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Re-FLIGHT Model: ESG-Based Strategic Communication to Mitigate Layoffs Issues in the National Aviation Industry

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Abstract: A global wave of layoffs has swept across industries such as technology (Google, Amazon, Meta, Microsoft), media (News Corp, BBC), manufacturing, automotive, banking, and higher education. The World Economic Forum (2025) projects that 41% of global companies—including those in aviation—plan workforce reductions within five years, driven by economic slowdown, geopolitical uncertainty, cost pressures, and AI adoption. The aviation sector has been severely affected: Boeing cut 17,000 jobs, Airbus 2,500, and airlines like Southwest and WestJet have also reduced staff. In Indonesia, Lion Air, AirAsia, and Garuda Indonesia collectively laid off thousands of workers between 2020–2021. Though mass layoffs have since slowed, rising costs and fragile finances signal renewed risks that could threaten public welfare and national stability. This study examines how ESG-based strategic communication can mitigate layoff risks in Indonesia's aviation industry. It proposes the **Re-FLIGHT Model**—anchored on six pillars: *Reskilling, Fair Labour, Innovation, Growth, Human-Centered,* and *Transition*—as a framework for proactive, ethical, and sustainable communication. Integrating ESG principles into corporate and regulatory strategies, the model promotes inclusive dialogue, responsible leadership, and resilience, positioning ESG as a foundation for social transformation in the aviation sector.

Keywords: Aviation, Crisis, Layoff Mitigation, Leadership Model, Strategic Communication

INTRODUCTION

The aviation industry faces serious challenges in the modern era—ranging from global economic pressures, environmental regulation changes, social uncertainty due to market fluctuations, to unstable geopolitical conditions. Additionally, waves of employee layoffs (PHK) across sectors and the ongoing threat of mass layoffs have become a serious phenomenon, potentially disrupting economic, social, and political stability—including in the aviation sector.

The aviation industry experienced severe disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic, marked by mass layoffs in many countries. Globally, the Air Transport Action Group (ATAG)

reported in 2020 that around 1.3 million aviation workers lost their jobs. This trend continues due to persistent structural challenges facing global aviation.

Financial pressure has forced international airlines to make significant efficiency cuts. According to *CNBC Indonesia* (Feb 2025), Southwest Airlines—which had never laid off workers in its 53-year history—announced mass layoffs of 1,750 employees, or 15% of its workforce.

In Indonesia, several airlines suspended operations and furloughed large numbers of employees during COVID-19. *Antara News* (July 2021) reported that Lion Air Group furloughed 25–35% of its 23,000 workers. Garuda Indonesia also furloughed at least 800 employees.

The aviation sector is capital-intensive, labor-intensive, and technology-intensive. Global challenges like geopolitical volatility (fuel prices, war, disrupted routes), shifting economic and financial regulations, and technological disruption (automation, AI-driven efficiency) significantly impact the industry's continuity.

According to a June 2025 International Air Transport Association (IATA) report, although there is cautious optimism for 2025, profit margins remain slim (3.7%) and are highly vulnerable to economic shocks, tariffs, and fuel price fluctuations. Meanwhile, a February 2025 study in the *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research* stated that mass layoffs can trigger fast and permanent crises.

Mass layoffs in aviation are typically a last-resort strategy for airlines to cut operational costs and survive. A study by Gathmann, Helm, and Schönberg (2018) in the *Journal of the European Economic Association* revealed that such layoffs cause systemic ripple effects: economic shocks, social inequality, inadequate protections, and regulatory unpreparedness in the aviation transport sector.

Since late 2020, IATA has warned of potential layoffs and revenue declines. CEO Alexandre de Juniac said the crisis would continue with the threat of more job losses and deeper economic collapse. The industry’s income remains limited despite some optimism.

IATA also urged governments to act swiftly, noting that in addition to 1.3 million direct job losses, there are 3.5 million more aviation-related jobs at risk, along with 46 million indirect jobs dependent on aviation.

Beyond layoffs, new disruptions like AI and automation may reduce the need for traditional labor or completely change job roles. A July 2025 report by the Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore (CAAS) projected that up to 30% of aviation jobs will need redesigning in the next five years due to automation and AI. Without adaptation, some jobs may disappear—exacerbating the layoff threat.

According to INACA (Indonesia National Air Carriers Association) chairman Denon Prawiraatmadja, layoff actions similar to the COVID-19 period may reoccur:

“The aviation climate is still fragile. Pandemic impacts are still being felt,” —Denon, end-of-2024 statement.

Social & Economic Consequences

On the social side, layoffs increase unemployment, mental health issues, and family instability. Economically, layoffs reduce consumer spending, lower productivity, and slow growth. Mass layoffs also have domino effects across industrial ecosystems and regional areas—worsening inequality and stalling economic recovery.

The broader implication for Indonesia’s aviation industry is a threat to public and national interests. Publicly, it increases unemployment among educated workers, fueling instability and potential brain drain, as reflected in the viral youth hashtag #KaburAjaDulu (“Just Escape First”).

For the nation, layoffs threaten air connectivity, which is critical for Indonesia as an archipelagic state. Disrupted air mobility and logistics hinder economic recovery. Layoffs also

increase political tension (e.g. demonstrations by students and laid-off workers) and raise the burden on social safety net programs.

These layoffs don't just impact individual incomes—they also erode institutional knowledge and worker trust in the aviation industry. This reality demands proactive solutions to mitigate layoffs with a focus on fairness and justice for employees.

The Role of ESG

Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) principles are now widely recognized as essential for business sustainability. A Mandiri Institute survey found that 95% of public companies in Indonesia have integrated ESG into their corporate values. ESG extends beyond environmental concerns—it includes social responsibility and fair governance.

The Indonesian government has even published an ESG framework that includes standards for decent employment, diversity and inclusion, and social interest protection. This integration helps companies manage non-financial risks while promoting sustainable employee well-being.

Traditional, purely economic efficiency models are no longer adequate. A new, more equitable and sustainable paradigm is needed. ESG offers a globally recognized framework for business resilience and corporate social responsibility. Yet in Indonesia, ESG integration into communication strategies and labor policies in aviation remains limited.

This research proposes the Re-FLIGHT Model, a strategic ESG-based communication approach to mitigate layoff risks. Rather than reactive tactics, this model encourages measured, adaptive, participatory, and long-term communication that balances corporate and worker interests.

Thus, this study is not only relevant for strengthening organizational and crisis communication literature but also offers practical contributions for designing ethical and transformative employment policies in Indonesia's aviation sector.

With this model, layoffs are no longer the only way out of crises—but part of a more ethical and human-centered transformation.

Problem Formulation

The threat of layoffs (PHK) in Indonesia's aviation industry highlights the weak integration between strategic communication, social governance, and justice-based mitigation policies. Despite the increasing global adoption of ESG principles, there remains a gap in communication approaches that can fairly and collaboratively bridge organizational needs and workers' rights.

From this context, the study formulates the following research questions:

1. **How can ESG principles be integrated into crisis communication strategies** to anticipate potential layoffs in Indonesia's aviation industry?
2. **How can the Re-FLIGHT Model function as a proactive and justice-based ESG communication framework**?
3. **What are the implications of this model for strengthening the role of organizational communication** in building legitimacy, public trust, and long-term social mitigation?

Research Objectives

This research aims to:

1. **Analyze the strategic factors** increasing the risk of layoffs in the national aviation industry in the post-pandemic and global disruption context.
2. **Explain the role and contribution of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) principles** in forming communication strategies oriented toward fair and sustainable layoff mitigation.

3. **Formulate and present the Re-FLIGHT Model** as a strategic ESG-based communication approach that can be operationalized by national airlines to prevent or reduce the impact of layoffs.
4. **Evaluate the implications of implementing the Re-FLIGHT Model** on corporate–stakeholder relationships, organizational sustainability, and public legitimacy in the context of organizational and crisis communication.

Research Significance

This study holds significance in several dimensions:

1. Theoretical Significance

a. Enriches the literature on **crisis communication, organizational communication**, and **ESG communication**, especially in strategic industries like aviation.

2. Practical Significance

a. Offers a **policy framework and applicable communication strategies** for airlines, regulators, and labor institutions to anticipate and manage layoffs collaboratively.

3. Social Significance

a. Strengthens the **legitimacy of public communication** based on **social justice and workers' rights**.
b. Encourages **human-centered transformation** in industrial relations amid technological and economic disruptions.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach within a critical-constructivist paradigm, aimed at deeply understanding the phenomenon of strategic communication for layoff mitigation through an ESG-based framework. The main objective is to formulate a conceptual model called Re-FLIGHT, integrating ESG principles into organizational communication strategies to address employment crises in the aviation sector.

This design was chosen because it is suitable for exploring multi-actor perspectives and understanding the social, political, and economic dynamics behind layoff policies and institutional communication responses. The study is both exploratory and conceptual, supported by case studies and contextual comparisons with global airlines.

Research Setting and Subjects

The research is focused on **Indonesia's national aviation industry**, with case studies involving one or more major airlines facing structural pressures due to the pandemic and digital transformation—especially:

a. **Garuda Indonesia Group** (Garuda Indonesia, Citilink)
b. **Lion Air Group** (Lion Air, Batik Air, Wings Air)
c. **AirAsia Indonesia**

Research subjects include:

a. Corporate communication and HR practitioners from airlines
b. Regulators (Ministry of Transportation, Ministry of SOEs, Ministry of Manpower)
c. Academics and experts in ESG and crisis communication
d. Representatives of labour unions and workers' organizations

Data Collection Techniques

1. **In-depth Interviews**
   Conducted with key stakeholders to explore their perspectives on:
   a. Layoff strategies

b. Internal communication practices
c. ESG principle implementation

Purposive sampling was used to select key informants such as:

d. Communication managers
e. Industrial relations officers
f. Relevant regulators
g. ESG practitioners

2. **Document Study**
   Analysis of:
   a. Sustainability reports
   b. Labor policies
   c. Company public communications
   d. Media narratives on layoffs and organizational transformation

Primary and secondary sources include:

e. Annual airline reports
f. ESG national regulations
g. Press releases
h. International research (IATA, ICAO, McKinsey, World Bank)
i. Aviation layoff data from media and survey agencies

3. **Participant Observation**
   Observing internal organizational dynamics, especially during:
   a. Town hall meetings
   b. Management–employee dialogue forums
4. **Media and Corporate Communication Content Analysis**
   Tracing how airlines communicate:
   a. Structural changes
   b. Layoffs
   c. ESG commitments to the public
5. **Focus Group Discussion (FGD)**
   Held with stakeholder representatives to:
   a. Capture diverse perspectives
   b. Evaluate the effectiveness of the Re-FLIGHT Model as a strategic communication tool

Data Analysis Techniques

This study applies **thematic analysis** to identify patterns, narratives, and strategic meanings in communication practices and ESG policies related to potential layoffs.

Analysis stages include:

A. Transcribing interviews and documents into narrative texts
B. Open and axial coding using categories such as:
   a. Reskilling
   b. Fair labor
   c. Public narratives
   d. Crisis communication strategies
   e. ESG principles
C. Mapping key themes to form the conceptual structure of the **Re-FLIGHT Model**
D. Interpretive analysis connecting:
   a. Strategic communication
   b. Managerial decision-making
   c. Social impact of layoff policies

E. **Cross-validation (triangulation)** among:
   a. Interviews
   b. Policy documents
   c. Theoretical literature

Validity and Reliability

In qualitative research, **validity** is assessed through four criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985):

1. **Credibility**
   Ensured through:
   a. Triangulation of sources (interviews, documents, media)
   b. Member checks (interviewee confirmation)
   c. Deep reflection during analysis
2. **Transferability**
   Achieved by providing detailed descriptions of:
   a. Context
   b. Organizational characteristics
   So findings can be adapted to similar institutions in other settings.
3. **Dependability**
   Ensured by creating an **audit trail** recording:
   a. Decision-making processes
   b. Analysis procedures
   Which allows external review.
4. **Confirmability**
   Ensures findings derive from data—not researcher bias—through:
   a. Field notes
   b. Direct quotes
   c. Documentation audit

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Key Findings

This study finds that the threat of layoffs in Indonesia's aviation industry is not only economic in nature but also involves communication and social governance challenges. The absence of an adaptive communication framework grounded in sustainability principles has led companies to prefer extreme efficiency measures—such as mass layoffs—without participatory mitigation mechanisms.

From the thematic analysis, **three main findings** emerge:

1. **Communication Gaps Between Management and Workers**
   These gaps result in a **lack of dialogue during crisis decision-making**, leading to unilateral layoff policies without consensus-building or shared responsibility.
2. **Lack of ESG Integration in Crisis Communication and HR Policies**
   While companies mention ESG in sustainability reports, it **has not been meaningfully applied** to labor governance. ESG remains **symbolic** and disconnected from **ethical and inclusive layoff policies**.
3. **Absence of Collaborative Communication Models**
   There is **no communication framework** grounded in **social justice** to manage layoff risks—especially in the **post-pandemic context** marked by high uncertainty and technological disruption.

Sub-Unit Analysis

a) Sub-Unit 1: Corporate Communication Strategies

Most national airlines adopt a **reactive communication approach** during employment crises. The focus is often on justifying layoffs for **business survival**, without:

a. Transparency
b. Worker union involvement
c. Risk education for employees

The communication is typically **top-down**, with **minimal two-way dialogue**.

b) Sub-Unit 2: ESG Implementation

Airline sustainability reports show rising awareness of ESG, especially on the **environmental** front. However, the **social pillar**—which includes employment justice—is rarely reflected in actual HR practices.

Layoff decisions still **lack ethical considerations**, and ESG is **not used as a decision-making tool**.

c) Sub-Unit 3: Stakeholder Perceptions

Internal stakeholders (employees, unions) and external ones (public, regulators) show **fluctuating levels of trust** in corporate layoff policies.

Key issues include:

a. **Unclear information**
b. **Lack of open communication**
c. **Negative public narratives**

These worsen the company's **reputation** and fuel **ongoing social tension**.

The Re-FLIGHT Model: Narrative and Visualization

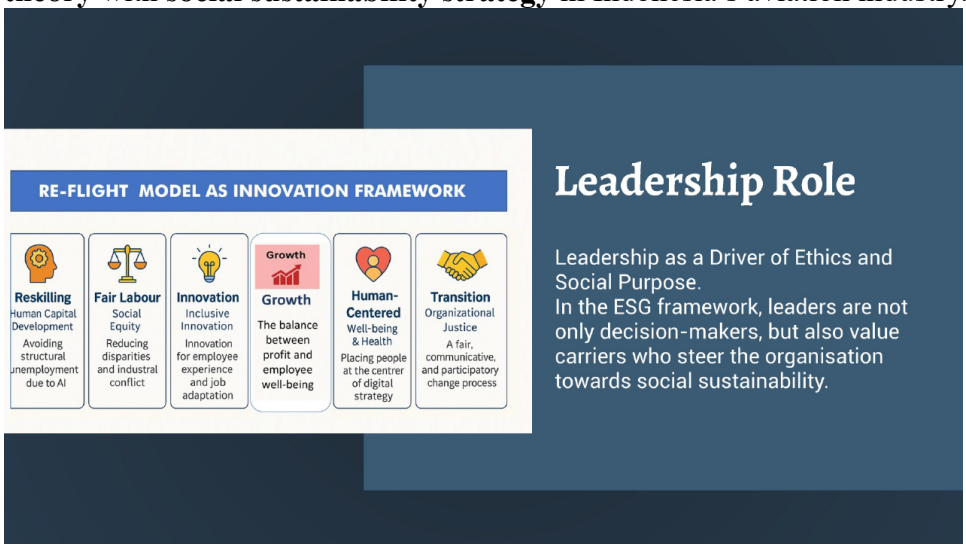
In response to these findings, the researcher developed the Re-FLIGHT Model—an ESG-based strategic communication framework designed to provide proactive, fair, and sustainable layoff mitigation.

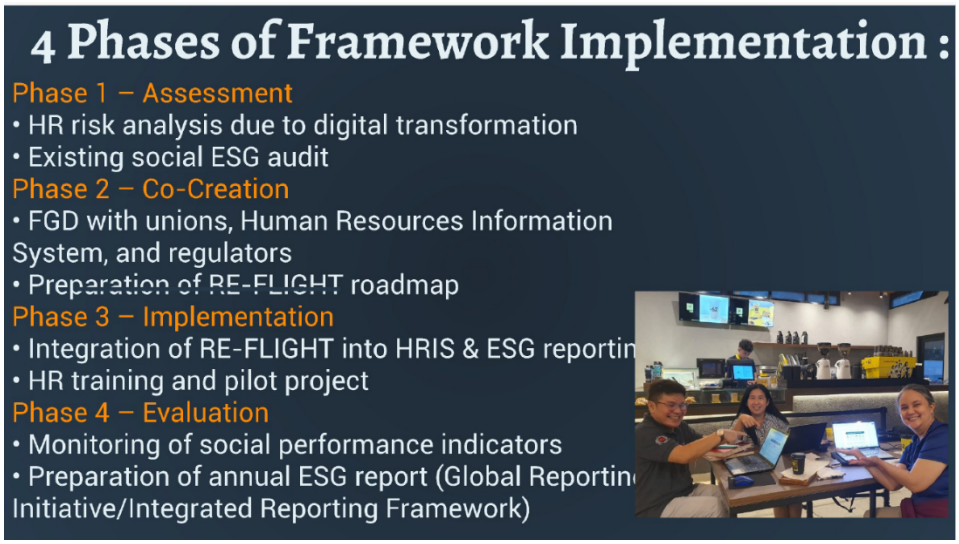
What is the Re-FLIGHT Model?

A strategic ESG-based communication model composed of **six components** within leadership role:

Model Function

The model addresses ESG challenges in layoff contexts by bridging **crisis communication theory** with **social sustainability strategy** in Indonesia's aviation industry.





DISCUSSION

Interpretation of Findings

This research reveals that the potential for **layoffs in Indonesia's aviation industry** is no longer a **hypothetical risk**, but a **complex reality**. It stems from a mix of:

A. **Post-pandemic impacts**
B. **Technological disruption**
C. **Economic pressure**

Airlines are trapped in a **dilemma**: between the need for **operational efficiency** and their **social responsibility** toward employees.

Despite attempts at efficiency, corporate responses remain largely **reactive** and are **not yet aligned** with long-term **sustainability strategies**.

The Shift Toward ESG

There are signs of a shift within the industry toward **Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG)** as a new foundation. However:

A. ESG **narratives** and **practices**—especially on the **"Social" pillar**—still require deeper development.
B. **Social aspects** of ESG, such as **employee welfare**, remain under-implemented and under-communicated.

Communication efforts from **management, unions, and government**, although present, are often:

a. **Uncoordinated**
b. Lacking **comprehensive solutions**
c. **Not focused** on social justice or participatory mitigation

This indicates that ESG is **slowly evolving** from a **symbolic reporting tool** into a part of **corporate identity**—but this requires **transparent and effective communication** to be meaningful.

The Re-FLIGHT Model as an Adaptive Response

The Re-FLIGHT Model is not just a **conceptual framework**, but an **adaptive response** that aims to:

A. **Bridge gaps** between efficiency needs, social responsibility, and strategic communication
B. Reframe layoffs as a process requiring:

a. **Dialogue**
b. **Reskilling**
c. **Multi-stakeholder collaboration**

Key Model Components

A. **Reskilling & Innovation**: Strengthen **worker adaptability** in facing automation and digitalization in aviation.
B. **Fair Labour & Transition**: Connect **ethical and social worker needs** with **corporate restructuring strategies**.
C. **Growth & Human-Centered**: Provide a **long-term vision** for inclusive and sustainable industrial relations.

These elements reflect **just transition principles**, now globally recognized in the industrial transformation agenda (OECD, 2023).

Theoretical Implications

This research makes significant contributions to:

1. Strategic Communication Theory

a. Shows how **ESG principles** can be **proactively integrated** into **HR management** during employment crises.
b. Confirms that ESG communication is not just about **sustainability reporting**—but is a tool for:
    a. **Crisis management**
    b. **Strong industrial relations**

2. Crisis and Dialogue Theory within ESG

A. Demonstrates how **dialogue- and participation-based communication** can:
    a. Mitigate layoffs
    b. Uphold **social justice values**
    c. Operationalize the **"Social" pillar** of ESG

Implication:

The success of communication during employment crises depends on an organization's **transparency** and **stakeholder engagement**.

Practical Implications

This study provides **concrete guidance** for the aviation industry and policymakers.

For Airlines:

A. Use **Re-FLIGHT** as a framework for **internal and external communication**.
B. Invest in **reskilling/upskilling programs** and communicate them **transparently**.
C. Create **routine dialogue forums** with labor unions to explore alternatives to layoffs, such as:
    a. Voluntary early retirement
    b. Mutually agreed working hour reductions

Outcome:

Effective ESG communication improves **public and investor perceptions**—especially as investors increasingly focus on **sustainability performance**.

For Government and Regulators:

A. Encourage policies that promote **deep ESG adoption** in aviation.
B. Offer **incentives** to airlines that show commitment to **workforce sustainability**.
C. Facilitate **tripartite dialogue** (government, employers, workers) to:
    a. Develop adaptive labor roadmaps

b. Address tech and market shifts
c. Prevent future mass layoffs

Limitations of the Research

1. **Generality**:
   Being qualitative, the findings may not be **widely generalizable** to all aviation sectors or other industries.
2. **Perspective-based**:
   The study focuses on **perceptions and experiences**, which can vary among actors.
3. **Model Implementation**:
   The **Re-FLIGHT Model** has not yet been empirically tested or implemented—**future studies are needed** to assess its effectiveness.
4. **Layoff Data**:
   Precise data on layoffs from some airlines remains **incomplete**, creating challenges for quantitative verification.

Summary of Findings

This study reveals that the threat of layoffs in Indonesia's aviation industry is not solely due to post-pandemic efficiency pressures or demand declines, but also reflects a strategic communication and corporate social governance crisis.

In an era of global disruption—rising fuel prices, AI adoption, and geopolitical tension—many companies still lack inclusive and adaptive communication strategies for managing labor crises.

In response, the research introduces the Re-FLIGHT Model, a strategic ESG-based communication framework made up of six core elements:

A. **R – Reskilling**
B. **F – Fair Labour**
C. **I – Innovation**
D. **G – Growth**
E. **H – Human-Centered**
F. **T – Transition**

The model emphasizes the central role of **strategic communication grounded in ESG** to:

A. Facilitate constructive **social dialogue**
B. Drive **human resource development**
C. Create **transparent, collaborative governance** between companies, workers, and the state

The model not only supports business sustainability and corporate reputation, but also safeguards social stability and mitigates the negative impact of layoffs.

It offers an alternative to conventional crisis responses—focusing not only on economic efficiency, but also on employee rights protection, social engagement, and inclusive long-term growth.

Recommendations

For the Aviation Industry

1. **Develop ESG-based layoff mitigation policies**, prioritizing:
   a. Reskilling programs
   b. Social dialogue
   c. Open worker communication

2. Ensure **transparent communication** regarding organizational restructuring, based on **public legitimacy** to maintain trust and industrial relations stability.
3. **Adopt the Re-FLIGHT Model** as part of:
    a. The company's **crisis response playbook**
    b. A standard **SOP for employment crisis communication**

For Regulators and the Government

1. Ministries (Transportation, Manpower, SOEs) should establish a **national layoff mitigation framework based on ESG**, especially for strategic sectors facing technological and economic disruption.
2. Promote **collaborative programs** such as national reskilling initiatives, involving:
    a. Industry players
    b. Training institutions
    c. Worker associations
3. Set **public communication guidelines** for employment crises to ensure:
    a. Ethical transitions
    b. Protection of workers' rights
    c. Institutional reputation preservation

For Academics and Future Researchers

1. Conduct further studies to **empirically test the Re-FLIGHT Model** across various industries and contexts to measure its effectiveness and sustainability impact.
2. Develop **ESG communication indicators** in workforce management to strengthen evaluation of strategic communication performance during crises.
3. Expand the framework into **cross-cultural communication models**, especially for multinational airlines operating in diverse regions.

For Other Stakeholders

A. **Investors and capital owners** should increasingly consider **ESG performance** in investment decisions to promote sustainable business practices.
B. **The public and media** should play an active role in promoting **transparency and corporate accountability** on ESG and labour issues.

CONCLUSION

The **Re-FLIGHT Model** is not only a response to current layoff challenges—it also reflects the **future of organizational communication** that is **fair, innovative, and human-centered**, designed to face the **inevitable disruptions** of our time. The essence of the word Re-FLIGHT possess a meaning by itself; reflecting current situation in Indonesia where layoffs happen in various industries in Indonesia then we took aeroplane as metaphor. Imagine a flying aeroplane, it symbolizes a company that is running, but unfortunate situation hit that company resulting it going bankrupt. However, just like an aeroplane that is going to fall, Re-FLIGHT takes over leadership to a forward-thinking model. Re-FLIGHT is preventing a company from bankruptcy as it is preventing an aeroplane from crash.

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