Between Words and Deeds

How internal communication strategies influence employee participation in corporate volunteering through sensemaking

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Preface

This thesis explores how internal communication strategies can influence employees' participation in corporate volunteering programmes through the process of sensemaking. It completes my Executive Master in Corporate Communication at the Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University.

My interest in this topic comes from a fascination with how the corporate and non-profit worlds can complement one another and help bridge social divides. Speaking with enthusiastic, committed, and reflective participants was one of the most inspiring parts of this journey. Equally impactful were the professionals I met along the way—people working in the CSR landscape whose dedication and integrity left a lasting impression. Together, these encounters offered a quiet reminder of humanity in an increasingly hardened society.

I am deeply grateful to my coach, Lonneke Roza, for her thoughtful guidance — and much-needed — encouragement throughout this journey, and to my co-reader, Guido Berens, for his constructive feedback.

A special thanks goes to my partner for his unconditional support and belief in me — and for putting up with the occasional, unintentional thesis-induced mood swings along the way.

I am equally grateful to my family and close friends for their patience and understanding — even when I was not always available — and to my mother-in-law, whose home-cooked meals kept me grounded (and well-fed) throughout this journey.

Caro Hamacher

Executive summary

This thesis explores how internal communication strategies shape employee participation in corporate volunteering programmes through the process of sensemaking. Corporate volunteering (CV) has become an important part of modern corporate social responsibility (CSR), providing a tangible way for organisations to connect business purpose with social impact. Yet many companies still struggle to turn awareness into action. Employees often value volunteering in principle but do not always act on it, suggesting that communication alone does not guarantee participation.

The study set out to understand *how* internal communication can help close this gap. It examines the subtle communicative and interpretive processes that influence employees' decisions to take part in corporate volunteering. The central research question asks: *How do internal communication strategies influence employee participation in corporate volunteering programmes through the process of sensemaking?*

To explore this, the research adopts a qualitative, interpretivist approach. Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with employees from different organisations, representing varied levels of seniority and volunteering experience. This method allowed participants to reflect on their experiences and interpretations in their own words. Using thematic analysis, recurring patterns were identified in how communication, authenticity, and social influence interact to shape behaviour.

The findings suggest that employees are more likely to participate when communication feels genuine and aligns with organisational values. Authentic stories and peer encouragement appear to legitimise participation, while overly polished or promotional messages tend to create scepticism. Leadership endorsement also matters — visible support from managers signals that volunteering is truly valued within the organisation. In this sense, internal communication functions less as a tool for persuasion and more as an environment where meaning is negotiated and trust is built.

The research contributes to CSR and communication theory by conceptualising internal communication as a *sensemaking infrastructure* that connects organisational purpose with employees' personal values. In practical terms, it offers guidance for communication professionals seeking to design credible and engaging CSR initiatives. Building communication around authenticity, inclusion, and emotional resonance can help transform volunteering from a symbolic gesture into a meaningful, shared experience — one that benefits both employees and the communities they serve.

1. Introduction

Corporate volunteering is widely recognised in CSR literature as a meaningful way for organisations to connect business purpose with social contribution. As organisations face growing pressure to demonstrate genuine societal engagement, corporate volunteering has evolved from a HR initiative into a strategic element of CSR. Through volunteering, employees can apply their time, skills, and empathy to social causes while organisations strengthen their legitimacy, purpose, and internal culture. Yet, despite this potential, many organisations struggle to move from *promotion* to *participation*. Internal campaigns often succeed in raising awareness about volunteering opportunities but fail to inspire sustained engagement. Employees may see corporate volunteering as valuable in principle, but competing priorities, scepticism toward corporate motives, and ineffective communication limit participation in practice.

This study addresses that challenge. It explores how internal communication strategies may influence employees' participation in corporate volunteering programmes, not by only transmitting information but by shaping the meanings employees attach to such initiatives. Specifically, the thesis examines how communication operates through the process of sensemaking—how employees interpret, negotiate, and internalise organisational messages about volunteering, and how these interpretations translate into behavioural participation.

1.1 The practical problem: Awareness without action

Across the Netherlands and much of Europe, social organisations increasingly report shortages of volunteers. National figures show that while the percentage of Dutch citizens engaging in volunteer work has recovered to 49% in 2023, the rate saw a critical drop during the COVID-19 pandemic—from 47% in 2019 to a low of 39% in 2021 (Volksgezondheid en Zorg, 2023). This strain has underscored the need for sustainable voluntary support. Meanwhile, corporate volunteering programmes have gained importance as a key mechanism to bridge this gap, with the share of Dutch companies encouraging employee volunteering rising from 17% to 29% in recent years (Bekkers et al., 2024).

However, in practice, the translation from organisational intention to employee action often falls short. Many employees express moral or emotional support for volunteering initiatives but do not participate themselves. For example, company-wide communications about "volunteer days" or "giving back campaigns" may receive positive feedback on intranet posts yet result in low actual turnout. This discrepancy illustrates a persistent *intention–behaviour gap* (Sheeran, 2002): while employees may support volunteering cognitively, they do not always act on these attitudes.

From a managerial perspective, this problem has consequences. Corporate volunteering is designed to increase employee engagement, strengthen organisational culture, and project authenticity in CSR efforts (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010). When participation remains limited, these strategic goals

cannot be achieved. From a societal perspective, underutilised volunteer capacity represents lost potential for addressing pressing community needs.

At the heart of this problem lies a communication gap: employees are informed about volunteering opportunities, yet information alone does not mobilise behaviour. This assumption, that awareness naturally leads to participation—often implicit in traditional corporate communication approaches (Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Argenti, 2016)—overlooks the interpretive processes through which employees assign meaning, assess credibility, and determine relevance. In this sense, the challenge of corporate volunteering is not one of *message visibility*, but of *meaning-making*.

1.2 The importance and urgency of the topic

The urgency of understanding this development can be described from two perspectives:

From a societal perspective, volunteerism plays an essential role in sustaining social cohesion and welfare. Following the pandemic, many non-profit organisations have reported declining volunteer capacity and increasing demand for services ranging from mentorship and education to environmental initiatives (Volksgezondheid en Zorg, 2023; Holland, 2023). Corporate partnerships can provide a crucial supplement to this civic infrastructure, yet their impact depends on employees' willingness to participate. By identifying how internal communication can strengthen participation, organisations can contribute to rebuilding a culture of civic engagement that extends beyond the workplace (Bekkers et al., 2024).

Second, from an organisational perspective, corporate volunteering has become a symbolic test of authenticity. As consumers and employees demand transparency and purpose-driven behaviour, organisations are expected to "walk the talk." Internal communication about volunteering is therefore not neutral; it signals what the organisation stands for. When messages appear genuine and consistent with organisational values, they enhance trust and identification. When they appear instrumental or image-driven, they provoke scepticism and disengagement (Cook et al., 2022; Kim & Lee, 2022). In this context, communication is not merely a logistical tool for coordinating volunteering—it is a moral practice that reflects the organisation's credibility and ethical stance.

Moreover, employee expectations have shifted. Modern professionals, particularly younger generations, increasingly seek meaningful work and expect their employers to support social causes that align with their values (Grant, 2012; Roza, 2016). Corporate volunteering thus functions as both a *signal* of organisational values and a *space* where employees can express their own. Understanding how communication shapes this mutual sensemaking is crucial to sustaining engagement.

1.3 Current knowledge and theoretical context

Academic research offers complementary perspectives on how internal communication influences participation in corporate volunteering. Studies on CSR communication highlight that corporate volunteering improves both organisational reputation and employee engagement, yet outcomes depend on perceived authenticity (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010; Cook et al., 2022; Kim & Lee, 2022). When initiatives appear sincere and aligned with organisational values, they build trust and legitimacy; when perceived as promotional, they tend to discourage participation.

From a behavioural standpoint, participation differs from engagement. Drawing on the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), volunteering can be understood as a function of employees' attitudes, perceived social norms, and sense of control. Internal communication has the potential to shape these perceptions by presenting volunteering as meaningful, socially supported, and practically feasible (Rodell et al., 2016).

Within internal communication research, scholars emphasise the strategic role of message framing, channel selection, and leadership approval in aligning employees with organisational goals (Cornelissen, 2020; Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Two-way dialogue and participatory storytelling tend to be more effective than top-down information sharing, as they invite employees to co-create the meaning of CSR initiatives.

Sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995) offers another important view. Employees do not only take in organisational messages; they interpret and negotiate them through their own experiences, identities, and conversations with others. Roza (2016) shows that sensemaking mediates the link between CSR communication and engagement, suggesting that participation depends on how employees perceive authenticity and purpose.

Overall, these perspectives within the literature indicate that communication, motivation, and meaning are tightly intertwined. However, they provide limited insight into *how* internal communication shapes behaviour through employees' interpretive processes. While studies such as Roza (2016) show that sensemaking mediates the relationship between CSR communication and engagement, they do not unpack the specific communicative cues, social dynamics, and credibility assessments through which employees translate organisational messages into participation. This thesis addresses that gap by positioning sensemaking as the bridge between organisational communication and volunteering behaviour.

1.4 The knowledge gap

Despite the growing attention to CSR and employee volunteering, two limitations remain. First, most research examines communication from the organisational perspective—how companies design strategies—rather than from employees' lived experiences. Second, studies tend to focus on attitudinal outcomes such as awareness or pride, rather than behavioural participation. While

behavioural research exists, including work on the intention–behaviour gap (Sheeran, 2002; Grant, 2012), it rarely examines the *interpretive mechanisms* through which internal communication is translated into action. Employees rarely volunteer simply because they are informed or persuaded; they act when messages resonate with their personal values and feel authentic and attainable.

Moreover, although studies such as Roza (2016) demonstrate that sensemaking mediates the relationship between CSR communication and engagement, they do not unpack the specific communicative cues, social dynamics, and credibility assessments through which employees translate organisational messages into participation. This study addresses that gap by examining how employees interpret and make sense of internal communication in ways that enable or inhibit volunteering behaviour.

By integrating insights from internal communication, behavioural theory, and sensemaking, this study proposes a more in-depth understanding of participation. Internal communication is viewed not as a one-way transmission of information but as an enabling condition—a structure of meaning and dialogue that allows employees to interpret volunteering as legitimate and worthwhile. This approach contributes by shifting the focus from awareness to action, by explaining how authenticity and interpretation drive participation, and by identifying communicative mechanisms—such as peer influence, leadership modelling, and message framing—that connect organisational intention with employee behaviour.

1.5 Research aim, question, and objectives

The aim of this thesis is to investigate how internal communication strategies influence employees' participation in corporate volunteering programmes through the process of sensemaking. It seeks to discover how employees interpret organisational messages about volunteering and how these interpretations shape their willingness, that eventually will lead to participation.

Central research question:

How do internal communication strategies influence employee participation in corporate volunteering programmes through the process of sensemaking?

Research objectives:

1. To explore how employees perceive and interpret internal communication strategies related to corporate volunteering.
2. To explore how sensemaking processes influence the relationship between internal communication and employee participation in volunteering activities.
3. To identify which elements of communication strategies (e.g., channel choice, message framing, leadership endorsement) stimulate employee participation.

4. To provide practical recommendations for organizations on how to design internal communication strategies that contribute to higher levels of sustained employee participation in corporate volunteering programs.

These objectives reflect the study's dual aim: to deepen theoretical understanding of how communication shapes behaviour and to provide practical guidance for CSR and communication professionals.1.6 Methodological orientation

To address this question and the objectives, the study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist approach. This orientation recognises that meaning is socially constructed through employees' lived experiences. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve employees across diverse organisational and sectoral contexts, allowing exploration of how they perceive and make sense of communication about volunteering. Participants represented varying levels of seniority and volunteering experience, offering a cross-section of perspectives.

The analysis followed a thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), combining inductive and abductive reasoning. This iterative process allowed theoretical concepts—such as authenticity, communication framing, and sense giving—to be refined through the lived experiences of participants. The qualitative design does not aim for statistical generalisation but for *analytic depth*, revealing the interpretive mechanisms through which communication shapes behaviour.

1.7 Contribution to theory and practice

The study makes contributions on two levels.

Theoretical contribution

It advances the integration of internal communication and sensemaking theories by conceptualising communication as a *sensemaking infrastructure*—a relational and interpretive process that enables employees to connect personal and organisational purpose. The findings further nuance Weick's (1995) sensemaking model by suggesting that employees assess plausibility not only cognitively, but also morally—evaluating whether communication aligns with organisational behaviour and authentic intent. They also refine Morsing and Schultz's (2006) framework by illustrating how involvement strategies operate through relational dialogue, peer influence, and leadership modelling, rather than through message frequency or persuasive framing alone.

Practical contribution

For practitioners, the study provides evidence-based guidance on how to design communication that encourages voluntary participation. It highlights that credibility emerges not from message frequency or design polish but from relational authenticity: employees are persuaded less by corporate campaigns than by the genuine enthusiasm of peers and managers. By focusing on authenticity, inclusivity, and emotional resonance, organisations can contribute to a culture of trust and intrinsic motivation that sustains long-term engagement.

In a broader sense, the research underscores the role of internal communication in bridging the moral divide between business and society. In times of declining institutional trust, authentic participation in volunteering allows organisations to demonstrate purpose not as rhetoric but as lived practice.

1.8 Structure of the thesis

The structure of this thesis is as follows:

- Chapter 2: Literature Review brings together existing research on corporate volunteering, employee participation, internal communication, and sensemaking. It identifies theoretical gaps and proposes a conceptual framework that links communication strategies, interpretive processes, and behavioural outcomes.
- Chapter 3: Methods describes the research design, philosophical stance, data collection, and analysis procedures. It explains how semi-structured interviews were conducted and analysed through thematic methods.
- Chapter 4: Findings presents the empirical results organised around three themes—internal communication as input, sensemaking as interpretive process, and participation as behavioural outcome—illustrating how meaning and behaviour are connected.
- Chapter 5: Discussion integrates the findings with existing theory, discusses implications for research and practice, and outlines limitations and avenues for future inquiry.
- References and Appendices provide the full list of academic sources and supporting materials such as the interview guide, coding overview, and consent forms.

In short, this introduction frames corporate volunteering within the broader effort to move from awareness to action. Understanding how employees interpret internal communication is crucial to this process, revealing how authenticity and shared purpose can make CSR a lived organisational reality.

2. Literature review

2.1 Introduction

To understand how internal communication strategies can drive employee participation in corporate volunteering programs, it is crucial to first examine the broader conceptual and theoretical landscape surrounding this topic. This literature review synthesizes existing knowledge in four interconnected domains: corporate volunteering, employee participation, internal communication, and sensemaking.

The following sections outline how each field defines its core concepts, identifies the mechanisms proposed, and highlights areas of theoretical divergence. This synthesis provides the theoretical backbone of the thesis and identifies gaps in current research—particularly regarding how internal CSR communication translates into actual employee behaviour. The chapter concludes with a conceptual model that integrates these insights and informs the subsequent research design.

2.2 Corporate volunteering: forms, functions, and frictions

Corporate volunteering has gained significant prominence in recent years as a cornerstone of corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategies. Defined as "the act of employees offering their time, skills, or labour to community or social causes, often organized or supported by their employer" (Bussell & Forbes, 2008; de Gilder et al., 2005), corporate volunteering allows organisations to demonstrate their social values in practice, while giving employees a chance to contribute to something beyond their day-to-day work.

2.2.1 Forms of corporate volunteering

Three main formats can be distinguished (Licandro, 2017):

- Direct employee volunteering, involving hands-on activities such as mentoring or clean-ups;
- Pro bono volunteering, where employees apply professional expertise to social causes; and
- Corporate-supported volunteering, such as paid volunteer days or matching schemes.

These forms vary in structure, accessibility, and perceived authenticity. Direct volunteering offers visible social impact but may not align with everyone's skills. Pro bono activities can feel more meaningful but are limited to specialised roles, while corporate-supported formats are inclusive yet sometimes perceived as managerial or image-driven (Rodell et al., 2016; Cook et al., 2022). Consequently, internal communication should adapt to each format's degree of structure, autonomy, and authenticity (Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Cornelissen, 2020).

2.2.2 Motivations and organisational value

From the employee perspective, volunteering fulfils intrinsic needs such as purpose, belonging, and personal growth (Grant, 2012). For organisations, it supports employer branding, retention, and reputation (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010). Yet these benefits depend on perceived authenticity: employees engage more when initiatives reflect genuine organisational values rather than promotional aims (Kim & Lee, 2022). Perceived misalignment between external messaging and internal practice can foster scepticism and disengagement (Cook et al., 2022).

2.2.3 Limitations and barriers

Despite increasing popularity, many programmes fail to sustain long-term participation. Common barriers include lack of time, unclear communication, or limited alignment with employees' interests (Booth, Park & Glomb, 2009). Structural constraints—such as shift work or limited scheduling flexibility—can also exclude operational staff, while smaller firms often lack the coordination capacity of multinationals (Bekkers et al., 2024; Holland, 2023). These disparities highlight the need for inclusive, context-sensitive communication strategies that acknowledge practical realities.

A further challenge concerns authenticity. When volunteering appears primarily driven by branding or recruitment motives, employees may interpret it as *CSR-washing* —the perception that corporate volunteering is used instrumentally for image rather than genuine social impact (Cook et al., 2022). Ensuring coherence between communicated purpose and lived experience is therefore essential to maintain credibility and trust—conditions under which participation becomes more likely (Kim & Lee, 2022).

2.3 Employee participation: From intention to behaviour

While employee engagement is frequently referenced in CSR literature, this thesis purposefully focuses on *employee participation*—a more behaviourally grounded construct. Whereas engagement often denotes emotional or cognitive alignment with an organisation's values, participation refers to *actual involvement*: signing up for, attending, or contributing time to volunteering initiatives (Booth, Park & Glomb, 2009). This distinction is crucial for understanding how internal communication strategies translate into tangible outcomes for CSR programs.

2.3.1 Intention–behaviour gap in volunteering

Despite employees expressing positive attitudes towards corporate volunteering, actual participation rates often remain low. This discrepancy has been referred to as the "intention–behaviour gap" (Sheeran, 2002), a well-documented phenomenon in behavioural science. Grant (2012) and Rodell et al. (2016) similarly note that favourable attitudes are not reliable predictors of volunteering action. Therefore, to increase employee participation, organisations must look beyond motivational messaging and understand the psychological mechanisms that convert intention into behaviour.

2.3.2 A complementary behavioural perspective: Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)

While this thesis adopts *sensemaking* as its primary theoretical lens, the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) provides a useful complementary perspective for understanding how employees form intentions to participate in corporate volunteering. TPB proposes that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control shape behavioural intentions.

In the context of corporate volunteering, internal communication may indirectly influence these perceptions—for example by strengthening normative cues through visible peer involvement or by clarifying procedures that increase perceived behavioural control.

However, TPB serves only as a complementary behavioural perspective. While it highlights cognitive predictors of intention, the present study focuses on the interpretive processes through which employees make sense of organisational communication. Sensemaking therefore forms the primary theoretical and analytical foundation of this thesis.

2.3.3 Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation

Participation in corporate volunteering is also influenced by an individual's motivational orientation. *Self-Determination Theory* (Deci & Ryan, 2000) differentiates between intrinsic motivation—volunteering for personal fulfilment or alignment with values—and extrinsic motivation, such as rewards, recognition, or pressure. Research suggests that intrinsic motivation is more strongly linked to sustained participation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, extrinsic cues can still play a supporting role if they affirm organisational values and are seen as authentic.

2.3.4 Barriers and social dynamics

Common barriers include limited time, unclear procedures, lack of alignment with personal interests, and low trust in corporate motives (Booth et al., 2009; Cook et al., 2022). These factors map onto TPB: time and ambiguity reduce perceived control; misalignment and scepticism weaken attitudes; and weak peer or managerial support undermines norms. Demographic and contextual conditions—such as hierarchical structures, shift work, or temporary contracts—further constrain access (Rodell et al., 2016).

Social dynamics within teams also matter. Following Cialdini's (2001) principle of social proof, employees are more likely to volunteer when they observe peers or leaders doing so. Storytelling, colleague highlights, or team-based activities thus strengthen normative pressure and reduce uncertainty. These mechanisms demonstrate how communication and social cues jointly shape employees' interpretations of volunteering opportunities, bridging the gap between intention and behaviour.

2.4 Internal communication strategies

Internal communication strategies refer to the structured use of organisational messages and channels to inform, inspire, and influence employee behaviour (Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Cornelissen, 2020). Within corporate volunteering, communication serves a dual purpose: raising awareness of opportunities and enabling employees to make sense of how these initiatives align with organisational and personal values.

2.4.1 From information to involvement

Traditional internal communication often follows a one-way, informational logic focused on message delivery. While effective for awareness, such approaches rarely change behaviour (Argenti, 2016). Morsing and Schultz (2006) distinguish between **informational**, **response**, and **involvement** strategies, with the latter encouraging dialogue and co-creation of CSR meaning. When employees are consulted or involved in shaping volunteering programmes, they perceive these initiatives as more authentic and personally relevant (Roza, 2016; Kim & Lee, 2022).
Internal communication should therefore go beyond informing employees *about* volunteering to actively engaging them *in* the interpretation of its purpose.

2.4.2 Framing and emotional resonance

The framing of internal communication determines how employees interpret meaning and intention (Cornelissen, 2020). Emotionally resonant storytelling—through narratives of impact, transformation, or belonging—evokes empathy and identification, fostering a stronger moral connection to volunteering (Grant, 2012). CSR messages framed around moral and prosocial values generate more trust and engagement than those focused on business benefits (Love, Sekhon & Salinas, 2022). Authenticity and emotional resonance are thus critical when promoting volunteering initiatives. Conversely, overly instrumental framing (e.g., “good for your career”) may trigger scepticism if perceived as manipulative or inauthentic (Cook et al., 2022).

2.4.3 Channels and segmentation

The choice of communication channel affects perceived credibility and emotional impact, as widely shown in internal communication research (Cornelissen, 2020; Welch, 2012). Formal channels (email, intranet, HR platforms) provide clarity and legitimacy, while informal communication (team discussions, peer exchanges) enhances relatability and trust. Leadership communication—videos or personal messages—signals organisational commitment, and interactive platforms (internal social media, apps) stimulate engagement and co-creation.

To reach diverse audiences, messages should be segmented and tailored to employee context. Personalised communication enhances relevance and trust (Men & Bowen, 2017) and increases willingness to act when messages reflect employees' functional roles or prior experience (Verčič & Vokić, 2017). For example, newcomers may respond to clear instructions and testimonials, whereas experienced volunteers value deeper impact narratives. Ultimately, effective communication combines multiple channels and tailored framing to ensure both reach and resonance.

2.4.4 Leadership and peer influence

Leadership endorsement plays both a symbolic and practical role in activating participation. When senior leaders visibly volunteer or express support, they signal alignment between organisational values and desired behaviour (Cornelissen, 2020; Men & Bowen, 2017). Yet day-to-day influence often lies with middle managers who legitimise participation and integrate it into work routines (Verčič & Vokić, 2017).

Peer influence further strengthens these effects through social proof (Cialdini, 2001): seeing respected colleagues participate normalises volunteering and enhances credibility. Storytelling and team-based volunteering make these cues visible and relatable, reinforcing the idea that "people like me" engage in such behaviour. These communicative and social dynamics prime employees' sensemaking, clarifying what behaviours are legitimate, valued, and feasible within the organisational context.

2.5 Sensemaking Theory: Interpreting communication for action

To understand how internal communication translates into behavioural participation in corporate volunteering, it is essential to examine how employees make sense of the messages they receive. *Sensemaking theory*, developed by Karl Weick (1995), provides a valuable framework for analysing this process. It focuses not on how people receive information, but on how they actively interpret, reconstruct, and align it with their own identities, beliefs, and social contexts.

2.5.1 Core principles of sensemaking

Weick (1995) defines sensemaking as "the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing" (p. 15). This process is retrospective, social, and identity-driven. In other words, employees interpret communication in light of past experiences, workplace norms, and their self-concept within the organisation.

Maitlis and Christianson (2014) offer a comprehensive review of sensemaking in organisations, emphasizing its dynamic, situated, and recursive nature. Their work helps clarify how organisational communication not only reflects reality but actively constructs the frameworks through which employees understand and act upon volunteering messages. Among Weick's seven properties, three are most relevant to this study:

- Identity construction: Employees ask, "Who am I in this organisation, and how do volunteering messages relate to that identity?"
- Social context: Sensemaking is influenced by conversations with peers, team norms, and cultural signals.
- Enactment: Employees do not passively receive meaning—they co-create it through action, e.g., attending an info session or joining a group initiative.

These features explain why identical communication efforts may trigger different interpretations and responses across individuals or departments.

2.5.2 Application to CSR and volunteering

In the CSR literature, sensemaking has increasingly been used to explain why some internal communication leads to behavioural change while other efforts fall flat (Roza, 2016). Employees must first perceive CSR efforts as credible, consistent across messages and actions, and authentic before internalising them.

Roza's multilevel model of employee engagement situates sensemaking as a mediator between CSR communication and employee behaviour. While sensemaking is a continuous process, it is more likely to lead to constructive outcomes—such as participation and identification—when employees:

- perceive a value match between organisational goals and personal beliefs;
- see volunteering opportunities as actionable and meaningful;
- experience peer validation of participation.

If these enabling conditions are absent—such as when communication is vague, priorities are conflicting, or organisational motives appear inauthentic—sensemaking may still occur, but it often results in confusion, inaction, or disengagement. In such cases, employees struggle to reconcile the organisation's stated values with their lived experience, which undermines trust and diminishes participation.

2.5.3 Communication as a trigger for sensemaking

Internal communication also acts as the moment that *activates* sensemaking: it prompts employees to interpret, evaluate, and compare organisational messages with their own experiences. When communication aligns with employees' experiences and organisational values, it enhances sensemaking; when messages are inconsistent or perceived as inauthentic, it may instead create confusion or disengagement (Cornelissen, 2020).
Elements that enhance sensemaking include:

- Narratives of impact: Personal stories from colleagues who volunteer help employees visualise themselves in similar roles and reduce psychological distance (Roza, 2016; Weick, 1995).
- Consistent values language: Messaging that echoes the organisation's broader CSR mission reinforces coherence and trust (Cornelissen, 2020).
- Dialogue opportunities: Mechanisms such as town halls, team discussions, or peer exchanges provide space for reflection, shared meaning-making, and identity construction (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995).

These communicative elements jointly establish the conditions under which sensemaking can occur effectively. In contrast, sensemaking is disrupted when communication signals are inconsistent with organisational practices, such as promoting volunteering while failing to allocate time or managerial support for participation. Such inconsistencies create cognitive dissonance, reduce perceived authenticity, and ultimately weaken employees' motivation to participate in volunteering initiatives.

2.5.4 Social context, leadership and social norms

Sensemaking is inherently social: employees look to others to interpret what is valued or expected (Weick, 1995). Leadership endorsement thus signals that volunteering aligns with organisational identity, while peer participation offers social proof (Cialdini, 2001), reinforcing behavioural norms. These subtle, relational cues often shape sensemaking more powerfully than formal messages.

When leaders "walk the talk"—for example by volunteering or granting flexibility—they legitimise participation and reduce ambiguity. Conversely, symbolic statements without follow-through can disrupt meaning-making and trigger scepticism (Cornelissen, 2020).

2.5.5 Nudge Theory: Supporting sensemaking through design

Sensemaking can also be supported through choice architecture, drawing on insights from nudge theory (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). Nudges are subtle design elements that steer behaviour without removing freedom of choice. In corporate volunteering, such cues include:

- Defaults: automatic enrolment in volunteering days with the option to opt out;
- Social proof cues: showing how many colleagues participate;
- Framing: emphasising shared prosocial identity ("Be a mentor, not just a colleague").

These mechanisms help employees interpret what is normal and feasible within their organisation. Importantly, nudges do not replace sensemaking—they guide it by directing attention and clarifying behavioural options.

However, ethical use is essential. As Sunstein (2015) notes, nudges are most legitimate when transparent, autonomy-preserving, and aligned with recipients' values. In hierarchical workplaces, manipulative or opaque designs may erode trust and disrupt meaning-making. Ethically designed nudges, by contrast, can facilitate sensemaking, amplifying intrinsic motivation and supporting informed participation decisions.

2.5.6 Synthesis: from communication to participation

Across the literature, internal communication functions as the input, sensemaking as the interpretive mechanism, and employee participation as the behavioural outcome. Communication shapes attitudes, norms, and perceived control (Ajzen, 1991) through framing, channel choice, and credible messengers. Sensemaking integrates these cues with identity and context, influenced by leadership, peers, and subtle nudges. Participation is more likely to follow when employees interpret communication as meaningful, socially supported, and feasible within their work environment.

2.6 Conceptual Framework

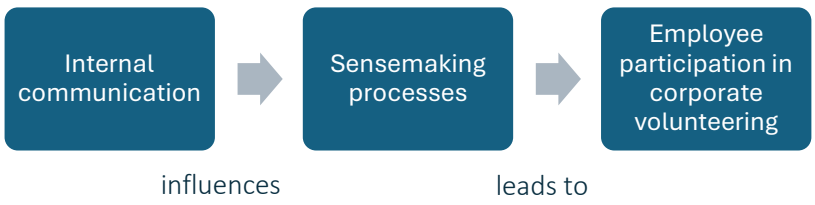

Figure 1.

The conceptual framework derived from this review integrates the three theoretical domains that explain how internal communication shapes employee participation in corporate volunteering: **communication strategies**, **sensemaking processes**, and **behavioural outcomes**. Figure 1 visualises this process. Together, these elements form a causal chain in which internal communication serves as the *input*, sensemaking as the *interpretive mechanism*, and participation as the *behavioural outcome*.

Internal communication strategies encompass message framing, channel choice, personalisation, leadership endorsement, and narrative design. These elements determine how employees perceive the authenticity, accessibility, and relevance of volunteering opportunities.

Sensemaking functions as the interpretive process through which employees assign meaning to communication, align it with their identities, and evaluate its credibility within their organisational

context. Leadership cues, peer norms, and subtle nudges all influence how employees interpret these messages and whether they experience them as legitimate and actionable.

Employee participation represents the behavioural response—the extent to which employees move from awareness to action. Participation occurs when communication and context jointly enable employees to view volunteering as meaningful, socially supported, and feasible within their work environment.

This integrative framework contributes to CSR communication research by bringing together related but often separately treated streams—internal communication, behavioural theory, and sensemaking—into a more integrated analytical lens. It moves beyond attitudinal explanations of employee engagement to illuminate the interpretive mechanisms that translate organisational messages into action.

Accordingly, the framework guided the design of the empirical study. It informed the development of the **interview guide**, the **thematic coding structure**, and the **analytical focus** on how employees interpret and act upon internal communication about corporate volunteering.

2.7 Conclusion

To summarize, the review reveals that activating employee participation in corporate volunteering is not a matter of communication volume or visibility alone, but of meaningful connection—between message and identity, intention and interpretation, structure and behaviour. Understanding that connection is the goal of the next phase of this research.

Ultimately, activating employee participation in corporate volunteering requires more than persuasive communication—it requires communication that resonates, respects, and reflects employees' lived realities. This literature review underscores that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. For communication professionals, the challenge lies in crafting strategies that are both scalable and personal, structured yet adaptive—capable of supporting meaningful, sustained behaviour across diverse organisational settings.

3. Methods

This thesis investigates how internal communication strategies influence employee participation in corporate volunteering programmes through the process of sensemaking. Given this focus on lived experience, interpretation, and behavioural outcomes, a qualitative research design was adopted. Such a design allows for in-depth exploration of individual perspectives and facilitates the identification of nuanced mechanisms that might remain undiscovered in purely quantitative approaches.

Guided by an interpretivist philosophy, this study assumes that organisational reality is not fixed but constructed through employees' everyday experiences and interactions. This view aligns with the aim of exploring how employees make sense of internal communication about corporate volunteering within their own contexts. Within this methodology, semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture how employees across different organisational contexts perceive internal communication and how they make sense of it in relation to their own values, identities, and behaviours. The choice of interviews not only provides access to insights into multiple realities but also enables flexibility in probing meanings, interpretations, and discovering (possibly) unexpected themes.

The research followed an abductive approach with inductive elements. The initial set of codes was informed by the theoretical framework, drawing on key concepts such as internal communication, sensemaking, and employee participation. As the analysis progressed, these codes were refined and expanded to reflect nuances and contextual details that emerged from the interviews. This iterative movement between theory and data allowed the study to remain grounded in empirical insights while guided by established theoretical perspectives.

By adopting this approach, the methodology aims to provide a transparent explanation of how data were generated, analysed, and interpreted, enabling a critical assessment of the validity and transferability of the findings.

3.1 Research design and strategy

The research design represents the overall plan through which the research question is addressed, including the philosophical assumptions, the approach to theory development, and the methodological choices that structure the study (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). In this thesis, the research design is rooted in an interpretivist philosophy, adopts a qualitative and exploratory strategy, and uses a mono-method approach based on semi-structured interviews. This design is considered most appropriate for examining the subjective ways in which employees perceive and interpret internal communication about corporate volunteering, and how such sensemaking processes inform their behavioural decisions to participate.

3.1.1 Philosophical stance: Interpretivism

Interpretivism assumes that reality is socially constructed and that organisational behaviour cannot be fully understood through objective measurement alone, but requires attention to meaning, context, and lived experience (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). This research approach is particularly appropriate for the study, as it seeks to understand how employees interpret and assign meaning to internal communication about corporate volunteering. As Weick (1995) argues, sensemaking is an interpretive process in which individuals construct meaning from their experiences rather than merely receiving information. Adopting an interpretivist perspective therefore enables the study to examine how employees' perceptions are shaped by their organisational context and how these interpretations influence participation.

3.1.2 Approach to theory development

The study follows an abductive research approach with inductive elements. The initial code set was informed by the theoretical framework, based on key concepts such as internal communication, sensemaking, and employee participation. However, as the analysis progressed, additional codes and refinements were made to capture nuances and contextual details that came up from the interviews.

This iterative process meant that data and theory informed one another: theoretical concepts guided the initial structure of the analysis, while the empirical material enriched and contextualized these concepts. The approach was therefore not designed to test hypotheses (deductive), but to deepen theoretical understanding through data-driven interpretation (inductive–abductive).

This reasoning process aligns with Saunders and Lewis (2018), who describe qualitative inquiry as an ongoing dialogue between theoretical understanding and empirical evidence.

3.1.3 Research strategy: Qualitative and exploratory

Exploratory research is appropriate when existing theory requires contextual refinement or when relationships between concepts are not yet fully understood (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). While previous studies have examined employee motivations for volunteering and the role of CSR communication, less attention has been given to the interpretive mechanisms through which internal communication shapes participation.

To investigate these mechanisms, the study employs a mono-method qualitative design using semi-structured interviews. This approach enables an in-depth exploration of employees' interpretations of internal communication, capturing nuances of tone, framing, channel choice, and authenticity, as well as the social factors shaping their participation decisions. Semi-structured interviews provide sufficient structure for comparability while allowing flexibility to probe deeper into participants' perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.2 Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen because it allows participants to describe their perceptions and experiences in their own words, while still ensuring that key themes from the conceptual framework were addressed. The interview guide (Appendix A) was developed based on the main concepts of the study—internal communication, sensemaking, and employee participation—and provided flexibility to probe on the topics.

In total, twelve interviews were conducted between June and October 2025. All interviews were held individually, either online or by phone (one interview), depending on participants' availability. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent (Appendix B for the informed consent form).

3.2.1 Sampling strategy

The sampling of the participants was done via a non-probability sampling approach, as the aim was not statistical generalisation but rather the generation of rich insights (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). Within this framework, three complementary techniques were used: purposive, snowball, and volunteer sampling.

Purposive sampling was used to intentionally select individuals with direct experience in corporate volunteering who could meaningfully reflect on how internal communication influenced their participation. This approach ensured that participants were information-rich cases relevant to the research questions.

To identify such individuals, the recruitment process drew on LinkedIn searches for posts shared by companies or nonprofit organisations featuring employees engaged in volunteering activities. These employees were then contacted directly via LinkedIn.

Volunteer sampling occurred when employees responded to the researcher's open LinkedIn post, in which the purpose of the study was explained and interested participants were invited to take part. This approach allowed individuals who recognised themselves in the topic to self-select for participation.

Snowball sampling complemented these efforts, as several participants and professional contacts referred additional employees from their networks who had relevant experience with corporate volunteering initiatives.

In total, thirty-nine individuals were contacted, including several intermediaries who helped facilitate access to potential participants. From this outreach, twelve interviews were conducted with employees who had direct experience with corporate volunteering initiatives.

While this approach ensured a diverse sample across sectors, it also led to an overrepresentation of participants in mid- to senior-level or strategic roles. Many were closely connected to CSR or community engagement functions, and several expressed strong intrinsic motivation towards volunteering. Although this provided valuable insight into organisational communication practices, it limited representation from front-line employees or those less engaged with CSR activities. This limitation is acknowledged and further discussed in chapter 5 (Discussion).

3.2.2 Participants and organisational contexts

In total, twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with employees across a diverse set of corporate organisations, including those in financial services, telecommunications, energy, manufacturing, consultancy, and recruitment/hr. The sample included participants in junior, mid-level, and senior or strategic positions, allowing for the exploration of different organisational contexts, communication practices, and employee experiences.

While most organisations were large, internationally operating corporations, one case involved an organisation operating at the intersection of commercial and philanthropic logics (lottery), offering a distinctive perspective on volunteering communication. Importantly, all participants were employees within corporate settings.

To enrich the dataset, two additional informants with a sector-wide perspective were included: one affiliated with a regional platform supporting corporate volunteering and another linked to a regional coordination body. Both were anonymised to ensure they felt comfortable sharing organisational insights. During the first interviews, several participants had indicated that they preferred anonymity, as otherwise they would need to seek explicit approval from their employers. These sector-wide informants provided contextual depth regarding how organisations design and communicate volunteering initiatives, although the core analysis focuses on employees' perspectives.

Although the number of quotations per participant varied, this variation reflects differences in narrative depth rather than analytical weight. Employees with extensive volunteering experience generally provided more detailed reflections on internal communication and sensemaking, resulting in a higher number of citations in the Findings chapter. In contrast, two of the four occasional volunteers (P05 and P07) offered shorter accounts that were nonetheless included in the analysis and helped identify contrasting perspectives. Their relative underrepresentation in the quotations corresponds with their limited engagement in corporate volunteering and therefore also represents a meaningful aspect of the data.

To ensure confidentiality, organisation names, participant names, and job titles were anonymised. An overview of participants' characteristics is presented in Appendix C. Table 1 summarises the pseudonyms, organisational contexts, function levels, forms of interview, and the participants' experience with corporate volunteering.

The majority of interviews (eleven) were conducted via online videoconferencing, and one by telephone. The diversity of organisational backgrounds and communication contexts contributes to the richness of the dataset and supports the exploratory character of the study. All interviews were video/audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised. Metadata such as date, duration, role, and organisational type were systematically logged to ensure transparency and rigour during analysis.

Table 1: Summarized overview of participant characteristics

Category	Description
Number of participants	12
Gender	6 male, 6 female
Organisational types	Consultancy (2), Energy (1), Financial (1), Charity Lottery (1), Manufacturing (1), Recruitment/HR (2), Retail (1), Tech(1), Telecom (2)
Function levels	Junior (1), Medior (4), and Senior(7)
Experience with corporate volunteering	Sustainable participation (8), occasional participation (4)
Interview format	11 Microsoft-Teams, 1 by phone
Average duration	40 minutes (range: 30–60 min)
Location	Netherlands-based organisations with international scope.

Note: A detailed participant overview, including pseudonyms and role descriptions, is provided in Appendix C.

3.3 Justification of approach

3.3.1 Validity, reliability, and trustworthiness

Ensuring the quality and credibility of qualitative research focuses not on positivist notions of validity and reliability, but on the constructivist criteria of trustworthiness—credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Multiple measures were taken in this study to enhance transparency, minimise bias, and strengthen the credibility and relevance of the findings.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings accurately represent participants' perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Several steps were taken to enhance credibility. Interviews were conducted using a carefully designed semi-structured guide (Appendix A) that ensured consistent coverage of the key themes while allowing participants to elaborate on personal experiences. Probing questions

were used to deepen understanding and clarify ambiguous statements. After transcription, recordings and transcripts were systematically reviewed for accuracy.

Triangulation was applied in two ways. Data triangulation was achieved by including participants from multiple organisational contexts and sectors (see Table 1), allowing cross-case comparison. Methodological triangulation was limited, as only interviews were used, but credibility was supported by the inclusion of two sector-level informants who provided contextual insight into organisational communication practices. These informants were not part of the formal dataset but helped to contextualise the findings.

Dependability

Dependability concerns the consistency of findings and the stability of the research process over time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All interviews followed the same procedural steps: first initial contact, invitation, informed consent, recording, transcription, and anonymisation. A master log containing metadata (e.g., interview date, duration, medium, and organisational type) provided an audit trail that enabled external scrutiny of the process.

In addition, reflexivity played an important role. As the researcher has professional experience in both corporate and nonprofit contexts, reflexive memos were maintained throughout data collection and analysis to monitor and reduce potential bias, ensuring that participants' accounts were prioritised over pre-existing assumptions. This practice contributed to dependability by making the researcher's interpretive stance explicit.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which findings may be applicable to other contexts (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). In qualitative research, this is achieved by providing sufficient contextual detail to enable readers to assess the relevance of the findings to their own settings. Rich descriptions of organisational types and participant roles (anonymised for confidentiality) were therefore provided earlier in this chapter. While the sample does not represent all employees or organisations, the diversity of sectors, roles, and communication practices strengthens the applicability of the findings across comparable contexts.

Confirmability

Confirmability concerns the extent to which the findings are shaped by participants rather than researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transparency in data handling was ensured through anonymisation, secure storage of transcripts, and systematic coding. Codes and emerging themes were reviewed iteratively, and quotations from participants are presented in the Findings chapter to demonstrate how interpretations are grounded in the data.

In addition, reflexive notes were kept to document interpretive decisions during coding and theme development, ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in the data rather than researcher assumptions.

3.3.2 Ethical considerations

Ethical safeguards were applied throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of their responses. Explicit consent was obtained prior to each interview, and participants signed an informed consent form (Appendix C). Anonymisation was applied not only to personal identifiers but also to organisational names and job titles to ensure confidentiality.

These ethical measures, combined with systematic documentation, reflexive practices, and triangulation across organisational contexts, contributed to the overall trustworthiness of the study.

3.4 Data analysis procedures

The analysis of the interview data followed a systematic, multi-stage process aimed at capturing employees' subjective experiences while ensuring transparency and methodological rigour. In line with the study's interpretivist philosophy, a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) was adopted. The procedures combined abductive and inductive reasoning: initial coding was guided by key theoretical concepts, while openness was maintained for additional insights coming from the data. This iterative process allowed for continuous movement between empirical material and theory (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). The analysis was conducted in Atlas.ti, which facilitated systematic coding, theme development, and documentation throughout the process.

3.4.1 Data preparation

Following each interview, audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and anonymised to preserve accuracy and confidentiality. Personal identifiers, job titles, and company names were removed or replaced with sector-based descriptors (e.g., "telecommunications company" or "financial services provider") to maintain anonymity and consistency across cases. Metadata such as interview mode, date, and duration were recorded in a master document to create a transparent audit trail. All transcripts were subsequently imported into Atlas.ti for systematic coding and analysis.

3.4.2 Coding approach

The transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which offers a flexible framework for identifying patterns of meaning across qualitative data. The coding process followed an abductive logic, combining theory-informed structure with openness to new insights.

Prior to coding, an initial code set was developed based on the main theoretical concepts of the study—*internal communication*, *sensemaking*, and *employee participation*. Each preliminary code was defined in a codebook with clear descriptions and inclusion criteria. During the analysis, additional codes were created inductively to capture nuances that extended or refined the theoretical framework. Analytic memos were maintained throughout to record emerging interpretations and potential links between data and theory.

Following this first cycle, the preliminary codebook was reviewed. Rather than merging overlapping codes, boundaries were clarified and operational definitions tightened. Overly broad labels were split into more specific subcodes, and co-coding was used where a segment legitimately related to multiple concepts. Each code was assigned a clear definition, inclusion/exclusion criteria, and illustrative quotations to ensure consistency across the dataset.

The final code groups reflected the main analytical domains of the study: *Communication* (68 codes), *Sensemaking* (43), *Participation* (13), *Barriers and Enablers* (16), *Motivation* (7), *Organisational Support* (4), *Evaluation and Suggestions* (5), and *Background* (9). This distribution provided sufficient analytical depth while maintaining coherence across the dataset. The coding system captured both

theory-informed and data-driven insights, forming a solid foundation for the development of higher-order themes. These themes—*Internal Communication as Input*, *Sensemaking as Interpretive Process*, and *Participation as Behavioural Outcome*—are elaborated in the subsequent section and presented in detail in the Findings chapter.

3.4.3 Theme development

In the second stage of analysis, the coded data were examined to identify conceptual relationships across the eight main code groups. Although the coding began with ideas from the literature and the interview guide to help orient the analysis, the development of higher-order themes was primarily inductive, emerging through iterative comparison and refinement of the data. This stage aimed to move beyond descriptive coding toward the development of themes that captured how employees interpret and respond to internal communication about corporate volunteering.

Within Atlas.ti, subcodes were organised hierarchically under broader categories, allowing for a structured yet flexible exploration of meaning. For example, within the *Communication* group, subcodes such as *Channel and Accessibility*, *Style and Strategy*, and *Visibility and Triggers* illustrated how message design and dissemination influenced employees' perceptions of accessibility and authenticity. Similarly, subcodes within *Sensemaking*—including *Authenticity and Credibility*, *Perception of Sincerity and PR Motives*, and *Value Alignment and Organisational Identification*—captured how employees constructed meaning around the organisation's motives and their own connection to its social initiatives. Within *Participation*, subcodes such as *From Awareness to Active Involvement* and *Peer Influence and Ambassadorship* represented the behavioural dimension of employees' engagement.

Through iterative comparison and analytic memoing, patterns within and between these code groups were identified and refined. The relationships between communication practices, sensemaking processes, and participation outcomes were visualised in a thematic map that aligned with the study's conceptual model. An overview of the thematic coding structure, including the main themes, subthemes, and representative codes, is presented in Appendix D (Thematic coding overview), while the corresponding thematic maps are provided in Appendix D, additional tables. These visual and tabular summaries illustrate how first-order codes and subthemes informed the three overarching themes discussed in the Findings chapter: *Internal Communication as Input*, *Sensemaking as Interpretive Process*, and *Participation as Behavioural Outcome*.

Negative or contrasting cases—instances in which communication did not effectively encourage participation—were also examined to assess the robustness of the emerging themes and to ensure that alternative interpretations were considered.

3.4.4 Abductive iteration

While the coding process combined theory-informed and inductive elements, the interpretation incorporated an abductive logic, moving back and forth between empirical insights and existing theory. Emergent themes were compared against established frameworks, including Weick's (1995) sensemaking theory, CSR communication strategies (Morsing & Schultz, 2006), and motivational models of employee participation (Grant, 2012; Rodell et al., 2016). This iterative process allowed the findings to both confirm and refine theoretical understandings. For instance, while authenticity is widely emphasised in the literature, the analysis revealed new nuances in how employees differentiate between image-driven and impact-driven communication within their sensemaking.

3.4.5 Cross-case comparison

To capture variation across organisational contexts, the analysis involved comparing how themes manifested across different cases. Each interview was reviewed in relation to the final set of themes, enabling systematic reflection on similarities and differences between industries and communication cultures. This cross-case perspective supported the identification of both convergent and divergent patterns, enhancing the robustness and contextual relevance of the findings.

4. Findings

This chapter presents the empirical findings derived from the qualitative analysis of the semi-structured interviews. The analysis followed an abductive thematic approach with inductive elements, allowing for an iterative movement between theoretical concepts and empirical data.

Guided by the interpretivist philosophy, the analysis sought to understand how employees perceive, interpret, and act upon internal communication about corporate volunteering within their organisational contexts. Using Atlas.ti, the data were systematically coded and organized into higher-order themes that reflect both the theoretical underpinnings of the study and the empirical patterns that emerged from the interviews.

The coding process resulted in three overarching themes that correspond with the study's conceptual model: (1) Internal communication as input, (2) Sensemaking as interpretive process, and (3) Employee participation as behavioural outcome. Each theme represents a distinct yet interconnected stage in the process through which internal communication influences employee engagement (as in awareness) and participation with corporate volunteering — from the initial exposure to organisational messages, to the interpretive processes of meaning-making, and finally to the behavioural enactment of participation.

Each theme integrates both dominant patterns and subtle nuances in participants' experiences, illustrating the complexity and diversity of employee experiences across organisational settings. An extended overview of the thematic coding structure, including main themes, subthemes, and key interpretive links, is provided in Appendix D.

The following sections present these findings in three parts, corresponding to the main analytical themes. The first theme, *Internal communication as input*, examines how communication channels, messengers, and framing strategies shape employees' awareness, perceptions, and initial engagement with corporate volunteering initiatives.

4.1 Theme 1 – Internal communication as input

Internal communication serves as both an informational and emotional infrastructure through which employees first encounter and make sense of corporate volunteering initiatives. Rather than acting as a direct behavioural trigger, it functions as a facilitating mechanism that legitimises and contextualises employees' existing motivations to contribute.

This theme therefore examines how organisations communicate about volunteering and how these messages influence employees' perceptions of accessibility, relevance, and credibility. The findings suggest that communication does not directly create engagement but can enable and legitimize it—by making volunteering visible, approachable, and aligned with the company's broader social purpose.

Participants described how different channels, messengers, and tones shaped their awareness and attitudes towards corporate volunteering. Clear and emotionally resonant communication that connected to the organisation's CSR values tended to reinforce employees' willingness to engage, whereas fragmented or overly formal messages made volunteering feel peripheral to everyday work.

The following subthemes—channels and accessibility, messengers and credibility, visibility and triggers, and style and strategy—illustrate how internal communication helps to frame volunteering as a meaningful and attainable part of organisational life. Together, these subthemes show that effective communication does not create motivation but rather amplifies and legitimizes employees' existing willingness to contribute, creating an environment in which personal and organisational values can meet.

To illustrate the findings, anonymized quotations from participants are used throughout this chapter. Each quotation is accompanied by a participant code and brief descriptor (e.g., *P10, medior in finance, exp./occ. in CV*), indicating the participant's pseudonym, seniority level, sector, and level of experience with corporate volunteering. These descriptors are derived from the participant overview presented in Appendix B.

4.1.1 Subtheme 1 – Multichannel and accessibility

Internal communication about corporate volunteering was discussed through a wide range of channels, reflecting differences in both formality and accessibility across organisations. Participants described a mix of formal digital media—mainly email and intranet announcements—and interpersonal or event-based communication, including team meetings, kick-off events, and informal conversations. While formal channels were seen as useful for information dissemination, they were often described as impersonal or easy to overlook. Messages about volunteering shared via email or intranet were often perceived as routine internal communication, conveying information efficiently but without much narrative or emotional depth. Compared to digital updates or announcements, face-to-face communication came across as more authentic and easier to relate to, as it allowed space for tone and personal interaction.

Beyond this initial contrast, participants often described how the richness and tone of the channel affected whether volunteering felt close to their daily work or merely part of a distant campaign. One participant explained that personal encouragement made volunteering feel more tangible and credible *(see Figure 1)*.

For example, one participant described how formal announcements were complemented by informal reinforcement from their manager:

> *When my manager mentioned it in our team meeting, it felt more real than reading another intranet post.*
>
> P10, medior in finance, exp. CV

Figure 1.

"There was an internal email sent, a Teams message with a short overview of the things there were, and you could then sign up for it. My manager had also seen it, so he posted a message in our team chat asking, 'Which one shall we do?" (P02, senior in consultancy, exp. CV)
This combination of digital and interpersonal channels illustrates how formal visibility gained relational proximity through managerial follow-up.

Several interviewees mentioned that internal communication about volunteering tended to appear alongside regular corporate updates, which made it feel routine rather than special.

"It's usually somewhere on the intranet or in the newsletter with all the other stuff. You see it, but you don't really look at it." (P09, medior in telecom, exp. CV) or as another participant stated*, "Most of it comes through the intranet; you notice it, but you don't really read it unless someone mentions it again."* (P06, senior in telecom, exp. CV)

Some participants further pointed out that information about volunteering was sometimes fragmented across multiple internal channels, which made it unclear where to find practical details. *"It came through so many ways — posters on our community board, emails, even during coffee mornings or town halls. The Social Committee always mentioned it somewhere, but there wasn't really a clear start or finish. You were asked to join, but it wasn't clear where or how to arrange it with your work."* (P05, senior in manufacturing, occ. CV)

This scattered communication occasionally led to confusion or low visibility, especially when updates were mixed in with broader corporate announcements. As several participants noted, messages could easily "get lost among all the other internal news" if they were not connected to a clear follow-up action or visible reminder.

At the same time, employees described how well-structured and easily navigable communication could make volunteering feel straightforward and inclusive.

"It was short and clear, with links and contacts if you wanted more. They repeated it just enough to keep it visible, never like an obligation." (P08, medior in retail, occ. CV) or as another participant explained: *"That Volunteer Day was all communicated via the intranet. You could sign up there, and it was very clear what we were going to do, how long it would take, and what the idea was—so everyone knew what to expect."* (P03, senior in recruitment, occ. CV)

Although the intranet ensured visibility, employees emphasized that personal follow-up made the difference between *noticing* and *acting*. Managers or team leads who reinforced those messages in meetings or informal chats helped translate information into something concrete and approachable.

"Volunteering always comes up when we talk with our line managers — it's part of the conversation." (P06, senior in telecom, exp. CV) and "My line manager at the time simply explained it to me during my onboarding — it was part of getting to know the company." (P04, senior in energy, exp. CV).

In summary, participants described how communication about corporate volunteering typically began through formal digital channels such as the intranet or newsletters, which ensured visibility and provided essential information. Yet these messages were often perceived as routine and easily overlooked unless they were reinforced through personal contact. Effective internal communication thus emerged from the synergy between formal visibility and informal proximity — accessible, clear messaging complemented by interpersonal reinforcement.

4.1.2 Subtheme 2 – Messengers and credibility

Participants emphasized that *who* delivers messages about corporate volunteering crucially shapes how credible and motivating these communications feel. While communication channels provide the infrastructure for information sharing, the messenger determines how employees interpret and emotionally connect with the message. Across interviews, leadership visibility, managerial support, and peer influence stood out as key elements in trust and engagement.

Senior leaders, particularly CEOs, were often described as setting the tone for the organisation's commitment to volunteering. When their communication appeared authentic and personally grounded, it strengthened employees' belief in the initiative's sincerity and purpose. In contrast, messages that appeared overly formal or target-driven were perceived as coercive or performative rather than inspiring. As one participant explained:

"Managers are like, 'Hey, haven't you done anything yet? You have to sign up.' You think, 'Yeah, that's not how it's supposed to be." (P12, medior in tech, exp. CV).

These findings suggest that credibility depends less on hierarchical authority and more on authenticity and alignment between leaders' words and actions.

While credibility focused on whether employees perceived messages as authentic and trustworthy, this theme highlights the managerial role in turning those messages into concrete team-level action. Employees described instances where direct encouragement during meetings or personal follow-ups triggered participation. One participant noted:

"A manager says, 'Hey guys, in a month on Thursday, we're all going to do this…' Then it will happen." (P10, medior in finance, exp. CV)

Yet, managerial communication was effective only when it encouraged voluntary engagement rather than obligation. The difference between genuine support and subtle pressure was crucial in determining whether employees viewed volunteering as a choice or a corporate expectation.

Informal word-of-mouth among colleagues appeared to be the most persuasive and authentic form of communication. Employees spoke of being inspired by co-workers who shared personal experiences or enthusiasm for volunteering:

"*But what actually convinced me were my colleagues—those who had already done it and shared their experiences. They said, "Oh yes, that was really fun." That's when I decided to sign up. I had seen the communication and thought, "Oh nice," but it was really my colleagues who pushed me over the line.***"** (P01, junior in consultancy, exp. CV)

"*They asked, 'We're going to participate, will you join us?' Asking directly made the difference."* (P10, medior in finance, exp. CV).

Such peer-to-peer exchanges provided emotional resonance, relatability, and social reinforcement, giving the volunteering initiative a human face. In several organisations, ambassadors or social committee members fulfilled this peer role formally, further strengthened the visibility and legitimacy of volunteering within teams.

Some participants also referred to formal messages distributed by communications or CSR departments, which ensured consistency and reach but often lacked a personal touch. Conversely, external partners being brought in to do the communication, such as nonprofits were perceived as highly credible and inspiring, precisely because of their evident passion and authentic connection to the cause. Employees described these communications as "real" and "heartfelt," reinforcing that messenger credibility stems from perceived sincerity rather than position or professional polish.

In sum, credibility in communication about corporate volunteering depends on authenticity, proximity, and relational trust rather than hierarchical status. Messages from relatable, value-driven individuals—whether leaders acting consistently with their values, managers enabling participation, or peers sharing genuine experiences—were the most influential in triggering participation. These findings resonate with Morsing and Schultz's (2006) involvement strategy, which emphasises dialogue, relational communication, and stakeholder interaction rather than hierarchical, top-down messaging.

4.1.3 Subtheme 3 – Visibility and triggers

Visibility played a central role in shaping awareness in corporate volunteering. Participants explained that communication was often concentrated around specific "peak moments," such as annual volunteering campaigns, Christmas initiatives, or fiscal-year kick-offs. These periods created heightened visibility and energy around the topic, contributing to a shared sense of purpose. As one employee recalled,

"*September was Volunteering Month. Every day for a week there was a presentation or an event, and you could sign up directly. It created a lot of attention around it.***"** (P10, medior in finance, exp. CV).

Employees emphasized that communication frequency varied significantly across organisations. Some described a steady rhythm of newsletters and workspace updates, while others experienced more fragmented efforts. In several cases, information about volunteering was shared "two or three times a year," primarily linked to major campaigns. As one participant observed,

"It's not so frequent that I feel like, 'oh, another project,' but I also don't know the exact rhythm. It just happens sometimes." (P07, senior in recruitment, incidental in CV)

Repetition and reminders were generally viewed as positive when they maintained visibility without becoming intrusive. A few participants described the most effective communication as being "present without feeling forced."

"The communication was clear. I like it short and simple, no long repetitive messages. The fact that it's concise and clear—and repeated both formally and informally—keeps it visible without pressure." (P08, medior in retail, incidental in CV)

A few participants also highlighted the importance of tangible or visual communication triggers that captured employees' attention in the workplace. Campaigns that used physical symbols or interactive elements were seen as especially effective. One participant shared,

"What really pushed me was the [object] they placed in the atrium. Seeing that so many colleagues were doing it made me think, 'I can't stay behind.' It was really smart of them to play into that." (P01, junior in consultancy, experienced in CV)

In addition, personal triggers—such as being directly invited by a manager or colleague—remained crucial in transforming awareness into action. While large-scale campaigns ensured that volunteering stayed visible, individual communication often served as the decisive prompt for participation. As one participant explained,

"The first time I participated was simply because my manager said, 'Hey, we're doing this next week, do you want to join?" (P07, senior in recruitment, incidental in CV)

Overall, participants described visibility as the bridge between awareness and participation. When volunteering was consistently communicated through multiple channels and reinforced at meaningful moments, it became part of the organisation's social rhythm. Yet, for many, the true trigger to participate remained personal—when corporate messages were brought to life through peers, managers, or visible symbols of collective action.

4.1.4 Subtheme 4 – Style and strategy

Participants described clear differences in how corporate volunteering was framed and communicated across organisations. Most participants experienced the overall tone as positive and motivating, with messages often emphasizing enthusiasm, gratitude, and collective impact. Campaigns were described as,

"It's really about giving back and feeling good—a lot of positivity" (P09, medior in telecom, exp. CV).

In only a few organisations, internal communication adopted a creative and visually appealing style that stood out from ordinary corporate messaging. Videos, storytelling, and visual campaigns were used to trigger emotional engagement and curiosity. One participant explained,

"They went to film on location, and the video was shown on a big screen in our atrium. You couldn't miss it. It really emphasized the emotional value—there are people who are less fortunate than we are, and what can we do to help them?" (P01, junior in consultancy, exp. CV)

This emphasis on emotional resonance helped employees connect personally with the purpose of the initiative, making corporate volunteering feel less like a policy instrument and more like a shared social cause.

At the same time, most participants appreciated that communication remained *balanced and not pushy*. Instead of obligations, they perceived a tone of encouragement and inclusion:

"It's certainly not mandatory. It's just presented in a fun way, with clear information about what it involves and how long it takes." (P11, senior in lottery, exp. CV).

This balanced approach, combining clarity with informality, was perceived as essential for sustaining genuine engagement. When the message became too directive or linked to participation targets, credibility declined. As one employee remarked,

"You just shouldn't attach numbers or Figures to it. It should come from within." (P12, medior in tech, exp. CV).

Several participants also noted that effective communication aligned with broader corporate social-responsibility strategies. When messages were visibly linked to CSR goals and presented with coherence and authenticity, employees perceived them as more strategic and trustworthy.

They described company-wide meetings or newsletters where volunteering was consistently positioned as part of the organisation's purpose and values.

"We always highlight what we do within purpose. It's one of our core values, and something we always present." (P01, junior in consultancy, exp. CV)

However, others observed that communication about volunteering sometimes lacked structure or context. Some described fragmented updates that made it unclear how initiatives related to the organisation's mission:

"They should first explain what the initiative is and what the purpose is. Sometimes it just starts and ends without a clear story." (P05, senior in manufacturing, occ. CV)

These findings show that communication style and strategic framing strongly influence how employees perceive corporate volunteering. When internal messaging combines emotional appeal with clarity, inclusiveness, and alignment to organisational values, it enhances authenticity and

engagement. Conversely, when communication feels disjointed or overly instrumental, it risks losing resonance and undermining the sense of purpose that sustains long-term participation.

Across the four subthemes, the findings demonstrate that internal communication serves as the foundation through which employees become aware of, interpret, and emotionally connect with corporate volunteering. Effective communication was not defined by the quantity of messages but by their quality — clear, credible, and meaningful.

When information was accessible through multiple channels, delivered by authentic and trusted messengers, kept visible through consistent reminders, and framed in an inclusive and value-driven tone, employees were more likely to perceive volunteering as relevant and approachable. Conversely, fragmented, impersonal, or overly instrumental communication weakened engagement and hindered participation.

Taken together, these findings highlight that internal communication functions as both an informational and relational process: it not only transfers knowledge but also builds trust and shared purpose. The next theme explores this relational dimension more deeply by examining how employees *make sense* of these communications — how they interpret, internalize, and attach personal meaning to corporate volunteering within their organisational context.

4.2 Theme 2 - Sensemaking as interpretive process

While Theme 1 addressed authenticity as a communicative feature, this section explores how employees interpret and negotiate authenticity — how it becomes meaningful through their own sensemaking. It examines how employees assess authenticity, align messages with personal values, and reconcile altruistic and organisational motives.

Sensemaking emerged as a social and reflexive process: employees compared official narratives with lived experiences, leadership behavior, and peer cues to form a coherent understanding of what volunteering represents within their organisation. The following subthemes — authenticity and credibility, value alignment and organisational identity, and sincerity perception and PR motives — illustrate how communication becomes meaningful only when employees can integrate it into their personal and moral frameworks.

4.2.1 Subtheme 1: Authenticity and credibility

Participants repeatedly emphasized that the perceived authenticity and credibility of communication strongly influenced how they made sense of corporate volunteering. Messages were not evaluated on the basis of content alone but on whether the messenger's actions and tone aligned with the organisation's stated values. Employees were particularly attentive to signals of sincerity: they noticed

when leaders "walked the talk" by participating themselves or by sharing personal experiences that gave the initiative emotional weight.

"Because he [CEO] really meant it. He's been through something too.. [shares personal story about CEO] Then you're definitely credible as far as I'm concerned." (P12, medior in tech, experienced in CV)

Leadership visibility and role modelling were viewed as decisive cues of authenticity. When senior managers actively joined volunteering activities or referred to them during meetings, employees interpreted this as a sign that the initiative was genuinely valued, not merely symbolic. One participant explained that,

"Our CEO didn't just talk about it—she was there herself, [spending whole day at office with children through non-profit], through the whole company, for everyone to see… If you don't believe in it, you don't do that. She really invested her own time, and that made the circle complete."
(P03, senior in recruitment, occ. CV)

Beyond leadership, employees also assessed authenticity through the consistency and clarity of information. In some cases, authenticity was perceived not through formal leadership but through passionate peers who coordinated communication voluntarily:
"What they do well is that the people who communicate about it, they're this small team who do it alongside their regular work. And they are really passionate about it. So that's why it comes across as very authentic." (P02, senior in consultancy, exp. CV)

Transparent and reliable communication—such as clear instructions, visible contact persons, and accessible links—created a sense of openness that strengthened credibility. Several participants also linked clear and accessible communication to perceptions of authenticity, explaining that openness and structural clarity signalled genuine organisational commitment.

"It's clear and simple, with links and names. You can just find everything—that works for me."
(P08, medior in retail, occ. CV)

Authenticity was further reinforced when employees perceived structural commitment rather than ad-hoc promotion. Departments or teams dedicated to CSR were interpreted as proof that the organisation "genuinely values" volunteering. "Authenticity was also reinforced when communication appeared embedded in structures rather than one-off campaigns *(see Figure 2).*

Still, authenticity was not experienced uniformly. Some participants expressed ambivalence, acknowledging both altruistic and strategic motives behind the company's CSR communication.

> ***It's not just publicity. There are departments dedicated to it. That shows they genuinely value it.***
>
> P08, medior in retail, occ. CV

Figure 2.

They appreciated that the organisation contributed to good causes but remained aware that visibility and branding were also part of the equation.

This ambivalence weakened the perceived authenticity of the organisation's CSR communication, as employees questioned whether the underlying motives were genuinely altruistic or partly strategic. Such tension between moral sincerity and corporate interest reflects the interpretive complexity through which employees make sense of organisational initiatives.

In sum, credibility in communication was grounded in consistency, clarity, and lived example. When leaders' behaviour aligned with their words and communication was transparent and reliable, employees viewed volunteering as authentic and trustworthy. These forms of operational authenticity helped employees make sense of corporate volunteering as a genuine organisational practice. The next sections, however, show that this perception of authenticity is not fixed; employees also interpret it in light of broader organisational motives, where sincerity sometimes coexists with strategic intent.

4.2.2 Subtheme 2: Value alignment and organisational identity

Many participants described volunteering as deeply intertwined with their personal beliefs and moral identity. For many, the motivation to contribute stemmed from a broader sense of social responsibility that predated any corporate messaging. Employees often spoke about volunteering as a way to restore balance and meaning alongside the demands of their professional lives:

"You really miss out on a bit of what really matters in life. You lose that very quickly because of your work. So I think it's extremely important to have that reality check. And that suits me; volunteering fits very well with that. I think it's really important that you also contribute to society in a different way." (P10, medior in finance, exp. CV)
Another participant expressed a similar sense of moral responsibility, emphasizing that *"with the knowledge and expertise we have, you are also, in a way, morally obliged to share that with the next generation."* (P03, senior in recruitment, occ. CV)

These reflections illustrate that employees' engagement in volunteering was grounded in their personal moral values and beliefs about social contribution. Internal communication later served as a bridge, helping them connect these individual convictions to the organisation's broader purpose. In line with Weick's (1995) notion of identity construction, employees used corporate messages as cues to integrate their self-concept as socially responsible professionals with the company's collective identity.

Building on this, participants emphasized that the way communication framed flexibility and personal initiative further strengthened this sense of alignment. Messages that invited employees to choose

how and when to participate — rather than prescribing fixed formats — enabled them to see volunteering as compatible with their personal motivations and work identities.

Participants explained that having the freedom to choose how and when to volunteer made it easier to align participation with their personal values and work identities, which they experienced as increasing the sense of fit.

“It’s a big plus that we can organize our own activity or just join one of the existing options. Having that flexibility and variety really helps.” (P06, senior in telecom, exp. in CV)

In addition to flexibility, participants highlighted how the tone and narrative framing of internal communication shaped their interpretation of corporate volunteering. Clear and consistent messaging that emphasized shared values helped employees understand why the initiative mattered and how it reflected the company’s purpose. Storytelling played a particularly important role in this process: by presenting authentic employee experiences, communication provided relatable cues for sensemaking.

“*What also works really well for me in the storytelling surrounding it is that you simply hear the stories from our employees themselves… That makes it credible communication for me.”* (P10, medior in finance, exp. CV)

Through such examples, employees recognized volunteering as more than a formal program — it became a reflection of collective values and identity.

Sensemaking was also shaped by leadership cues and managerial communication, which provided social context for how employees interpreted volunteering. Managers acted as both sensegivers and role models, translating organisational messages into everyday practice. Their reminders and encouragements helped employees understand that volunteering was not just permitted but actively valued.. Several participants described moments when leaders encouraged participation explicitly: ***“****During a team meeting, my manager said, ‘Hey guys, next month we’re all doing this—block your calendar.****”*** (P10, medior in finance, exp. CV)

Such interventions positioned volunteering as part of “how things are done here,” shaping a collective norm of participation. Rather than perceiving this as top-down pressure, employees often framed these managerial prompts as guidance — subtle cues that clarified what the organisation stood for. Through these micro-level interactions, meaning was co-constructed: employees collectively made sense of volunteering as a legitimate and valued form of organisational citizenship, grounded in both leadership endorsement and peer recognition.

However, this influence was rarely experienced as coercive. Rather, employees framed these signals as guidance that helped them interpret volunteering as a legitimate and valued organisational

behaviour. Through these micro-level interactions, sensemaking was anchored in social norms and leadership endorsement rather than in formal mandates.

Finally, employees frequently described internal communication about volunteering as symbolic of the organisation's broader culture and moral character. Rather than viewing these messages as peripheral updates, many saw them as part of an ongoing narrative about *who we are* as a company. Consistent, value-loaded communication—through leadership speeches, internal storytelling, and visible recognition of employee efforts—reinforced the perception that volunteering expressed the company's collective identity.

"*When we have town halls where they present the results and the strategy… they now always take the time and show examples of what people did and how great it is*." (P09, medior in telecom, exp. CV)

These accounts suggest that internal communication itself became a form of identity work: by framing and reiterating messages of care, social responsibility, and shared purpose, the organisation invited employees to integrate their personal values with the company's moral narrative. CSR communication thus served not only to inform but also to reaffirm a shared sense of identity and belonging.

At the same time, several participants acknowledged that such alignment between communication and values was not without ambiguity. While many perceived the messaging as sincere, others recognized its strategic and reputational dimensions. This emerging tension between moral purpose and corporate self-interest—explored in the next subtheme—further shaped how employees made sense of their organisation's commitment to corporate volunteering.

4.2.3 Subtheme 3: Sincerity perception and PR motives

While many employees experienced corporate volunteering communication as sincere and value-driven, several also acknowledged a tension between moral purpose and perceived self-interest. Their interpretations often shifted between viewing internal communication about corporate volunteering as genuine and recognizing them as part of a broader corporate agenda. This ambivalence reflects what Weick (1995) — and later Maitlis and Christianson (2014) — describe as sensemaking under ambiguity: individuals construct plausible meanings when confronted with mixed or conflicting signals about organisational intent. Rather than experiencing this ambiguity as confusion, most employees treated it as something to *work with* — a normal condition of corporate life that had to be reconciled through interpretation.

Participants often assessed the credibility of communication by comparing words with actions. Early messages felt authentic when linked to leaders who embodied the initiative, yet later appeared routine once volunteering became institutionalized.

"It was definitely credible. He really meant to do something for the community. That's how he was. Only after that, it became an obligation—and that wasn't the intention." (P12, medior in tech, exp. CV).

Authenticity therefore depended less on content than on continuity between values, tone, and behaviour. When communication aligned with perceived genuine motives, it created more trust; when formalized into compliance language, it weakened it. This evaluative process shows how employees use communication not just to receive information but to judge organisational integrity — testing whether adopted values hold in practice.

Employees frequently expressed a form of mixed or ambivalent feelings—simultaneous belief in the company's good intentions and awareness of its strategic interests.

"Sometimes it feels like it's all communication and marketing… but still, they're doing it. They're trying to change, and that takes time." (P09, medior in telecom, exp. CV)

Rather than rejecting such communication, participants integrated both readings, acknowledging that strategic visibility and sincere purpose can coexist. This reflects Cook et al.'s (2022) notion of *bounded authenticity*—a pragmatic form of trust that endures even when employees are aware of organisational self-interest. For many, the coexistence of morality and strategy did not diminish authenticity but made it feel more realistic in the sense that it aligned with how organisations typically balance moral purpose with strategic interests.

Several participants explicitly recognized the communication as part of reputational management, yet still valued its societal contribution.

"The CEO said, 'We're just going to organize giving-back days.' That's kind of a publicity stunt… but on the other hand, we're also helping our community." (P12, medior in tech, exp. CV).

Rather than cynicism, these reflections may suggest rational acceptance: employees understood publicity as a normal component of corporate operations and as a legitimacy mechanism through which the organisation affirms its social role. Communication thus served both moral and strategic functions, maintaining internal credibility while signalling external responsibility.

For some, volunteering narratives also offered emotional reassurance amid difficult corporate realities such as reorganisations or layoffs.

"It helps to compensate a bit… they're always reorganizing, and sometimes people have to leave. It's not a nice feeling, but at least we have this part of the culture that's a bit more human." (P09, medior in telecom, exp. CV)

Here, sensemaking was not purely cognitive but also affective: employees drew on both the volunteering initiatives and the communication surrounding them to restore a sense of moral balance

and to reaffirm that the organisation retained a human dimension. These emotional interpretations helped them reconcile pride in their employer with discomfort about its business decisions, echoing Maitlis and Christianson's (2014) observation that sensemaking often serves both interpretive and emotional functions.

Across interviews, participants noted that internal communication and visible CSR initiatives influenced how the company was perceived both internally and externally. Employees described how management consistently emphasized the organisation's social engagement as part of its broader identity, which supported a sense of legitimacy.

"I know they hold that in high regard. They find it very important to give back to society. I think it also has to do with the industry we're in, which isn't always viewed very positively. And for that reason, we also try to give back to society in other ways." (P04, senior in energy, exp. CV).

This reflection illustrates how internal narratives about corporate volunteering contributed to a shared image of moral responsibility. By positioning volunteering as a way to "give back," communication reinforced employees' sense of pride in their organisation, even when they remained aware of its strategic motives.

In summary, employees' sensemaking around sincerity and PR motives was marked by constructive ambivalence. Authenticity was not fixed but negotiated—maintained when communication and visible initiatives acknowledged corporate interests while still reflecting shared moral values. Through this interpretive process, employees reconciled pride in their organisation's social contribution with awareness of its strategic objectives. Corporate volunteering thus became both a moral statement and a pragmatic expression of organisational identity. The next theme explores how these interpretations translate into action—how sensemaking around communication and values shapes employees' actual participation in corporate volunteering.

4.3 Theme 3: Participation as behavioural outcome

While sensemaking enables employees to interpret and emotionally connect with corporate volunteering, participation represents the behavioural realisation of these interpretations. This theme examines how employees translate understanding into action—how internal communication, awareness, motivation, and social context combine to lead to engagement in volunteering initiatives. Communication continues to play a facilitating role: by providing visibility, coordination, and reinforcement, it helps transform meaning into behaviour. Participation is shown not as a spontaneous act but as a process shaped by organisational structures, reinforced through social dynamics, and sustained by positive experiences. The following subthemes—social and structural enablers, peer influence and ambassadorship, and the transition from awareness to active involvement—outline the conditions through which sensemaking transforms into participation.

4.3.1 Subtheme 1: Social and structural enablers of participation

While employees entered the volunteering process with strong intrinsic motivations, their actual participation depended on whether the organisation—and its internal communication—created the social and structural conditions that made engagement possible. Across interviews, participants emphasized that clear communication about opportunities, practical organisation, and collective formats either enabled or constrained their involvement. When information was accessible and supported by visible structures, employees were more likely to act on their intentions, turning positive attitudes into concrete behaviour.

Employees emphasized that participation was easier when opportunities were well-organized, clearly communicated, and supported by practical guidance.

"From there, you can also choose from a list of volunteering activities, because our company offers a lot of those." (P01, junior in consultancy, exp. CV)

Others mentioned internal platforms or CSR teams that coordinated information and logistics:
"You can just sign up there and see what's possible. So that's pretty much it, yeah." (P12, medior in tech,exp. CV)

When communication about available activities was transparent and easy to follow, it reduced uncertainty and made participation feel straightforward. Employees described such structures as reliable and supportive, giving them confidence that volunteering was both encouraged and institutionally backed.

Knowing that initiatives were officially approved and supported by management further strengthened employees' confidence to participate. Internal communication that visibly endorsed these initiatives — for instance through managerial updates or intranet features highlighting CSR approval — gave employees a sense of legitimacy and safety.

"So it's quite safe… everything gets approved by the committee itself. I never had any doubts." (P12, medior in tech, exp. CV)

Such clarity and endorsement supports what Ajzen (1991) describes as *perceived behavioural control*: the belief that one's actions are both feasible and institutionally supported. Communication thus played not only an informative role but also a legitimising one — assuring employees that volunteering was not merely permitted, but valued and encouraged within the organisation.

Participation was often framed as a shared rather than an individual experience. Employees described how internal communication, such as team updates or shared intranet announcements, helped create collective visibility around volunteering and encouraged group participation. Team-based volunteering days and departmental traditions were seen as both logistically easier and socially more rewarding.

"When you do it together with your team, it makes it even more fun." (P02, senior in consultancy, exp. CV) and, "Every department does something annually." (P11, senior in lottery, exp. CV)

These shared initiatives created a rhythm of engagement and strengthened a sense of belonging. Communication about such group efforts reinforced the social momentum by publicly highlighting participation, normalizing volunteering as "something we do together." These patterns reflect Cialdini's (2001) notion of *social proof* — employees are more likely to join when they see peers actively involved and when participation is made visible and celebrated within the organisation.

Despite the collective nature of many initiatives, employees also valued the opportunity to volunteer independently when activities aligned with their personal motivations or schedules.

"I really wanted to do that… I did it alone. Without colleagues. I just took a volunteer day and then took the initiative myself." (P04, senior in energy, experienced in CV)

These accounts highlight that organisational frameworks and individual agency operated in tandem. Employees appreciated having the freedom to act on their own values while knowing that formal communication and systems supported their efforts. This combination of autonomy and structure made participation feel both self-driven and institutionally recognized. Providing space for individual choice alongside collective opportunities fostered intrinsic motivation, consistent with Deci and Ryan's (2000) *self-determination theory*. Through clear and inclusive communication, organisations created an environment in which employees could see volunteering as personally meaningful yet socially connected.

Overall, the findings show that participation in corporate volunteering was not simply a matter of personal motivation but of communicative and structural opportunity. Clear and consistent internal communication ensured visibility, legitimacy, and guidance, while supportive frameworks and collective formats made participation both feasible and socially reinforced. When organisations combined accessible systems with opportunities for personal initiative, employees experienced volunteering as simultaneously supported and self-directed. Communication thus served as the connective tissue between individual intention and collective action, transforming corporate volunteering from an abstract ideal into a tangible, normalized part of organisational life.

4.3.2 Subtheme 2: Peer influence and ambassadorship

Participation was driven less by formal communication and more by interpersonal influence within teams. Across interviews, participants emphasized that enthusiasm and encouragement from colleagues often served as the decisive trigger to move from awareness to actual participation. Volunteering became a socially embedded experience, sustained by informal networks, personal invitations, and visible role models who embodied the organisation's values in practice.

Employees described how colleagues repeatedly revived volunteering messages in team chats, prompting group participation *(see Figure 3)*. Such spontaneous coordination and mutual encouragement made participation feel natural and collective. As another participant explained, *"In all the teams I've been part of over the past few years, it's always at least once a year that we're all going to do an activity together for a morning, a day, or an afternoon."* (P10, medior in finance, experienced in CV). These practices reflect how social proof operates within the workplace: seeing others join, and being personally invited, lowers hesitation and reinforces the sense that volunteering is part of "how things are done here" as discussed earlier.

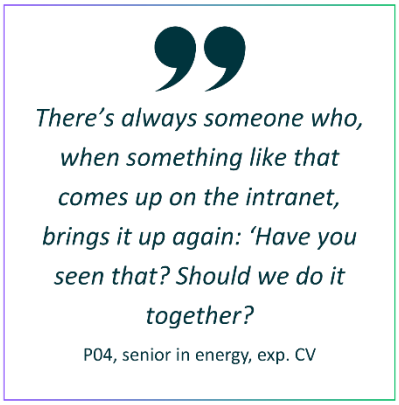

Figure 3.

In several organisations, participants took on informal ambassador roles, actively promoting volunteering and helping others to get involved. One participant described himself as *"a kind of ambassador for volunteering within the company. I help people who want to contribute but don't know what to do. I show them possibilities and tell them, 'You could do this or that.'"* (P12, medior in tech, exp. CV). These ambassadors functioned as trusted intermediaries between official CSR communication and everyday employee life, translating broad organisational goals into relatable action. One participant suggested that distributing communication ownership across multiple employees could strengthen this peer-based dynamic:

"Maybe what they could do is—right now they have a small team and one person does all the communication about it. What I would do is let each person in that team 'own' one activity. That way you also use the network a bit more to enthuse more people." (P02, senior in consultancy, exp. CV)

Participants described ambassadorship as something that spreads organically through informal influencers, rather than being driven by a single central communicator.

Their authenticity and proximity gave the message emotional credibility: *"Because if it comes from me, it comes out differently. When it comes from the manager, it's a bit more forceful. But if it comes from me, it's just someone from outside—no pressure."* (P12, medior in tech, exp. CV).

Employees who had previously volunteered often acted as advocates by sharing their experiences and encouraging others. As one participant noted, *"I always try to advertise it internally and get people more involved."* (P09, medior in telecom, exp. CV).

A reconstructed example of an internal volunteer newsletter (Appendix E) was created based on an authentic document shared by Participant 09. To ensure confidentiality, all identifying information, names, and images were replaced with anonymized or AI-generated content. The mock-up replicates the tone, structure, and design of the original to illustrate how employee ambassadors communicate

volunteering initiatives inside the organisation. Through storytelling, photos, and casual conversations, these advocates reinforced the social and emotional appeal of volunteering. Their enthusiasm contributed to a positive feedback loop in which each act of participation generated new interest among peers. This aligns with Cialdini's (2001) notion of *social proof* and Weick's (1995) view of sensemaking as a collective process—employees observe, interpret, and replicate the behaviours that appear valued and meaningful within their community.

Managerial presence also played a secondary but supportive role in this dynamic. When managers participated alongside their teams or encouraged them informally, their involvement added legitimacy without undermining autonomy. As several employees put it, managers "joined in, encouraged us casually, and made it feel like something we did together rather than something imposed." This participative leadership style helped position volunteering not as a top-down expectation but as a shared cultural practice.

Taken together, these findings suggest that peer influence and ambassadorship form the social infrastructure of participation. Through interpersonal encouragement, visible role modelling, and collective enthusiasm, employees transform formal communication into lived practice—turning organisational messages into a shared act of identification and belonging. Participation thus emerges not through formal communication or campaigns, but through relational trust: the moment when one colleague turns to another and says, "Let's do this together."

4.3.3 Subtheme 3: From awareness to active involvement

Awareness of corporate volunteering initiatives—largely created through internal communication such as intranet updates, newsletters, and team channels—was widespread among participants, yet awareness alone rarely led to participation. Participants consistently described a transition from knowing about opportunities to acting upon them, a process often triggered by specific moments of interpersonal connection, organisational facilitation, or positive early experiences. The findings reveal that participation emerged not as a spontaneous act, but as a gradual conversion of intention into behaviour, shaped by context, encouragement, and emotional support.

Participants were widely aware of volunteering opportunities, mainly through intranet, newsletters, or team channels. ***"****We have our own website for colleagues, and as soon as there's anything available—volunteer activities—it's always shared there,****"*** one participant explained ((P11, senior in lottery, exp. CV). However, while awareness was high, action depended on direct and personalized prompts. Participants repeatedly emphasized that the moment someone reached out—a manager, colleague, or ambassador—was what truly activated their decision. ***"****The first time I really started to actively participate was mainly because my manager was also organizing an activity,"*while also describing the triggering effect of personal contact*: "It's most successful if someone asks you directly"* (P10, medior in finance, exp. CV)

Such moments often combined emotional appeal with social proof. Invitations that came through informal channels, or that showed visible examples of colleagues already participating, reduced hesitation and built confidence. ***"****What actually convinced me were my colleagues—those who had already done it and shared their experiences. They said, 'Oh yes, that was really fun.' That's when I decided to sign up.****"*** (P01, junior in consultancy, exp. CV). This shows how awareness evolved into action when abstract communication was rooted in trusted relationships and lived examples.

Organisational support also played an enabling role in this conversion process. Some participants mentioned that formal scheduling or designated volunteer days provided the necessary structure to take the step. ***"****It was true that I could have done volunteering before, but I didn't until it was part of the organisation and they started implementing those events and saying, 'Okay, on that day you can participate.' That for me was really the moment that helped me decide.****"*** (P09, medior in telecom, exp. CV). This indicates that when companies move from simply communicating opportunities to actively organizing them, they bridge the gap between intention and behaviour—enhancing what Ajzen (1991) terms perceived behavioural control.

For some, the first volunteering experience became a turning point. Positive early experiences contributed to emotional rewards that encouraged continued engagement. One participant recalled, ***"****It was probably my first one, and I really, really liked it.****"*** (P09, medior in telecom, exp. CV). Enjoyment, pride, and collective energy transformed volunteering from a one-off event into an integrated part of work life. As one participant recalled, informal conversations after events helped normalize volunteering and spread enthusiasm *(see Figure 4)*. Such post-event social sharing creating a positive feedback loop: enthusiasm circulated, motivating others and normalizing participation.

Figure 4.

Over time, participants developed sustained participation patterns, volunteering repeatedly or across locations. ***"****Every year I'm participating in more and more volunteering,****"*** said one employee (P09, medior in telecom, exp. CV). Another reflected on the intrinsic motivation that followed: ***"****I specifically chose this one because I enjoy contributing to it.****"*** (P04, senior in energy, exp. CV).. These accounts demonstrate how meaningful first experiences can evolve into an enduring sense of responsibility and identity alignment, echoing Grant's (2012) notion of sustained employee volunteering as self-reinforcing prosocial behaviour.

Internal communication does not directly cause participation but enables it through a social process of sensemaking that provides the informational and emotional infrastructure for action. Across the three themes, participation emerged when messages were not only clear and consistent but also socially reinforced and personally meaningful. Formal communication created visibility and structure,

informal dialogue translated those messages into shared understanding, and collective experience transformed them into behaviour. The next chapter discusses how these dynamics relate to existing theories of internal communication, sensemaking, and employee engagement, highlighting how communication operates as both a strategic and relational force in fostering participation.

5. Discussion

This chapter discusses the overall conclusions and implications of the study. It integrates the empirical findings with existing literature on internal communication, sensemaking, and employee volunteering to explain how employees interpret and respond to organisational messages about corporate volunteering. The discussion shows how the study has addressed the main research question and objectives, and highlights its contributions to both theory and practice. The chapter concludes with practical recommendations, limitations, and directions for future research.

5.1 Main findings

The study explored how internal communication shapes employees' engagement with corporate volunteering, focusing on the interpretive processes through which employees make sense of organisational messages. The analysis revealed three interrelated stages that together explain this process: *internal communication as input*, *sensemaking as interpretive process*, and *participation as behavioural outcome*.

First, communication acts as an input that informs, legitimises, and frames volunteering within the organisation. Employees described how the tone, visibility, and framing of messages influence their perceptions of the organisation's motives. When communication was transparent, human-centred, and connected to organisational purpose, it was perceived as authentic. In contrast, overly polished or promotional messages created scepticism, suggesting that authenticity is a key determinant of whether communication triggers genuine engagement.

Second, sensemaking emerged as the interpretive bridge between organisational communication and behavioural outcomes. Employees actively constructed meaning by evaluating the credibility of messages, aligning them with personal values, and observing managerial and peer behaviours. These processes highlight that sensemaking around volunteering is not merely cognitive, but also moral and social. Employees continuously compared what the organisation *said* with what it *did*, assessing whether volunteering was portrayed as a genuine social contribution or as a branding tool.

Finally, the findings show that participation is the behavioural outcome of these interpretive processes. When communication was perceived as authentic and value-congruent, it reinforced identification with the organisation and increased willingness to participate. Conversely, when employees perceived a disconnect between words and actions, or when initiatives seemed top-down, engagement decreased. Participation was also influenced by contextual factors such as managerial encouragement, peer involvement, and organisational culture, which shaped how employees translated meaning into action.

Together, these findings reveal that internal communication does not simply inform employees about volunteering opportunities; it creates the conditions for sensemaking that determine whether and how employees choose to engage. This interpretive process explains the variation in participation

across organisational contexts, emphasising the need for communicative authenticity, managerial sense giving, and peer influence in creating sustainable engagement.

5.2 Answering the research question and relation to literature

The findings show that internal communication does not directly cause participation but operates as an enabling condition that shapes how employees interpret and evaluate organisational messages. Through this interpretive process, employees determine whether corporate volunteering is a credible, value-driven initiative or a symbolic exercise.

Communication acts as the starting point of this process. Employees perceived internal communication about volunteering as more than information; it served as a signal of organisational intent. When messages were transparent, human, and connected to a broader social purpose, they were interpreted as sincere. In contrast, communication that appeared overly polished or managerial created scepticism, echoing Kim and Lee's (2022) observation that perceived authenticity is central to CSR credibility. These findings therefore confirm that *how* messages are framed—emotionally, narratively, and morally—matters as much as their informational content.

The study also extends Morsing and Schultz's (2006) model of CSR communication. While their typology distinguishes between informational, response, and involvement strategies, the present research demonstrates how the *involvement strategy* operates in practice. Employees responded positively to communication that invited participation and dialogue—through peer stories, team initiatives, and visible managerial support—rather than one-way announcements. This confirms that effective internal communication is relational and dialogical, aligning with Cornelissen's (2020) argument that communication functions as an ongoing process of sense giving rather than transmission.

Sensemaking emerged as the mechanism connecting communication to behaviour. Employees actively compared what the organisation *said* with what it *did*, assessing whether leadership behaviour and peer engagement matched the rhetoric. When this alignment was visible, employees internalised the message and connected volunteering to their own values and identity. This moral and emotional interpretation expands Weick's (1995) concept of sensemaking, showing that plausibility is not only about whether something seems consistent, but also about whether it feels authentic and ethically coherent. Similarly, it supports Roza's (2016) finding that engagement depends on employees' ability to make sense of the organisation's motives, while adding nuance by showing how peer influence and managerial example anchor this process in everyday organisational life.

Participation thus represents the behavioural realisation of sensemaking. Employees were more likely to act when communication provided both legitimacy and opportunity—clear information, visible endorsement, and social proof. This finding aligns with Grant's (2012) and Rodell et al.'s (2016) work, which emphasise that sustained participation requires not only motivation but also structural and

social support. It also resonates with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), as employees described volunteering as intrinsically rewarding when communication respected autonomy and avoided pressure. Overly directive campaigns, by contrast, undermined motivation by making volunteering feel instrumental rather than voluntary.

Overall, the findings are largely consistent with existing literature but deepen current understanding in two ways. First, they demonstrate that authenticity is *constructed* rather than simply perceived: employees continuously interpret organisational communication through a moral and relational lens, deciding whether it reflects genuine purpose. Second, they reveal that internal communication functions as a *sensemaking infrastructure*—a network of cues, narratives, and social interactions that together shape behavioural outcomes.

In sum, the research shows that internal communication influences employee participation indirectly, through the social and moral processes of interpretation. When communication is authentic, dialogical, and supported by visible action, employees align their own values with organisational purpose and choose to participate. When this alignment is absent, communication fails to translate awareness into behaviour. This interpretive model clarifies *how* and *why* internal communication matters—bridging the gap between awareness and action.

The central research question guiding this study was:

How do internal communication strategies influence employee participation in corporate volunteering programmes through the process of sensemaking?

The findings demonstrate that internal communication influences participation not directly, but indirectly through employees' interpretive processes. Communication strategies create the context in which employees make sense of organisational messages about volunteering, assess authenticity and purpose, and decide whether to engage. The study's conclusions are summarised below in relation to the research objectives.

Objective 1: To explore how employees perceive and interpret internal communication strategies related to corporate volunteering initiatives.

Employees interpreted internal communication strategies through the lens of credibility and authenticity. When communication was transparent, personal, and value-driven, it was perceived as genuine and trustworthy. Conversely, when messages appeared overly promotional or detached from real organisational behaviour, employees questioned the motives behind them. This highlights authenticity as a critical factor shaping employees' interpretations of internal communication.

Objective 2: To explore how sensemaking processes influence the relationship between internal communication and employee participation in volunteering activities.

Sensemaking emerged as the mechanism through which communication strategies translate into behavioural outcomes. However, many participants emphasised that their motivation to volunteer

was primarily intrinsic — rooted in personal values and a general desire to contribute to society. In this context, internal communication did not *create* motivation but helped employees make sense of how volunteering fit within organisational life. By aligning messages with employees' existing values, providing visibility, and legitimising participation, communication amplified rather than generated engagement. Participation occurred when this interpretive alignment reinforced both organisational purpose and employees' intrinsic sense of meaning. When dissonance arose — such as a perceived gap between rhetoric and practice — sensemaking inhibited rather than enabled participation.

Objective 3: To identify which elements of communication strategies (e.g., channel choice, message framing, leadership endorsement) stimulate employee participation.
The analysis identified several communication elements that can *support* or *amplify* participation. Message framing was central: communication that emphasised societal impact and employee agency rather than corporate reputation resonated most strongly with employees who were already intrinsically motivated to volunteer. Channel choice also mattered; interpersonal and peer-driven communication was more persuasive than formal campaigns because it made volunteering feel legitimate and accessible. Leadership endorsement played a symbolic role—when managers personally participated or spoke credibly about volunteering, employees interpreted this as authentic sense giving that validated their own engagement.

Objective 4: To provide practical recommendations for organisations on how to design internal communication strategies that contribute to higher levels of sustained employee participation.
The results highlight the importance of authenticity, managerial modelling, and social dialogue in communication about volunteering. Organisations should focus less on top-down persuasion and more on enabling meaning-making through storytelling, peer involvement, and visible alignment between words and actions. Rather than creating motivation, internal communication should nurture existing prosocial values, making participation more visible, socially supported, and easy to integrate into daily work life.

In summary, the study answers the research question by showing that internal communication strategies influence employee participation through sensemaking processes that determine whether communication is perceived as authentic, value-congruent, and socially credible. Participation is therefore not a direct outcome of message exposure but the result of an interpretive process in which employees align organisational communication with their own motivations and moral evaluations.

5.3 Theoretical implications

5.3.1 Revisiting sensemaking theory

Drawing on Weick's (1995) sensemaking theory, the study demonstrates that employees engage in continuous interpretation to assign meaning to organisational volunteering initiatives. The findings suggest that plausibility in sensemaking extends beyond cognitive coherence to include employees'

moral evaluation of whether messages feel authentic, sincere, and ethically aligned with organisational behaviour. Participants often distinguished between “image-driven” and “impact-driven” communication, revealing that credibility arises when volunteering messages are perceived as sincere and socially meaningful rather than promotional. This emphasis on moral and emotional resonance adds nuance to Weick’s (1995) notion of plausibility, aligning with later interpretations of sensemaking as both cognitive and affective (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

5.3.2 Internal communication as enabling dialogue

The study also contributes to research on CSR and internal communication. Morsing and Schultz’s (2006) typology distinguishes between stakeholder information, response, and involvement strategies. The findings suggest that effective internal communication around volunteering aligns most closely with the involvement strategy, where dialogue and authenticity take precedence over one-way information flow. Employees valued communication that was participatory and personal—such as stories from peers or managers who had volunteered—over formalised campaigns or intranet posts. This supports the argument that internal communication should not primarily aim to persuade, but to enable meaning-making through authentic interaction.

5.3.3 Motivation and participation

Finally, the study adds to research on employee motivation and participation in corporate volunteering (Grant, 2012; Rodell et al., 2016). Communication was found to enhance participation indirectly, by reinforcing intrinsic motives such as purpose, identification, and social connectedness rather than by creating new motives. This finding resonates with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which emphasises autonomy and relatedness as key drivers of voluntary engagement. When communication was perceived as authentic and aligned with employees’ values, it supported rather than constrained autonomy. Conversely, highly polished or managerial messages were often interpreted as inauthentic, undermining motivation.

5.4 Practical implications

The findings suggest several practical implications for organisations seeking to strengthen employee engagement in corporate volunteering:

- Prioritise authenticity over amplification; Communication should highlight genuine experiences rather than corporate promotion. Peer storytelling and informal sharing can enhance credibility and emotional connection.
- Empower managers as sense givers; Managers play a central role in shaping employees’ sensemaking. Training them to communicate volunteering opportunities through dialogue, not directive messaging, can enhance perceived sincerity.

- Leverage peer influence; Encouraging employees who have volunteered to act as informal ambassadors can create social contagion and normalise participation across teams.
- Integrate volunteering into purpose communication; Volunteering should be positioned as part of the organisation's broader social purpose, not as a stand-alone HR or CSR activity.
- Balance structure and autonomy; Provide clear logistical support (time, platforms, information) while allowing employees to choose causes that align with their personal values. This balance supports intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement.

5.5 Limitations and directions for future research

As with all research, the findings must be interpreted within the boundaries of the study design. The sample primarily consisted of highly educated, intrinsically motivated employees, many of whom were connected to CSR or communication functions. This may have limited the diversity of perspectives, particularly from employees less engaged with volunteering. Additionally, data were gathered solely through interviews; future studies could benefit from a mixed-method approach that combines interviews with participant observation or organisational document analysis. Because interviews rely on self-reported accounts, certain aspects may come through less clearly—for instance, tendencies toward social desirability, the possibility that memories of past initiatives were incomplete or uncertain, and potential mismatches between what people recall and how they actually behaved in everyday work settings. As several participants reflected on experiences that had taken place some time ago, some descriptions were offered with hesitation or qualification, which may have influenced the level of detail or certainty in their accounts.

The study was conducted within a Dutch context, primarily involving large, knowledge-intensive organisations. Cultural and institutional factors may shape how employees interpret internal communication about volunteering; for instance, norms around hierarchy, expectations regarding employee autonomy, or broader societal attitudes toward CSR can influence what employees consider credible or legitimate. These contextual dynamics may differ across countries or organisational types, meaning that sensemaking processes observed here could unfold differently in settings with stronger hierarchical structures, different volunteering traditions, or varying levels of CSR maturity. Comparative research could therefore help clarify how such contextual factors shape employees' interpretations and participation.

Future research could also explore non-participation—examining why some employees remain disengaged despite organisational efforts—and investigate how communication strategies evolve over time. Longitudinal designs, or studies that follow volunteering programmes as they mature, could provide insight into how authenticity, credibility, and sensemaking processes develop as initiatives become more embedded in organisational life.

5.6 Conclusion

The study concludes that internal communication influences corporate volunteering by shaping how employees make sense of organisational messages rather than by persuading them to participate. Employees' motivation to contribute to society often predates organisational initiatives; communication becomes effective when it aligns with and legitimises this intrinsic drive. Authenticity, dialogue, and peer interaction therefore form the communicative foundations of credible and sustainable engagement.

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Appendices

This appendix section provides supplementary materials that support the methodological transparency of the study. It includes the interview guide, participant overview, example of internal communication, coding overview, and informed consent form.

Appendix A: Interview guide

The following interview guide was used for semi-structured interviews with employees participating in corporate volunteering initiatives.

Introduction for the participant

Thank you for participating. This interview is part of my master's thesis on how internal communication influences employee participation in corporate volunteering programs. There are no right or wrong answers — I am interested in your personal experiences and interpretations. Everything will remain confidential, and the conversation will take approximately 45 to 60 minutes.

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1. Introduction & context

- Could you briefly describe your position, your role, and how long you have been working here?
- How familiar are you with the social initiatives or volunteering programs within the organisation? Which initiatives have you participated in?

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2. Information reception & communication channels

- Can you tell me more how you first heard about the volunteering initiative you participated in?
- What stood out to you about that initial moment? What made it memorable (or not)?
- Through which channels did you receive more information? (e.g., email, intranet, team meetings, manager)
- Which channel appealed to you most, and why?
- Was the initiative communicated about repeatedly?
- What was the frequency, and did it influence your decision-making?
- Did it feel like the communication was part of a broader strategy (CSR) or more of a one-off effort?
- How did this compare to how the organisation normally communicates?

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3. Framing & interpretation (sensemaking)

- How would you describe the tone or style of the communication? (Informative, promotional, emotional, distant, inspiring, etc.)
- Would you have preferred a different approach? What worked well or not?
- What did that communication mean to you personally?
- How did it align with how you see yourself as a professional or employee?
- Can you tells something on how you find the communication credible or authentic?
- Did it feel like the initiative was about creating social impact or more about image?
- How has it changed your perception of the organisation? Why or why not?

4. Motivation & tipping point

- What ultimately motivated you to participate?
- Was it something personal, something in the communication, or something in your environment?
- Was there a specific moment when you decided: “I’m going to do this”?
- Can you tell me more about the decisive factor?

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5. Barriers & doubts

- What were the doubts or concerns beforehand?
- What helped you overcome those?
- What might prevent someone in a similar role from participating?

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6. Influence of colleagues & leadership

- How did colleagues or managers play a role in your decision to participate?
- What have you seen or heard from others that influenced you?
- How did management communicate about volunteering?
- Can you tell something about if it felt convincing or more like a formality?

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7. Reflection & recommendations

- Looking back: what did you find effective about the communication around volunteering?
- What could the organisation improve to encourage more people to participate?
- Think, for example, about timing, tone, examples, involvement, or leadership.

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8. Closing

- Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience or the communication surrounding it?

Appendix B: Informed consent form

This appendix includes the informed consent form used in this study. It informed participants about the study's purpose, procedures, voluntary nature, and confidentiality of their data. Participants provided written consent prior to each interview.

Consent form

Channelling good: How internal communication strategies influence employee participation in corporate volunteering through sensemaking.

[Researcher's name], Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University

1. I confirm that I understand what the research is about and have had the opportunity to ask questions. Yes/No
1. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time without giving a reason. Yes/No
2. I agree to take part in the research. Yes/No
3. I agree to my interview being audio recorded. Yes/No
4. I agree to the use of anonymised quotations in publications. Yes/No

Name of participant: Signature:

....

Researcher's name:

[..]

Signature :

Date:

Appendix C: Participant Overview (pseudonymized)

The table provides an overview of interview participants, including their organisational context, functional level, and prior engagement in corporate volunteering. “Experienced” refers to employees with recurring or sustained volunteering involvement, whereas “Occasional” refers to those who participated one to three times and are not currently active.

Pseudonym	Organisation Type	Function Level	Interview medium	Volunteer experience level
P01	Consultancy	Junior	Online	Experienced
P02	Consultancy	Senior	Phone	Experienced
P03	Recruitment/HR	Senior	Online	Occasional
P04	Energy	Senior	Online	Experienced
P05	Manufacturing	Senior	Online	Occasional
P06	Telecom	Senior	Online	Experienced
P07	Recruitment/HR	Senior	Online	Occasional
P08	Retail	Medior	Online	Occasional
P09	Telecom	Medior	Online	Experienced
P10	Finance	Medior	Online	Experienced
P11	Public sector (Lottery)	Senior	Online	Experienced
P12	Tech	Medior	Online	Experienced

Appendix D: Thematic coding overview

This appendix presents an overview of the thematic coding structure used in the analysis. The tables below summarize how first-order codes were clustered into subthemes and overarching themes, as well as the interpretive meaning attached to each cluster. The overview complements the findings discussed in Chapter 4 and illustrates the analytical transparency of the thematic process.

Table C1 - Main themes:

Main Theme	Key Subcodes (Highest Frequency)	Core Meaning
1. Internal communication as input	Channels (Email, Intranet, Face-to-face meetings), Peer-to-peer messengers	How the choice of communication channel and messenger shapes the visibility and perceived credibility of corporate volunteering initiatives.
2. Sensemaking as interpretive process	Authenticity/Credibility, Organisational Identity, Social & Leadership Influence	How employees interpret and make sense of volunteering communication by aligning it with personal and organisational values, authenticity, and social cues.
3. Participation as behavioural outcome	Triggers/Decisive moments, Group-based participation, Opportunities available	How communication exposure and social dynamics translate into actual participation and, in some cases, sustained engagement.

Table C2 - Subthemes of main theme 1:

Subtheme	Empirical Focus (from Codes)	Interpretation
1. Multichannel consistency and reach	Email × Intranet × Meetings × Mixed Channels	Effective internal communication relies on the alignment and integration of multiple channels to ensure both reach and coherence.
2. Messenger credibility and relational authenticity	Peer-to-Peer × Managers × Ambassadors × Informal Face-to-Face	The credibility and relational proximity of the messenger enhance perceived authenticity and trust in internal communication.
3. Communication visibility and triggers	Meetings × Emails × "First Remembered Contact"	Certain communication moments act as entry points that trigger awareness and initial engagement with corporate volunteering initiatives.
4 Style & strategy	Tone of communication × Emotional framing × CSR alignment × Consistency ×	Effective communication about corporate volunteering combines emotional appeal with clarity and inclusiveness. When messages are aligned with broader CSR strategy and organisational values, they enhance authenticity

	Inclusiveness × Strategic coherence	and engagement. Conversely, fragmented or overly instrumental communication weakens resonance and undermines employees' sense of purpose.

Table C3 - Subthemes of main theme 2:

Subtheme	Empirical Focus (from Codes)	Interpretation
1. Authenticity and value	Authenticity / credible × Credibility of Messenger × Leadership Role Modelling	Employees interpret volunteering communication through its perceived authenticity and the credibility of those who deliver it. Leadership visibility and messenger trust strongly reinforce sensemaking.
2. Value alignment and organisational identity	Authenticity / credible × Organisational Identity × Identity Alignment	Sensemaking occurs when employees connect volunteering initiatives to the organisation's core values and identity, allowing them to align personal and organisational meaning.
3. Perceptions of sincerity and PR motives	Mixed Authenticity Perception × PR/Marketing Perception × Publicity Stunt vs Genuine Purpose	Employees evaluate whether corporate volunteering is driven by genuine social purpose or marketing intent. Ambivalence and skepticism shape their interpretation of authenticity.

Table C4 - Subthemes of main theme 3:

Subtheme	Empirical Focus (from Codes)	Interpretation
1. Social and structural enablers of participation	Group-based participation × Opportunities available × Sustained participation	Participation is facilitated by accessible, well-organized opportunities and collective settings. Volunteering becomes easier when it is group-based and structurally supported.
2. Peer influence and ambassadorship	Ambassadorship / advocacy × Peer influence / active encourager	Colleagues who act as ambassadors or active encouragers play a decisive role in motivating others to participate, reinforcing social proof and normative engagement.
3. From awareness to active involvement	Awareness High × Current involvement × Triggers / decisive moments	Awareness alone does not guarantee participation; action is typically triggered by specific decisive moments or encouragement from peers and managers.

Appendix E: Internal volunteer newsletter (pseudonymized)

This is a reconstructed example of an internal volunteer newsletter that was created based on an authentic document shared by Participant 09. To ensure confidentiality, all identifying information, names, and images were replaced with anonymized or AI-generated content. The mock-up replicates the tone, structure, and design of the original to illustrate how employee ambassadors communicate volunteering initiatives inside the organisation.

Volunteering Highlights – Spring Edition

My Volunteering Experiences This Year (so far...)

18th April – At Greenfields Community Gar-

Greenfields Community Garden is a place for local residents to come together and tend to shared green spaces.

Garden promotes sustainability aity and urban greening in the community.

Mission is: to foster environmene·ntal stewer/ship and provide a space for a

rewarding afternoon spent ɑutnɑɒɹ, senɯnged members in the local neighbourhood

Assong vith spring plliting, removins weeds and dead plants, watering young seedlings.

6 June – At Parkvev Senior Center

Parkview Senlor Center is a commurnity hub offe-ring services and activites for older adults.

Provides seniors with opportunities to socializae and enjoy a range of recreational programs.

Pʏrpose, to support the well-being anσrïnıutln-ment of local seniors.

I hepled prepare and serve a lunch for seniors.

Collaborating with other volunteers to cook and

A fulfilling experience filled with laughter and meaningful conversations

Upcoming Opportunities

15th July: Community Park Clean-Up

Join our fellow colleagues to help clean up a local park. Working together to improve our shared ʊʜ-door spaces.

12th August: School Supplies Drive

Contribute to a school supplies drive for local students. Make a differenc-e.bj/help‹ɑ children start the school year ready and equipped.