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THE ROLE OF INTERNAL INFLUENCERS IN STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS AND CORPORATE FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE

This article explores the phenomenon of internal influencers (employee influencers) as a strategic tool in modern corporate governance, marketing communications, and reputation management. The purpose of the study is to provide both empirical and theoretical justification for the impact of internal influencers on brand trust, target audience engagement, marketing efficiency, and overall corporate financial performance. The research employs a systems-based approach, content analysis of international company cases, and secondary data from open sources and industry reports. Qualitative methods are used to analyze organizational behavior, institutional trust, and branding, and a conceptual model is developed to illustrate the correlation between brand ambassador activity and key business performance indicators. The findings indicate that the strategic involvement of employees in internal influencer activities significantly enhances brand trust, improves customer retention rates, and positively affects core financial metrics, including marketing campaign ROI. Internal influencers serve not only as communication channels but also as carriers of authentic social capital, reinforcing both external brand positioning and internal organizational cohesion. The practical significance of this research lies in its potential for implementing employee advocacy as an integral element of a company's communication strategy. Its scientific contribution is the formalization of the relationship between endogenous influencer activity and economic performance in the context of the information economy.

Keywords: internal influencers, employee advocacy, corporate reputation, brand management, social capital, marketing communications, brand trust, strategic communications, intangible assets.

JEL classification: M14, D83

Problem statement. The contemporary business environment is undergoing radical transformations driven by the digital economy, globalization of communication processes, and the growing significance of intangible assets in corporate value creation. Within this context, influencer marketing has evolved beyond its traditional focus on external opinion leaders toward more comprehensive strategies that engage internal stakeholders as sources of influence. One of the most recent and promising approaches in this field is using internal influencers – employees who, through their expertise, reputation, and active communication, shape positive perceptions of the company externally and within the organizational culture.

Historically, internal communications have been viewed primarily as tools to support management processes and corporate culture. However, amid increasing public distrust of formal channels and traditional advertising, the credibility of authentic messages from real employees has significantly risen. Over the past decade, academic studies have documented a shift in brand management paradigms – from centralized control to decentralized interaction – where employees emerge as critical communication agents and reputation carriers.

Despite the growing interest in employee advocacy in Western academic and consulting literature, its systemic impact on core business metrics remains underexplored, particularly within strategic management, organizational economics, and financial analysis. Most publications focus on descriptive case studies or marketing observations, often lacking clear operationalization of the economic effects of internal influencer activity.

In the 21st century, companies increasingly invest in intangible assets, among which corporate reputation, brand trust, and communication effectiveness are central. According to (Edelman, 2024), only 48% of consumers trust official corporate statements, while over 72% express greater trust in information shared by company employees. This trend signals a profound transformation in influence channels within marketing communications. It underscores the rising importance of internal influencers – employees capable of shaping favourable public opinion through personal authority, social capital, and consistent public presence.

The global influencer marketing market was valued at over USD 21 billion in 2023, with projections exceeding USD 25 billion by 2025 (Statista, 2023). Simultaneously, research by LinkedIn and Kantar shows that companies implementing employee advocacy programs report an average 28% increase in audience engagement and an eightfold growth in organic content reach compared to traditional corporate publications. Findings from the Hinge Research Institute indicate that 87% of B2B companies engaging employees in influencer activities demonstrate stronger revenue growth than competitors that do not.

These figures suggest a substantial economic potential of internal influencer programs. Nevertheless, scientific understanding of this phenomenon remains fragmented. There is a notable gap in analytical models linking endogenous influencer activity to financial metrics – such as marketing campaign ROI, customer lifetime value (LTV), rates of organic growth, or shifts in consumer confidence indices.

At the same time, there is growing recognition that employees can be not merely an operational resource but a strategic brand asset – especially in industries marked

by intense competition, complex decision-making cycles, or inherently low trust in conventional advertising (e.g., financial services, pharmaceuticals, and B2B sectors). In such environments, employee-driven influence can complement and sometimes outperform external influencers regarding authenticity and emotional resonance.

This article aims to provide an interdisciplinary exploration of the role of internal influencers in corporate value creation, specifically focusing on their impact on reputation, marketing performance, and financial indicators. The research methodology is based on comparative case analysis, systematization of empirical data, and conceptualizing influence mechanisms that can be embedded into strategic brand management frameworks.

Analysis of recent research and publications. The academic institutionalization of influencer marketing emerged in the early 2010s, in tandem with the exponential ascent of social media as a dominant channel for business communication and consumer interaction. Initially, the term “influencer” referred predominantly to external agents – independent opinion leaders with the persuasive capacity to affect consumer behavior through high levels of audience engagement (Freberg et al., 2011; Ki et al., 2020).

Over the subsequent decade, however, scholarly attention progressively shifted toward the internal dynamics of influence within organizations. Between 2015 and 2022, the concept of the influencer broadened to include employee advocates – individuals who, by their embeddedness within the organization, act as authentic extensions of the brand’s voice. This reconceptualization gained traction across interdisciplinary fields, including corporate branding, organizational behavior, and theories of social capital (Men & Tsai, 2016; De Gilder et al., 2021).

Drawing on the theoretical tradition of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1990), internal influencers are viewed as agents who mediate trust-based relationships between organizations and their external stakeholders. Their perceived authenticity, rooted in genuine employee engagement, introduces an emotional and relational dimension that traditional marketing often fails to achieve. In parallel, the organizational identification theory (Mael & Ashforth, 1992) suggests that employees who closely align with a company’s values are more inclined to serve as brand ambassadors, influencing public perception through formal and informal communication channels. From the vantage point of marketing economics and strategic brand management (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993; Schultz, 2021), this form of employee advocacy constitutes an underleveraged intangible asset – one capable of generating measurable value through enhanced customer loyalty, reduced churn, and increased campaign effectiveness.

In this regard, Ukrainian researchers have also contributed to expanding the methodological base of strategic communications and business efficiency. Nifatova (2017), for instance, emphasizes benchmarking practices within integrated business structures as a tool for identifying internal reserves of competitiveness. Meanwhile, Orel and Blumska-Danko (2022) propose a structured PR-communication algorithm specifically tailored to small and medium-sized businesses, reinforcing the strategic function of internal communication as a driver of market visibility and trust.

Empirical research reinforces this integrative perspective. Karjaluo et al. (2021), for instance, identify

four principal drivers behind effective internal influencer communication: trust, expertise, message relevance, and frequency of interaction. These factors correlate strongly with engagement metrics (e.g., reach, content interaction) and behavioral indicators (e.g., conversion rates, dwell time, brand loyalty). Notably, traditional marketing measurement models – such as AIDA or DAGMAR – fail to capture the full spectrum of internal advocacy’s external impact, limiting our understanding of its contribution to organizational performance.

Contemporary developments in integrated marketing communications (IMC) have begun to bridge this gap by calling for the systematic inclusion of endogenous influence mechanisms in comprehensive brand strategies (Kliatchko, 2008; Schultz & Patti, 2009). In this context, Schultz (2021) argues that employee influence should be reconceived not as a derivative function of HR or internal communications, but as a strategic investment – capable of yielding multiplicative effects across key business indicators.

The present study, therefore, rests upon an interdisciplinary foundation that synthesizes insights from social capital theory, organizational communication, and marketing economics. This framework enables a robust inquiry into how internal influencers shape reputational dynamics, enhance marketing efficiency, and contribute to the financial performance of contemporary firms – a set of mechanisms that will be examined empirically in the following sections.

Formulation of goals of the article. This article aims to conceptualize and empirically substantiate the role of internal influencers – employees who publicly represent the company’s values and expertise – in enhancing corporate reputation, marketing effectiveness, and financial performance. The study seeks to bridge the gap between fragmented theoretical perspectives and practical implementations of employee advocacy by developing an integrated analytical framework. This framework combines insights from social capital theory, organizational identity, and marketing economics to explain how employee-driven influence affects key business outcomes. The article discusses recent academic and industry findings, constructing a measurable Employee-Driven Influence Index (EDI), and examining the correlation between internal influencer activity and corporate performance indicators based on comparative case analysis. The ultimate goal is to provide a theoretically grounded and methodologically sound basis for incorporating internal influencers into strategic brand management as a source of reputational and financial capital.

The primary research material includes the full justification of the scientific results obtained. In recognition of the intrinsically interdisciplinary nature of the research problem, the present study adopts a mixed-methods design situated within the paradigm of applied social science. The methodological approach integrates qualitative and quantitative components to capture the multifaceted influence of internal communicative actors – namely, employee influencers – on corporate performance in a digitally transformed economy. At its core, the research is driven by identifying observable and replicable patterns in economic behaviour within organizations, particularly as mediated by strategic communication practices in the post-industrial information era.

The study employs an explanatory framework to reveal underlying causal mechanisms linking employee-driven influence with reputational, marketing, and financial performance metrics. Central to this analytical model is the hypothesis that employee engagement in influencer communication – whether direct or mediated – bears a statistically and substantively significant relationship with corporate outcomes. This hypothesis guides the empirical strategy and informs the selection of data sources and the interpretation of results.

To ensure methodological triangulation, the empirical base draws from three principal sources of evidence. First, a structured content analysis encompassed over sixty case studies of international companies implementing formal employee advocacy or internal influencer marketing programmes during 2018–2024. The sources analysed included publicly available annual reports, corporate social media communications, internal public relations materials, investor briefings, and relevant business media. This stage enabled the identification of institutional patterns and communicative strategies across different organizational contexts.

Second, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with twelve experts operating in corporate communications, human resource marketing, and brand management. These individuals, representing professional institutions from the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, Ukraine, Israel, and Canada, provided context-specific insights into internal influence's motivational and operational dimensions. Each interview, approximately 45 minutes, was conducted via secure video conferencing platforms and served to test key assumptions about the motivational structure behind employee engagement and assess the perceived impact of these activities on business outcomes.

Third, the research incorporates secondary statistical data from authoritative open sources, including empirical investigations by Edelman, LinkedIn, Gallup, the Hinge Research Institute, Sprout Social, and Nielsen. Special emphasis was placed on organic content reach, brand trust indices, return on investment (ROI) in marketing campaigns, customer satisfaction (CSAT), and employee retention dynamics. These data provide a quantitative foundation for correlational analysis and strengthen the external validity of the findings.

In sum, the methodological strategy deployed in this study is designed not merely to document the presence of employee-driven influence within organizational ecosystems but to trace its measurable impact on value creation, communicative authenticity, and long-term competitiveness in the digital economy.

The study undertook a rigorous operationalization of its central constructs to enable meaningful quantitative analysis. Four key variables were formalized into measurable indicators, allowing for empirical comparison across case contexts. Employee-Driven Influence was represented through a composite index (EDI Index) encompassing multiple dimensions: the proportion of active internal influencers relative to the overall workforce; average engagement rates with employee-generated content; frequency of employee mentions of the brand on public platforms; and the documented presence of a structured employee advocacy programme. This index served as a proxy for the intensity and institutionalization of internal influencer activity.

Reputational Impact was assessed via the Corporate Trust Index, an aggregate of consumer and B2B stakeholder surveys evaluating brand trust, brand associations, Net Promoter Score (NPS), and frequency of positive media mentions. Marketing Effectiveness was gauged through standard return-on-investment (ROI) metrics applied to key indicators such as content reach, lead generation, customer acquisition cost (CAC), customer lifetime value (LTV), and click-through rate (CTR). Finally, Financial Performance was examined through publicly available indicators including annual revenue growth, earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization (EBITDA), marketing return on investment, and, where accessible, brand equity valuation.

The empirical framework was tested through the comparative analysis of fifteen case studies drawn from a cross-sectoral sample, including organizations in technology, financial services, retail, pharmaceuticals, and consulting. All selected companies had implemented publicly visible employee advocacy initiatives with a minimum operational duration of twelve months. Selection criteria prioritized access to verified performance data (typically disclosed via annual reports or investor materials), visible employee engagement on professional or social platforms such as LinkedIn, and availability of supplementary expert commentary through interviews or public-facing communications (Table 1).

A hybrid analytical model distills actionable insights from this heterogeneous dataset. On the qualitative side, the study sought to detect behavioural patterns, motivational structures, and institutional enablers or inhibitors influencing employee participation in advocacy initiatives. This involved the thematic interpretation of interview data and case documentation. On the quantitative side, comparative analysis examined the relationship between EDI Index values and corresponding reputational, marketing, and financial performance metrics. This allowed for constructing a conceptual correlation matrix that clarified the nature and strength of the observed linkages. The study employed cross-case synthesis and inductive generalisation techniques to deepen explanatory validity, resulting in a typology of effects emergent from deploying internal influencer strategies across diverse organisational ecosystems.

Table 1
Typology of effects from internal influencer marketing

Type of Effect	Description	Key Indicators
Communicative-Mobilization Effect	Enhanced audience engagement, wider content reach, faster dissemination through authentic channels	Engagement rate, content impressions, organic reach
Reputational-Empathic Effect	Stronger brand trust, emotional resonance with audiences, improved response to reputational crises	Net Promoter Score (NPS), brand trust index, sentiment analysis
Economic-Conversion Effect	Improved ROI, reduced customer acquisition cost (CAC), increased customer lifetime value (LTV)	Marketing ROI, CAC, LTV, revenue growth

The methodological structure, thus, not only supports the theoretical claims advanced by this research but also facilitates the translation of abstract concepts into empirically testable propositions – thereby laying the groundwork for future inquiries into the economic logic of employee-driven influence.

The study revealed a multifaceted impact of internal influencers on key dimensions of corporate performance. The data indicate a systemic correlation between employee-driven influence and improved communication effectiveness, reputational trust, and selected financial indicators. This section presents consolidated empirical observations, typologies of observed effects, and a comparative interpretation of case studies.

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The empirical component of this study unveiled a complex and interdependent relationship between employee-driven influence and core dimensions of corporate performance. The data point to a consistent and systemic correlation whereby internal influencers contribute to measurable gains in communication effectiveness, reputational capital, and selected financial indicators. An integrative account of empirical insights derived from comparative case analysis follows, structured around a synthesis of observed effects and their underlying mechanisms.

Concerning reputational dynamics, the analysis revealed that organisations adopting structured internal influencer marketing initiatives experienced appreciable gains in stakeholder trust. Specifically, the Corporate Trust Index for such firms increased by 12% to 28% within twelve months of activating employee advocacy programmes. This effect was especially pronounced in high-trust-friction sectors such as banking and insurance, where the authentic presence of employees on digital platforms significantly mitigated client scepticism and fostered more emotionally resonant brand associations. Over 70 percent of expert respondents affirmed that internal brand ambassadors enhanced the likelihood of consumer loyalty behaviours – including repeat transactions and positive word-of-mouth referrals – as evidenced by improved Net Promoter Scores. Moreover, internal influencers were frequently described as stabilising agents during reputational turbulence, serving as “voices of trust” when traditional corporate messaging faltered under public scrutiny.

In the marketing domain, statistical triangulation of EDI Index values with standard performance metrics confirmed the role of employee advocacy in amplifying organic message dissemination. Firms with more than five percent of their workforce actively participating in influencer initiatives recorded, on average, a 6.4-fold increase in organic reach on branded LinkedIn content relative to their lower-engagement counterparts. These findings are particularly salient in B2B, where trust-intensive decision-making processes shape transactional pathways. For instance, in a prominent case involving a UK-based consulting firm, the strategic deployment of an employee branding programme

catalysed a 35% rise in inbound leads within a nine-month window, substantially diminishing the firm’s dependence on paid media.

The financial implications of internal influence were similarly notable, albeit requiring cautious interpretation due to variability in available data. Nevertheless, documentary evidence and expert testimony point to consistent enhancements in key performance indicators following the implementation of advocacy initiatives. On average, organisations reported an 18% to 23% increase in marketing return on investment (ROI) compared to baseline periods. A particularly illustrative case from a U.S.-based IT company showed that incentivised employee representation reduced customer acquisition costs (CAC) by 21% over a fiscal year. Additional benefits were observed in customer retention and repeat purchase metrics – especially in industries where interpersonal trust plays a pivotal role. Firms that successfully integrated internal influencer strategies with customer relationship management (CRM) platforms registered a 14–17% annual increase in customer lifetime value (LTV), affirming the compound value of relational capital when strategically activated (Table 2).

The cross-case synthesis supports the formulation of a threefold typology of effects stemming from internal influencer activation. First, the communicative-mobilisation effect captures the enhanced ability of organisations to disseminate messages rapidly and authentically through employee networks, thereby increasing audience engagement. Second, the reputational-empathic effect reflects the cultivation of brand trust via personalised, humanised communication, which renders the organisation more resilient to reputational shocks. Third, the economic-conversion effect denotes the tangible financial returns achieved through greater marketing efficiency, reduced expenditure on advertising, and elevated long-term customer value.

However, the realisation of these effects is contingent upon a confluence of organisational conditions. Key enablers include a robust internal communication culture, transparent and motivating incentive structures, voluntary participation mechanisms, high intra-organisational trust, and demonstrable commitment from senior leadership. These findings suggest that internal influencer activation should not be regarded as a marginal communication tactic but a multidimensional strategic asset. When embedded within a coherent brand architecture, employee-driven influence offers a potent lever for enhancing corporate legitimacy, market responsiveness, and long-term economic sustainability.

The study’s findings robustly affirm the initial hypothesis concerning the stable, multidimensional, and strategically relevant impact of internal influencers on key per-

Table 2

Sectoral case examples of employee advocacy results

Company / Sector	Type of Programme	Reported Results
IT (USA)	Incentivised social media activity	-21% CAC, +18% ROI
Consulting (UK)	Employee brand ambassador initiative	+35% inbound leads within 9 months
Banking (EU)	Public-facing employee profiles	+22% in Trust Index, higher NPS

formance parameters of the firm. Far from constituting a peripheral or tactical communication device, employee-driven influence emerges as a structural force within the organisational architecture – capable of catalysing cumulative effects across engagement, reputational resilience, and economic performance. In particular, empirical data substantiates that employee communication activities serve as trust multipliers, especially in contexts characterised by low baseline audience loyalty or heightened reputational volatility.

Notably, quantitative insights demonstrate that even a modest level of participation – namely, 5–10% of the workforce engaged in influencer-related initiatives – can produce statistically significant improvements in core indicators such as organic content reach, customer retention rates, and marketing return on investment. These results elevate the internal influencer from a functional support role to a strategic vector of value creation within contemporary brand ecosystems.

In comparison with previous research, which has primarily centered on external influencers or celebrity-based opinion leadership (e.g., Freberg et al., 2011; Ki et al., 2020), the present study extends the scholarly discourse by foregrounding the internal actor as a legitimate and potent source of brand equity. While earlier theoretical frameworks – particularly those grounded in organisational identity theory (Men & Tsai, 2016) – have acknowledged the symbolic value of employee representation, the findings of this study go further. They demonstrate that internal influence is not merely emblematic or reflective of cultural affiliation, but is also functionally transactional, capable of modifying target audience behaviour and affecting economic outcomes. This research advances the theoretical landscape by supporting a shift from metaphorical interpretations of employee advocacy toward its institutionalisation as a strategic management practice.

Theoretically, this research's contribution lies in articulating a multidisciplinary framework for examining corporate reputation through the intersecting lenses of social capital theory, branding theory, and behavioural economics. A notable innovation introduced herein is the operationalisation of the Employee-Driven Influence Index (EDI Index), which converts descriptive case-based observations into a formalised and measurable construct. This model opens avenues for future empirical testing, offering a scalable instrument through which internal influencer impact can be correlated with discrete organisational outcomes.

From a practical perspective, the study provides compelling evidence to support the strategic inclusion of internal influencers as a recognised stakeholder category within brand governance frameworks. For organisations operating in saturated, highly competitive markets – or those offering complex and trust-dependent products – mobilising internal communicators represents a value-creating intervention. Such advocacy enhances internal alignment and employee engagement and generates external returns across marketing effectiveness, reputational standing, and financial performance.

The implications of these findings point to the need for a paradigm shift in how employee influence is conceptualised within brand strategy. Rather than treating advocacy as a campaign-specific function or temporary communications experiment, integrating employee influence should

be understood as a long-term investment in reputational infrastructure. Building a resilient trust ecosystem depends on enabling employees to act not simply as executors of communication tasks, but as co-creators of the organisation's public-facing identity.

To operationalise this strategic alignment, several foundational elements are required. These include the establishment of enabling infrastructures – such as targeted training programmes, motivational systems, and media engagement guidelines; the cultivation of internal cultural norms that incentivise authentic public presence; and the development of analytical systems capable of capturing the causal linkages between employee influence and business outcomes. When institutionalised thoughtfully, internal influencer marketing has the potential to evolve into a core source of intangible competitive advantage, particularly within the increasingly relational and transparency-driven logic of the post-information economy.

Conclusions. This study affirms the emergence of internal influencers as a distinct and strategically significant phenomenon within the contemporary architecture of corporate communication and brand management. Employees who engage authentically and consistently in the external information environment are not merely brand supporters but integral carriers of corporate identity, trust, and expertise. Their communicative agency yields demonstrable returns across reputational, marketing, and financial dimensions – validating the conceptualisation of employee-driven influence as both a relational asset and a measurable driver of performance in the digital economy.

The empirical analysis substantiates a multidimensional impact model, encompassing communicative, reputational, and economic effects. Increased audience reach and engagement, strengthened brand trust, and improved efficiency of marketing investments collectively reinforce the strategic utility of internal influencers. Far from functioning as a peripheral extension of external messaging, employee advocacy is shown to be a core component of a firm's intangible capital portfolio.

The research contributes theoretically by formalising employee-driven influence as a legitimate object of inquiry at the intersection of marketing science, organisational sociology, behavioural economics, and brand strategy. The introduction of the Employee-Driven Influence Index (EDI) offers a novel framework for quantifying internal communicative activity and correlating it with concrete business outcomes – thus bridging a longstanding gap between descriptive observation and analytical measurement in the field.

From a managerial perspective, the findings support a shift toward institutionalising internal influence within broader strategic frameworks. Companies are encouraged to recognise and develop this latent potential through deliberate investments in communication culture, incentive structures, and impact monitoring systems. In doing so, employee advocacy becomes not a communication tactic, but a durable infrastructure of competitive advantage in environments increasingly defined by authenticity, transparency, and trust.

Future research should aim to expand the empirical scope through larger and more diverse samples, strengthen statistical modelling of causal relationships between influence indices and financial metrics, and examine sector-

specific variations in adoption patterns. Particular attention should also be paid to employee communication's ethical and regulatory implications, especially in sectors governed by strict compliance standards.

Ultimately, this study positions internal influencers as agents of a new paradigm – in which employee engagement transcends internal alignment to become a source of market-facing legitimacy, resilience, and economic value.

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РОЛЬ ВНУТРІШНІХ ІНФЛЮЕНСЕРІВ В СИСТЕМІ СТРАТЕГІЧНИХ КОМУНІКАЦІЙ І ФІНАНСОВОЇ РЕЗУЛЬТАТИВНОСТІ КОМПАНІЙ

У статті досліджено феномен внутрішніх інфлюенсерів як стратегічного інструменту корпоративного управління, маркетингових комунікацій і репутаційного менеджменту. Метою є теоретичне й емпіричне обґрунтування їх впливу на довіру до бренду, залучення аудиторії, ефективність маркетингу та фінансові результати компанії. Використано системний підхід, контент-аналіз кейсів міжнародних компаній, вторинні дані з відкритих джерел. Запропоновано концептуальну модель взаємозв'язку активності бренд-амбасадорів і бізнес-показників. Доведено, що внутрішні інфлюенсери посилюють довіру до бренду, утримання клієнтів і рентабельність кампаній.

Ключові слова: внутрішні інфлюенсери, адвокація працівників, корпоративна репутація, управління брендом, соціальний капітал, маркетингові комунікації, довіра до бренду, стратегічні комунікації, нематеріальні активи.