Employee communication

Learn about building an effective internal communication strategy, from tailoring communications and engaging line managers to using social media and developing two-way dialogue.

Introduction

Employee communication is an essential part of business and HR’s role. Effective internal communication is important for developing trust within an organisation and has a significant impact on employee engagement, organisational culture and, ultimately, productivity. Yet our research suggests that many employees feel they receive limited or very little information. To be successful, communication needs management support, a clear strategy and evaluation.

This factsheet explores the role internal communication plays in developing engaged employees, achieving organisational goals and supporting strategy and change. It examines aspects of an effective communication strategy, including the role of line managers, social media and two-way or multi-directional dialogue. Finally, it takes a closer look at planning and tailoring communications as well as the roles and responsibilities in good workplace communication.

What is employee communication?

This factsheet looks at internal rather than external communication - it may be helpful to read it with our factsheet on employee voice which covers the mechanisms of employee involvement and the benefits of two-way communication. Our factsheets on employee engagement and employer brand are also relevant.

Effective internal communication is vital in developing transparency in organisations. Clear and consistent internal messaging is needed especially as the nature of organisations and their workforces continues to change, driven by factors such as technology and a diversity of employment contracts.

Communication in the time of coronavirus
At a time of such uncertainty, good employee communication becomes even more vital. Employers can build trust and relieve tensions by communicating regularly and in a timely way with their employees. Communication should be transparent and include details on how the organisation is responding to, and impacted by, the COVID-19 pandemic, and what this means for employees. Listen to our webinar Leading and communicating through crisis.

Evidence suggests that a lack of information about wide-spread diseases can have a negative psychological impact. Circulating reliable and up-to-date information, from government or public health sources, will help keep employees informed of developments which may affect them physically, emotionally and financially.

Organisations should provide information on any additional support that they provide employees, such as Employee Assistance Programmes or other helplines, and emphasise any other benefits available, such as health insurance.

For more on what employers should be doing, see our Responding to the coronavirus hub.

**Why does communication with employees matter?**

Communication is a critical part of employee engagement, which in turn promotes better performance, employee retention and well-being. Employees are more likely to engage and contribute when there’s an open communication culture. Good employee communication will help people to understand their organisation’s purpose and strategy, identify with its values, and develop a sense of belonging by understanding how they contribute to its wider purpose.

However, despite the need for it to be high up the agenda in all organisations, there are challenges to effective communication at all levels of the organisation. Faced with change and complexity, senior leaders often struggle to communicate clearly about where the organisation is going and the impact on employees. Equally, managers can lack the skills, confidence and time needed to communicate well with their teams. Our UK Working Lives survey found that around a third of employees reported their manager as being poor at keeping them informed about management decisions.

Access to different technology channels also needs to be carefully considered for all job roles, to ensure all employees have fair and reasonable means to receive the messages.

Ongoing uncertainty about the implications of Brexit brings the potential for major
change in the near future. The most immediate challenge for HR teams is to provide a clear channel for communication and information, as well as to reassure staff that their right to work in the UK and other employment rights won’t change significantly in the short-term. Our Brexit hub has dedicated commentary and resources to help the people profession plan effectively and respond with agility. Our podcast Brexit - managing communications highlights how, with effective communication, HR professionals can best support their leaders and staff in times of uncertainty.

Principles of an effective employee communications strategy

A truly effective approach to internal communication will be cohesive and strategic, and support a culture of trust and openness.

Successful communication:

- is built on a shared sense of purpose and aligned to organisational strategy
- receives attention and support from senior leaders
- is driven by genuine dialogue
- is part of good people management
- draws on a range of digital channels and tools
- is reviewed and assessed for effectiveness.

In our report From best to good practice HR: developing principles for the profession we explored the principles that enable two-way relationships between people and organisations. We also explore the importance of employees having a meaningful voice at work in our 2019 report Talking about voice.

The role of senior leaders and people managers

A successful communication strategy depends on the full support of senior leaders as they are a key communication channel to all employees. But rather than being a ‘top down’ exercise, there needs to be dialogue, so that people have meaningful opportunities to feed their views upwards and discuss them with colleagues. Where resources permit, leaders may need support and training to be authentic, clear and inclusive in their communication.

Our Talking about voice research showed that employees two main concerns are work pressure and organisational change. Over half also say they had not raised these issues with their manager, colleague, HR or other representative. Failing to hear such views can lead to poor organisational outcomes (such as lower performance) and employee outcomes (such as lower well-being and motivation).
Using social technology

Employees are increasingly seeing intranets as out of date and unwieldy sources of information. This is particularly the case for people who are used to personalised, on-demand content in their private lives. Instead, enterprise social networks, such as online discussion forums or interactive intranets, are a potentially game-changing shift in how internal communications work. Some organisations are seeing benefits from internal social media in:

- Enabling employee interaction and a sense of belonging.
- Quickly resolving operational issues, especially across a dispersed workforce.
- Encouraging teams or departments to collaborate.
- Giving employees greater voice.
- Gaining insight into issues that affect employees and their work.

New communication technologies are emerging fast. When looking at what will work best for an organisation, it's vital to think carefully about what employees throughout the organisation need to do and what help they need to achieve it.

Two-way and multi-directional dialogue

The principle of two-way and responsive communication is crucial. Effective two-way communication supports the psychological contract and employee engagement, as individuals feel listened to and valued.

However, with the use of enterprise social networks, communication has increasingly become not only two-way, but multi-directional. Employees can share their views with colleagues at the same time as feeding them ‘upwards’, and quickly receive responses from colleagues or leaders in any part of the organisation. As our research report Social media and employee voice argues, this has marked a significant shift in how internal communications work and their impact.

Assessing communications effectiveness

There are two key levels for evaluating communication effectiveness:

- **Overall culture of communication within the organisation** - a regular employee attitude survey can ask questions covering, for example:
  - whether employees feel fully informed
  - is communication regular and consistent
  - do employees' feel listened to
  - are leaders trusted.
- **Success against specific objectives** - any communications campaign must have a clear aim, for example, awareness of a particular initiative, or a change in perceptions or behaviour. Once the aim is established, it's possible to measure the campaign's success.

**Communications planning**

**Specific communication strategies**

When facing organisational change, carefully planned communications are vital. The plan will cover appropriate timing, content, style and the channels to be used. It's also important to give clear, honest and consistent messages.

**Channel and message selection**

Communications planning should start with the outcome – what do you want the audience to think, feel or do as a result? This gives a good basis for selecting appropriate messages and channels.

Some methods of communication tend to be top-down, such as all-staff presentations or team briefings. Others, such as group meetings or online discussion forums, provide more opportunity for dialogue.

When dialogue is needed, it's important that the method chosen stimulates an appropriate two-way discussion. For example, while an enterprise social network may work well for some discussions, more sensitive or targeted issues will be better as face-to-face individual or group meetings. It's also important that communication addresses individual needs, including remote or part-time workers, or those who may feel more comfortable having one-to-one conversations rather than large group meetings.

Technology has transformed the range of options available for communicating with employees. However, not all employees will habitually use social tools. Communicators should consider the range of channels available and match them with how people prefer to receive information and communicate.

**Tailoring communications**

Some organisations segment employees so they can tailor communications to different audiences. This can apply to both for the style of communication and the method – for example, using the intranet for employees who have computer access, but other approaches for employees who don’t.
Organisation size is also an important factor. Communication is more complex in a global organisation, especially where different languages and cultures are involved.

**Roles and responsibilities in communication**

In large organisations, internal communications departments play a key role in developing the communication strategy and the flow of messages across the organisation. People professionals need to work with these specialists to ensure clear and timely communication around people management and employment issues.

Senior leaders set the tone for role modelling good communication, in terms of outlining strategy and purpose, and in their own communication style.

Managers are the front line of communicating with employees. They need to understand the importance of communicating and listening, have the right skills, and be willing to have conversations with their staff. This includes being prepared to address difficult situations. Read our Developing managers for engagement and well-being guidance.

Finally, all employees play a role in ensuring effective communications. Sharing, learning, listening and collaborating is key to an organisation’s success and adaptability.

**Useful contacts and further reading**

**Contacts**

Acas - Informing and consulting your employees about workplace matters

Involvement and Participation Association - case studies

**Books and reports**


Visit the CIPD and Kogan Page Bookshop to see all our priced publications currently in print.
Journal articles


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This factsheet was last updated by Rebecca Peters.