content theme preferences;
6. Local story engagement;
7. Views on editorial collaboration between Global Head Office and the local BUs.

Other materials used for this study include Microsoft Outlook for emailing participants and planning the interviews. Conference calls were made using spider phones, and recorded with a voice recording application on a Huawei smartphone. Participants' answers were noted digitally on ING-supplied laptops.

3.3 Procedure

All interviews were planned and conducted in May and June 2016. Before the interviews were conducted, an email was sent to all participants roughly one month in advance, informing them of the research, the reasons for it and how their input could improve the internal communication on the Global Intranet. The email was not sent to the complete group, but personalised for participants of the same BU/branch. See Appendix 1 for the email text. The participants were asked to respond as soon as possible and to provide preferred dates and times (and location if a personal meeting was possible) for the interviews. The researchers confirmed the appointment and sent the participants conference call details if needed. Wherever possible, the researchers met with the participants personally. When the geographical distances proved too big, a conference call was set up by the researchers. The appointments were ideally scheduled per BU/department, not per person. Scheduling individual interviews with all 34 participants would have taken too much time to conduct the study. This meant that an interview with, for example, the communication representatives from Luxembourg, was conducted once, interviewing two people at once. The only exceptions here were the interviews with Italy and Spain, as these participants could not attend the same interview.

At the start of each interview, the researchers determined the roles they would take. One would ask the questions and insert the answers directly in the Collector programme, while the other researcher took more detailed notes on the motivation of the participants. The researchers sometimes switched these roles per interview. Having the task division, combined with the semi-structured interview approach, ensured that one researcher was able to ask follow-up questions, while the other noted down the participants' answers. This often resulted in more outspoken and personal answers, contributing to the quality of the results (Dörnyei,

2016, p. 136). In addition, the approach ensured that the participants' answers were provided in spoken form. Should the survey have been sent to the participants digitally, the answers could have been in written form and less detailed, as some of the multiple-choice options did not feature an argumentation box to elaborate on the answers.

At the start of every interview, the researchers asked the participants if they agreed to the interview being voice-recorded. All participants agreed. After a short introduction, similar to the email text, the setup and procedure were explained by the researchers, and participants were asked if they had any questions before beginning the interview. Each interview was conducted in roughly the same amount of time (one hour), and all questions were presented in the same order. See Appendix 2 for the full list of questions.

To ensure the most accurate responses and representation of the BU, researchers explicitly asked all participants for their answers in case more than one participant was interviewed at the same time. As the survey programme allowed for selecting multiple answers, the answers from different participants in one interview session were combined. For instance, if France 1 were to prefer the themes *innovation* and *customer*, and France 2 preferred *customer* and *strategy*, the three themes were selected as answers.

Before a series of questions about a certain topic were asked, that topic was first introduced to the participants to frame the correct context. Some questions included several multiple-choice options, allowing for more than one answer. All options were repeated once before participants gave their answers. In addition, the researcher often summarised long and detailed answers to ask the participants for extra confirmation. Only after a complete answer was provided by all participants in the interview sessions did the researcher proceed to the next question.

After all questions had been asked and answered, the participants were given the opportunity to ask any last questions about the interview's results. After that, the researchers

thanked the participants for their input and informed them that the results would be reported back to them in time. This ended the interviews, after which the survey answers, written notes and the voice recording were saved.

4. Results

The results are presented here in three sections, following the structure of the Research Questions. The first section covers the participants' opinions on the internal communication from Global Head Office on the Global Intranet page, including their views on the content formats and content themes. The second focusses on the communication and content on the participants' own local intranet pages. Lastly, the editorial collaboration between the communication departments will be covered, leading up to the Discussion and Conclusion Chapters, resulting in recommendations for ING's internal communication approach.

4.1 Internal Communication from Global Head Office

All participants stated they had access to the Global Intranet portal from their local intranet portals, usually via a link on that page. The participants were then asked how often they view content on the Global Intranet page per week, on average. The answers are shown in Table 2.

Table 2.

Participants' answers to the question "On average, how many times per week do you view content on the Global Intranet?" out of 19 interview sessions.

Average number of views per week	Number of times answer provided	Percentage
0 – 3	6	32%
4 – 6	6	32%
7 – 9	5	26%
10 +	2	11%

The participants' answers were quite diverse, not particularly favouring any of the provided options. Most participants stated they looked at the Global Intranet content between 0 – 3 and 4 – 6 times per week (combined 64%).

The difference between the answers is more noticeable with the following question, asking the participants for their preferred content format(s). The results are displayed below in Table 3.

Table 3.

Participants' answers to the question "What is / are your preferred format(s) for content?" out of 19 interview sessions.

Preferred content format	Number of times answers provided	Percentage
Written article	10	53%
Interview	9	47%
Video	18	95%
Infographic	17	89%
Other	5	26%

Out of the four presented options, *written article*, *interview*, *video* and *infographic*, the participants favoured the visual content of videos (provided as answer in 95% of all interviews) and infographics (89%) over the textual content of written articles (53%) and interviews (47%) (providing multiple answers was possible). The answer option labelled "other" was chosen five times, including answers such as Q&A formats about complicated topics, statistic overviews for large data and the digital quarterly magazine ING.world, written and produced by the Content team at Head Office.

The participants' views on the content themes were questioned next. Providing multiple answers was possible. Table 4 shows the answers provided by the participants in order of frequency.

Table 4.

Participants' answers to the question "What is / are your preferred theme(s)?" out of 19 interview sessions.

Content theme	Number of times answer provided	Percentage
Innovation	16	84%
(Financial) results	16	84%
Strategy	13	68%
People	13	68%
Sustainability	13	68%
Achievements	11	58%
Competition	9	47%
Customer	8	42%
ING values	8	42%
Campaigns	8	42%
Brand	7	37%
Other	4	21%

Preferred content themes were *innovation* and communication about the quarterly *(financial) results* (both provided in 84% of all interview sessions). Second were the themes of *strategy*, *people* and *sustainability* (68%). Besides the “other” category, the *brand* theme was least preferred as it was mentioned only seven out of 19 times (37%). The answers provided under “other” included the suggestion to link innovative or sustainable projects to the strategic messaging more explicitly. In addition, it was stated by participant Netherlands 2 that the number of IT people is rapidly growing within ING, indicating that tailoring (more) content to their needs is worth considering, for instance as a sub-theme in *innovation*.

When the participants were asked about a piece of content from the global Content team that stood out in their opinion, their answers were highly diverse. One of the items most often mentioned was a 90-second video from CEO and chairman Ralph Hamers. Hamers filmed himself with a handheld camera, telling the audience about his personal experiences during a Money 20/20 convention in a vlog. The video was edited with additional footage from the event, including Hamers’s speech at the convention, and he shared his vision of the future of banking. Furthermore, the video and written communication about a world-wide internal innovation competition and about Brexit with regards to the potential economic impact were mentioned often, the latter by the European participants in particular.

The fact that pieces of content were chosen more often correlates with the answers with the next question: what did participants think are the criteria that make a story global? The answer given most often was that the content should be appealing to all readers, for example when it is from an organisational strategic point of view, or of international interest. Furthermore, participants stated that sharing best practices and how these are/could be implemented in other parts of ING is also of global appeal. No mentions of cultural differences were made here, not in organisational culture nor in local market culture. Lastly, in one interview session, with BU Asia, the participants mentioned that the format of a message is one of the criteria for global appeal.

The next question dealt with the specific information needs of the participants. In six interview sessions, the participants stated that they had no remarks regarding the published content topics. There was not too much of one topic, nor too little coverage of another topic. A remark was made about the coverage of the IT space. Participant COO2 suggested there could be more on that subject. Additionally, a topic that participants said could be covered more is sustainability. This was mentioned in four interview sessions. Finally, one general remark mentioned three times was about an oversupply of content. As the BUs have their own local communication too, “the impact that some messages deserve is lost by sharing too much information” (UK1). In addition, the length of the shared messages, especially with written articles, was considered as too much in three interviews.

4.2 Internal Communication Within Local BUs

The next questions asked participants about the internal communication in their local BU/department, correlating to the Research Question and the second Sub Question: “What are the participants’ preferred content themes on their local intranet?” The participants were presented with the same 11 story themes as in question number four, only now in the context

of their audience's content theme preference on local intranet publications. The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5.

Participants' answers to the question "What is / are your preferred theme(s)?" out of 19 interview sessions.

Content theme	Number of times answer provided	Percentage
People	12	63%
Strategy	9	47%
Other	9	47%
Customer	5	26%
Sustainability	5	26%
(Financial) results	5	26%
Achievements	4	21%
ING Values	3	16%
Campaigns	2	11%
Innovation	2	11%
Brand	1	5%
Competition	0	0%

Here, the most popular answer was *people* stories (stated in 63% of the interview sessions), followed by *strategy* and *other* (both 47%). After these, stories about *customers*, *sustainability* and *(financial) results* (all 26%) were popular. The theme *achievements* was mentioned four times (21%), communication around the *ING Values* three times (16%), *campaigns* and *innovation* twice (11%), *brand* stories was mentioned in only one interview (5%), and communication about the *competition* was not provided as answer in any interview.

The *other* section included answers such as stories that are either very topical, or when employees can take part in small competitions to win prizes. Furthermore, Americas 1 stated that people tend to become more involved when they are asked for their opinions on organisational matters, even when asked what type of headphones the office should offer. In addition, there were three BUs undergoing an office move, resulting in those local stories being well-received by the audience too.

To determine how the content on the Global Intranet portal is in line with the local intranet publications, the researchers asked the participants for the local story that was best received by their local audience. Most answers related to a human factor in the story, either with a single person as a main character (e.g. an ING employee who is also a professional athlete, or new appointments) or with people in a larger context (e.g. solidarity in Belgium after the Brussels terrorist attack).

Lastly, the researchers asked about the local internal engagement with local employees as a result of communication publications. On the Global Intranet portal, readers can comment on any message. However, out of 19 interviews, only eight participants stated that employees could comment on stories on their local intranets too. There was no such feature available on the other 11 local intranet portals. Furthermore, when comments were indeed possible, the participants stated that the average number of comments on any story was less than five.

4.3 Collaboration in Content Creation

The last section of questions revolved around the participants' willingness to collaborate and share story ideas internationally, as stated in the third Sub Question: "What are the participants' views on international content alignment?" The answers to this question would show whether or not participants were in favour of better aligning the content from Global Head Office and local BUs, by collaborating proactively. In only one interview session did the participants state that they do not share local achievements or projects with Head Office that could lead to stories on the Global Intranet. Out of the participants who do share story leads, in 13 interviews the participants stated that they receive consistent feedback from Head Office on their story leads, explaining why it will or will not be published on the global Intranet. In the remaining five interviews, the participants did not receive consistent feedback for all their sent leads, or were not satisfied with the received feedback structure.

Lastly, when asked if sharing the Global editorial calendar with the BUs' communication teams would be considered useful for their content planning, 100% of the participants answered positively. They were also all but one willing to share their local editorial calendar with the Global Content team if they did not already. The one interview in which the participant responded negatively explained that that was because they do not work with an editorial calendar.

4.4 Answers on Sub Questions

Based on the results as discussed in this Chapter, the sub questions as stated in Chapter 2 can be answered. As for the first sub question, "What is the participants' preferred content formats and themes on ING's global intranet?", the participants expressed a strong preference towards visual representations of information, rather than textual formats. I.e. videos (95%) and infographics (89%) are preferred over textual information such as written articles (53%) and interviews (47%). Furthermore, the participants stated they prefer to read about the themes *innovation* and *(financial) results* (both 84%), followed by *strategy*, *people* and *sustainability* (all 68%).

Moving to Sub Question 2 about the preferred themes on the participants' local intranets, however, the preferred content theme is *people* (63%), followed by *strategy* and *other* (both 47%). Reader engagement on the stories was very low with an average of five comments per story. This was also due to the fact that only eight out of 19 participants confirmed that such a feature was available on their local intranet portals.

Lastly, international collaboration and content alignment between global Head Office and the BUs was highly preferred by the participants. The majority of participants who sent story leads to Head Office on a regular basis were content with the feedback they received. In addition, 100% stated to appreciate receiving Head Office's editorial calendar and all BUs with an editorial calendar of their own were willing to share theirs with Head Office.

5. Discussion

5.1 Visit Frequency Global Intranet

The results of the first few questions show that the local intranets all have a link to the Global Intranet portal. Not all links are alike, though. Some participants stated that the link is just a line of text (e.g. Americas, Asia), whereas others have the link more prominently visible on their portals. The Australian portal has the link in the shape of a larger banner, for example.

The frequency of visits to the Global home page differed too, as can be seen in Table 2. Some participants stated they only look up or look at content from the Global Content Team once a week (e.g. Spain, France, Italy), whereas Asia and Poland visit the intranet at least 10 times a week. On average, most participants stated that they look at the Global Intranet portal on a daily basis. That is mostly because they are the communication specialist of their departments and have the responsibility of informing the other employees on important messages. The participants estimated that the majority of employees do not visit the global portal as often as they do. There are factors explaining this difference too. For example, the participants from Spain stated that the connection to their intranet was not easily established, as employees were required to insert an extra password. This made visiting the intranet one step harder to do, resulting in many people not frequently checking the Global Intranet. This correlates with the participants' statements of not constantly having the amount of time required to keep track of all intranet publications.

5.2 Global Intranet Formats and Themes Appreciation

Most of the participants shared a preference for specific content formats, with the more visual-oriented *videos* (95%) and *infographics* (89%) being mentioned much more often than the textual formats *written articles* (53%) and *interviews* (47%). The most apparent

reason for this difference is that participants stated they did not have enough time during the day for a multitude of tasks: reading lengthy articles and assessing how to share that with their local audience is not easily combined with their other daily work and projects. This is especially the case when the local communication departments have to translate most of the English messages in their language too (for instance in Italy, Spain, France). The visual communication formats are therefore easier to interpret and to share. Videos are more effortlessly subtitled than written articles are translated, mostly because the videos from Head Office are already generally kept under 90 seconds. Infographics make use of universally interpretable icons and graphs instead of descriptive texts. These do not need to be translated to be understood. In a time where organisations experience increasing (international) communicative opportunities (Cummings & Worley, 2015), publication speed and presentation of content can become an influencing factor for the appeal of a message.

Publication speed and content presentation function as influencers of the message appeal. The participants' answers about their Global content theme appreciation follow a similar pattern. The most interesting finding is that the communication themes *innovation* and *(financial) results* were both most often mentioned, in 84% of the interviews. This may be because the financial results of ING are of interest to every employee. Employees will want to know how well their organisation is faring, as this is relevant both for the future of the organisation as well as for their own job. Besides the quarterly or yearly profit, the results also show the growth of customers, a short review of the most interesting projects and investments, plus a personal message from the CEO Ralph Hamers to all employees. This particular message style is one of the most prominent examples of combining content themes with content formats, as the *innovation* and *(financial) results* themes are often presented in visual formats on the intranet. It seems that the combination of characteristics, instead of a singular factor, makes for the high appreciation of the message.

The personal way of delivering this message to all employees, coming directly from Ralph Hamers, is something that is much appreciated by the participants, as became evident from the seventh question in the survey. A personal message from the CEO, thanking and praising them for their hard work, along sharing his confidence in the future and the current strategy of the organisation makes the employees feel more involved and directly addressed. The combination of the format, storytelling and narrative help to make the message more memorable as well (Gill, 2011). In addition, providing all employees with the possibility to share their thoughts and questions directly under the published story on the intranet helps to spark the conversation and make employees more engaged (Cornelissen, 2017).

5.3 Local Intranet Communication Appreciation compared to Global Intranet's

The participants' answers regarding their preferred themes on their local intranets are different from their answers about the preferred themes published on Global Intranet stated above. Whereas Global stories about *innovation* and *(financial) results* are among the most appreciated (84%), it is actually the *people* stories that are most appreciated on the local intranets (as stated in 63% of the interviews). *People* stories are perhaps more personal and closer to the local BU's employees. The content variation between local personal stories and global *(financial) results* would also make for a balance between the top-down communication from Head Office (mostly regarding strategy announcements or *(financial) results*), and the bottom-up communication from the local workforce (Cornelissen, 2017). The subject and people in the local *people* stories may be both literally and figuratively closer to the local audience than the board members from Head Office are. The variation between the types of messages could also explain why the participants stated that they had no remarks concerning the global content supply in six of the interviews, as for them, there could be a good balance between the content offered by Head Office with the local content (Cornelissen, 2017, p. 179).

In the other 13 interviews, though, the participants did have remarks about the content published by Head Office. For one, they stated that it was either too lengthy, or that the upload frequency was too high. Despite frequent contact and mutual project updates among the communication experts of all ING BUs, the BUs generally have two intranets to keep track of (the local and the global), whereas the Global Head Office does not keep detailed track of all publications of all other BUs. Especially in the countries where most ING employees are not proficient (enough) in the English language, the translation process can become time consuming and expensive for the local communications departments. Therefore, the participants' remarks do seem justified as they almost have a double supply of content, generally with a smaller communications team. This could also be a reason why 100% of the participants stated that they would be willing to share their local editorial planning with Head Office, and vice versa. Firstly, awareness of each other's content and story lead needs could thereby be improved (Ahmed & Rafiq, 2003). More importantly though, collaborating on global stories, where more BUs deliver input for a global message, helps in improving the global appeal of the content (White, Vanc et. al, 2010), leading to more engagement and, ultimately, a more successful organisation (Yates, 2006; Smith & Mounter, 2008).

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the appeal and preferences of the internal communication on ING's intranet portals. 34 BUs communication representatives were interviewed about their views and preferences regarding the content from Global Head Office, and how this related to the content on their local BUs' intranets in terms of content formats and content themes. Their combined answers have been analysed qualitatively considering ING's Internal Communications procedures and findings in other relevant studies.

As for the first sub question, “What are the participants’ preferred content formats and themes on ING’s Global Intranet?”, the participants expressed a strong preference towards visual representations of information (i.e. videos (95%) and infographics (89%)), rather than textual formats (written articles (53%) and interviews (47%)). The more universally comprehensible messages in the visual formats are more easily and quicker to interpret and are easier to select relevant information from.

When comparing the content themes appreciation on the Global Intranet with the participants’ local intranets (as formulated in Sub Question 2), the findings for these two portals are not alike. Regarding the communication coming from Global Head Office, the participants stated they prefer to read about the themes *innovation* and (*financial*) *results* (both 84%), followed by *strategy*, *people* and *sustainability* (all 68%). For the participants’ local intranets, however, the preferred content theme is *people* (63%), followed by *strategy* and *other* (e.g. topical messages or employee competitions). Both of these content themes were mentioned in 47% of the interviews.

This difference can be explained by the global messages of the quarterly (financial) results being of interest to every employee worldwide. These messages are also shared via email to every employee, containing a message from CEO Ralph Hamers and links to all relevant content. On the other hand, the local BUs operate in a closer setting, generally with far fewer colleagues than in Head Office. The internal communication can mirror this professional setting, featuring personal messages from management and with employees as main characters in stories. These messages do not necessarily have to be of a global appeal and can be more culturally bound, whereas the communication from Head Office has to reach a much wider and diverse audience. Still, even with a smaller and closer audience, reader engagement on local intranets was low.

As for the third Sub Question, the gap between the content appreciation on the different portals could be bridged by improved content alignment. All participants were willing to exchange editorial calendars with Head Office to better plan and collaborate on internal communication.

6.3 Recommendations

The findings of this study, combined with the theoretical framework, lead to the following recommendations for ING's internal communication:

- The most preferred internal messages are presented in visual formats, ideally a short video, contain a message of global appeal that is interesting to every employee worldwide, presented in a personal way. The best example is the communication concerning the (financial) results. Though the content of these messages is usually very factual, figure based and bound to specific legal textual descriptions, it does contain all the elements that make these messages more successful. Publishing more messages in a similar style could result in higher content appreciation.
- Secondly, with the new intranet portal "OneIntranet" being introduced, one of the challenges has already been tackled. As all employees automatically land on the same page where the content from Head Office and their local BU are instantly visible, message exposure and reading figures are likely to go up as well. This will also save the local communication departments the task and time to adapt and translate messages for their local audience. This is an improvement on the previous situation where the departments were more segmented. Now ING employees are united on a shared communicative platform where they can engage in group discussions as well. In addition, all participants are keen on collaborating on editorial planning and content creation. This can further prevent high workloads in the communication departments and improve the global appeal of the content.

- Still, the key to successful internal communication is to match the content theme to the format. It is less useful, for example, to present impactful strategic changes only in video format, as this information is harder to retrieve at later stages. Consequently, sharing innovative solutions only in text might not provide for an adequate explanation. In these cases, a combination of a personal, visual message combined with more detailed textual explanations can be more suitable.

6.4 Limitations

The generalisability of these results is subject to certain limitations. The first has to do with the ING survey programme Collector. Unfortunately, this programme did not allow for separate answer input of multiple participants at the same time. The results have therefore been based on the 19 interview sessions, instead of on the 34 individual participants' answers. Though the researchers did ask for the participants' individual opinions and answers, multiple participants from one BU in one interview sessions usually gave similar answers.

Secondly, one of the researchers was the coordinator of the ICN network. All participants in this study are part of that network. The other researcher was part of the Global Content Team, involved in creating the stories that were published on the Global Intranet portal. As the participants were aware of the professional roles of the two researchers and are often in direct contact for other work-related matters, it could have influenced the participants into giving more preferable answers. This did not become evident during the interviews or in the results, but it may have affected the findings.

Thirdly, when asking the participants about the employees' appreciation of the stories on their local intranet portals, the participants could not provide any figures or statistics on viewing numbers or intranet traffic as this was not being measured in the BUs. The answers to this question were therefore based on educated guesses and less reliable for the study.

Furthermore, national culture has not been taken into account for this study, whereas it could have had an influence on the results. The participants may have different content, format or even formulation preferences in the communication they receive. For instance, participants from a more results-based and competitively driven national culture with a higher power-distance rating could have a higher preference for communication about results, strategy or competitors, perhaps also presented in more formal messages. Motivation could be found in both personal preference as well as for professional needs, as their local audience has a higher appreciation for these themes and / or formats.

Lastly, some of the participants took the interview as an opportunity to share their thoughts and complaints about various other matters in the overall communication processes, such as the quality of some translations coming from specific agencies. This was not the intended purpose of the interviews and the researchers had to politely redirect those participants' attention to the survey questions. This could be an indication that more frequent contact with the communication departments of the BUs may be necessary to share feedback and constructive criticism as the basis of improving overall processes. All complaints were noted during the interviews and later shared with the people involved in these processes, such as the translation coordinator.

6.5 Future research

Future research into the topic of internal communication in international organisations is recommended. With growing technical possibilities in a more interconnected professional environment, knowing what type of message delivery has the best effects on employees is vital for any organisation's future. As has been established, successful internal communication leads to a better informed and more engaged workforce, ultimately resulting in achieving organisational goals (Yates, 2006; Chong, 2007; Smith & Mounter, 2008; Rosenfeld, Richman et. al, 2004; Ahmed & Rafiq, 2003).

Furthermore, it would be interesting to see how the national cultures of the participants compare and may influence their preference for specific formats, themes and communicative delivery styles. This has not been taken into account in the present study, but could have had an influence on the participants' answers. In addition, this study has shown what type of messaging communication professionals prefer to receive. It could also be interesting to research the sentiments towards internal communication of employees in other departments than the communication department. By interviewing more participants from various countries and departments, the study would also provide a better perspective of the nation's cultural influences. Moreover, comparing data on specific stories' reading figures could help in determining format and theme preferences between BUs and departments in greater detail.

In addition, this study has been conducted at the time when the new intranet portal was in development, but not yet in use. Now that OneIntranet has been operational since October 2016, it would be interesting to conduct a similar study to investigate the appreciation of the content presentation on new intranet portal. Have the participants' feedback, the collecting and analyses of user data, and this study's recommendations made an impact regarding the content creation, content themes and used formats?

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Appendix 1

Survey introduction as presented to the participants.

Global content and ICN survey research

Dear ...,

To improve our internal communication methods throughout the business, we would like to ask for your participation in a research. The purpose of this research is to get a better understanding how you feel about the content on the Global Bank Intranet and the ING Communications Network (ICN).

This information will be used in two ways:

Firstly, we would like to get a better understanding of your local content (themes, formats, etc.) to align the global content with your local content and to increase the exchange of story ideas as we move towards the new OneIntranet. Also, we would like to get your feedback on how we can best cooperate in sourcing, aligning, and creating content together. Your opinions about local and global content will help determine how the content on the new OneIntranet can be best developed.

Secondly, we would like to refresh and reshape the ICN. Making the ICN a success is a combined responsibility. We would like to take this opportunity to reach out to you to see how we can ensure an optimal way of working together. We need your help and honest feedback to understand what works well and understand how the ICN can support your communication needs.

Please respond to this email and let us know when you are available for the interview. It will take approximately one hour.

Thank you in advance.

Appendix 2

Survey questions as presented to the participants.

Your Name:

Your department / Business Unit:

Global Intranet:

1. Is the Global Intranet page accessible via your local intranet (via a banner or link or otherwise)?
2. On average, how many times per week do you (and your colleagues) view content on the Global Intranet?
 0. 0-3
 0. 3-6
 0. 7-9
 0. 10+

Global Content:

3. What is / are your preferred format(s) for content? You can choose multiple answers.
 - a. Written article
 - b. Interview
 - c. Video
 - d. Infographic
 - e. Other,

4. What is / are your preferred theme(s)? You can choose multiple answers.
 - a. Strategy
 - b. Customer
 - c. Values
 - d. Campaigns
 - e. People
 - f. Achievements
 - g. Innovation
 - h. Brand
 - i. Sustainability
 - j. (financial) figures
 - k. Other,
5. Is there a story, video, interview, infographic, etc. from the Global Content Team that really stands out in your opinion?
6. What – in your opinion – makes a story “global”? What criteria does it have to meet?
7. What are your specific information needs? Are you reading too much about one topic, or not enough about another topic?
8. To achieve alignment of content on OneIntranet, do you see value in collaborating with the Global Content team in planning, developing and writing stories? Why / Why not?

Local content:

9. Where do you get your story ideas from?
10. What themes/type of stories are most often read by your staff on your intranet page?
 - a. Strategy

- b. Customer
- c. Values
- d. Campaigns
- e. People
- f. Achievements
- g. Innovation
- h. Brand
- i. Others,

11. Editorially, what has been the best received story that you have published in the past year?

12. Why was it so successful?

13. Are staff able to comment on any of the stories that are published?

13a. If so, how many comments do you receive per story on average?

14. Do you send the Global team in Amsterdam any story leads to publish on the Global Intranet?

14a. If so, do you feel that your input is taken into consideration? Why / Why not?

15. Would sharing the Global editorial calendar with you be useful for your editorial and content planning? Why / Why not?

16. Would you be willing to share your editorial calendar with us (for use in story leads and to know what is published locally)?

Appendix 3

Glossary of terms in this paper

Most of the following explanations were retrieved from the glossary of terms used within ING Group, accessible via ING.com.

- BU

Business Unit: a local office branch of ING that is responsible for the retail/wholesale market in that specific country. This local office functions as head of the customer branches or smaller offices in its area. Not every country has one BU. The BU for the Americas, for instance, is located in New York and is responsible for the wholesale markets in the United States, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, and Colombia.

- CCB

Corporate Communications Bank: the communications department of ING Global Head Office in Amsterdam, responsible for the creation, publication and distribution of both internal and external communication.

- COO

The COO domain is the department of the Operations Office, responsible for the bank's operations, IT, data management, the security of information, procurement, etc.

- Content Team

The Content Team from Global Head Office is one of the teams in the Corporate Communications Bank department. The team is responsible for the majority of the content on ING.com, and for the content on the Global portal of the intranet. They can be described as the journalists of the bank, writing and developing every kind of message within ING's communications.

- ICN

International Communications Network: An ING network for the communications professionals who represent a BU. The ICN members have a monthly conference call where the global stories and local initiatives are discussed, with the aim of sharing best practices and supporting international collaboration.

- Infographic

A visual way of displaying information by using icons, graphs, pictures etc. or a combination thereof, instead of descriptive texts. There is usually a clear order in the way the information is presented.



Figure 2. Example of an ING infographic. This example was created for communication around ING’s involvement in the Dakota pipeline controversy and published on ING.com on 21 March 2017. (ING Group, 2017).

- **ING Values**

The ING Values are three phrases that the whole organisation revolves around. All employees are expected and required to uphold these in their work, both with customers as well as internally. The Values are: “We are honest”, “We are prudent”, “We are responsible” (retrieved from <https://www.ing.jobs/Netherlands/Why-ING/This-is-ING-too/ING-Values.htm>).

- ING.world

A digital magazine written and published by the Content Team, in cooperation with an external agency. The award-winning magazine was published together with the quarterly results and featured a different core theme each time. The magazine has been discontinued after the risk of cybercrime through this channel was deemed too big in early 2017.

- MVP

A Minimum Viable Product, like OneIntranet at its launch, is a product that is not yet 100% finished, but functions well enough to be used. There will still be bugs or glitches in the system and not every function will be operational, but those are fixed over time, based on user feedback and data.

- Retail Banking

All of the bank's services intended for private customers as individuals. E.g. loans, mortgages, (savings) accounts, banking apps, physical customer branches, etc.

- Top Story

A Top Story is a story that is generally of bigger importance than the rest of the published news items of that week. The Top Story is usually part of the bank's strategy or topical at that time. The Top Stories are more visibly displayed on the intranet, as the latest four Top Stories are always presented with title and key image at the top of the intranet page.

- Wholesale Banking (WB)

All of the bank's services intended for corporations, from SMEs (Small to Medium Enterprises) to the large corporations. These services include account management, loans, investments, bonds, advice, and more.