CIPD
Championing better work and working lives

GUIDE TO USING GROUP VOICE CHANNELS

Practical advice for HR professionals

Guide
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The CIPD is the professional body for HR and people development. The registered charity champions better work and working lives and has been setting the benchmark for excellence in people and organisation development for more than 100 years. It has more than 150,000 members across the world, provides thought leadership through independent research on the world of work, and offers professional training and accreditation for those working in HR and learning and development.

Guide

Guide to using group voice channels: Practical advice for HR professionals

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① Introduction

This guide provides advice on how HR can maximise the impact of group voice channels within their organisation. Group voice channels include those which enable employee voices to be listened to through interaction as a group, rather than from an individual perspective.

Though digital channels are easy to access, having a diverse mix of outlets for two-way communication will be more effective in reaching a broader spectrum of your workforce. Make sure to utilise a wide range of channels, including the following, to empower employee voice.

② Meetings

Meetings are essential for business, though underlined studies suggest that they are often unproductive and inefficient. The Harvard Business Review states that 71% of senior managers said meetings are unproductive and inefficient. Remote working has prompted organisations to search for solutions, in order to develop efficacy, enhance wellbeing and enable successful hybrid working. See the CIPD Line Manager Guide on Supporting Hybrid Working.

Successful companies nurture a culture of creativity, transparency, ideas-sharing and continuous dialogue with their workforce. As studies show, this is most powerfully achieved where there is active dialogue and open opportunities for feedback that is acted upon. The linkage between employee voice and organisational culture has been found in numerous studies[1, 2, 3, 4, 5] and has highlighted the probability of cultural values affecting how employees express themselves.

Meetings can provide a formal and an informal means of eliciting ideas and insights from employees, which can have a substantial impact on the overall organisational culture. Meetings promote accessibility and visibility. Best of all, they can build relationships and cultivate an environment of trust.

Different meetings enable different forms of employee voice. Examples of these include:

- **one-to-one meetings** – to strengthen relationships and build trust
- **onboarding** – to establish expectations, values and understanding
- **brainstorming** – to collaborate and creatively generate ideas
- **department meetings** – to build a sense of connectedness between employees operating in and with closely related teams
- **kick-off project meetings** – to set out goals, give clarity, and establish a mode of regular feedback
- **post-project meetings** – to revise successes and challenges
- **organisation meetings** – to increase engagement from senior leaders with all employees.

For more effective meetings, consider the following:

- Establish clear roles and responsibilities for the meeting.
- Set out mutual requirements and expectations.
- Be clear about the aim of the meeting, as well as any related policies.
- Share knowledge to maximise informed voice.
- Ensure timely action in response to feedback.
- Secure leadership accountability for creating healthy, safe environments for voice. Make sure leaders practise active listening.
- Communicate regularly and follow up consistently after the meeting. See Case study 1 below.

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Case study 1: Organisation meetings

During organisational meetings at Boots UK, senior leaders create time on the agenda for an in-depth Q&A session. Employees are given the facilitating director's mobile number and encouraged to text their questions in advance of the Q&A. Sufficient time is given for individual reflection.

This removes the pressure from employees to speak in an open forum and protects anonymity. The outcome is often very open and honest feedback.

Senior leaders then review the questions that come in and openly acknowledge the emerging themes. These insights are then shared with the relevant teams for resolutions or ongoing monitoring.

③ Employee apps

As the world of work adapts to changing needs, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, many HR and internal communications teams are relying on digital channels to improve employee engagement. Employee apps (which should ideally be optional, rather than mandatory to use) can support better communication and make a difference to internal communication, especially in reaching non-office-based employees.

With widespread access to mobile devices, an employee app is an ideal tool to reach employees wherever they are. The potential benefits and uses include:

- **communication with employees who are not desk-based** – driving awareness of what's happening both locally and company-wide; it can also help build cross-departmental communities
- **sharing of time-critical communications** – including announcements or push notifications on health and safety alerts, and other information such as business continuity plans, organisation charts and employee contact details
- **real-time reactions** from the workforce
- **sharing of content 'on the go'**, cultivating authentic employee voice.

Most employee apps have the following capabilities:

- cloud-based, and easily accessible from any mobile device (company or private)
- fast
- user-friendly
- easy to navigate
- engaging design (many have a design functionality similar to popular social media platforms)
- employees can put questions directly to senior leaders
- pulse surveys can be carried out easily
- increased participation at employee events – for example, live surveys or voting
- fundraising can be facilitated
- collaboration is easy – for example through a digital suggestion box
- the app can host CEO or senior leader blogs
- a digital employee handbook can be made available and easily kept updated
- the homepage can have live news or a social media feed from the company's Twitter or Instagram account.

The effectiveness of employee apps can be maximised by:

- **Providing good content** that is constantly changing – this is key to making an employee app attractive.
- **Tailoring the content for your audiences** – this enables you to build engagement. Employees have a far greater interest in the information that affects their immediate working environment and everyday work. This includes local site news, team charity activities, or even community-sharing, where they can see and hear what their peers are getting up to.
- **Encouraging employees to give their feedback** and transparently communicate how their input will be used – enable different departments or teams to easily create, share, comment and like the content.
- **Ensuring new employees are given access early** – ideally before or during their induction – so they can immerse themselves in the organisational culture during their crucial early stages.
- **Enabling constant two-way communication** by making it easy for employees to give and receive feedback. This will help the organisation to innovate, improve and develop quickly.
- **Promoting HR processes** – the app is useful for HR processes, which encourages employees to own and manage holiday requests, shift planning and even performance check-ins with their line managers.
- **Maximising multimedia** for better engagement – short videos with simple explanations will often build engagement. Use the app to bring stories to life and better explain the company's vision, mission and values, or even its strategic goals.
- **Senior leadership showcase videos** – hosting videos from CEOs and project managers on the app helps colleagues to know their leaders. Most videos could be filmed with a phone camera – the more authentic the look and feel, the better!
- **Encouraging interaction** – increased interaction on this platform will improve engagement and positively impact your organisation's culture.

See Case study 2 for how construction firm nmcn used an app to increase employee engagement.

Case study 2: Employee apps

At construction firm nmcn, a site manager published updates on the go to the company intranet via an employee app.

The update (taken by the site manager's phone camera) showcased the progress of a multi-million-pound development.

Other employees interacted with the post easily, particularly because it was written by a peer.

These posts often generate a greater level of engagement, further demonstrating employees' interest in information affecting their day-to-day work.

Employees may sometimes feel a bit removed from 'corporate news', but local sharing by peers gives them a sense of ownership in telling the stories that matter most.

It also gives the employees working on that project a sense of being seen and recognised by the organisation for their efforts.

④ **Focus groups**

Focus groups can give a richer set of insights than you may get from a survey, as they delve deeper to uncover detailed information. Focus groups should be used to identify important issues that can then be explored further through surveys or wider studies with a larger representation of the workforce.

The benefits of holding employee forums include:

* being able to pick up on non-verbal cues vital to your research
* gaining insight from a diverse cross-section of employees
* gaining an understanding of the link between behaviours and beliefs – this can be useful when launching a new product, system or service.

Tips for holding effective focus groups include the following:

* **Consider in advance what will limit voice and what will stimulate it** – ask clear questions to facilitate dialogue and learn about employees' opinions. Then use those findings to shape campaigns or launches.
* **Select a representative sample from across the organisation** – an ideal focus group should comprise a cross-section of employees representing different employee groups and diverse backgrounds. Before selecting employees for a focus group, think deeply about who you are trying to influence and what will influence them.
* Ideally, the focus group should consist of **12–15 employees to one facilitator**.
* **Inform attendees in advance of the topics to be discussed** and preferably allow people to volunteer to attend, rather than making their attendance mandatory.
* **Check that attendees can take time away from their work** – ensure the timings of the focus group work for the business.
* **Provide refreshments** – a useful incentive is to offer snacks or even a buffet. It also encourages a communal atmosphere among attendees.
* **Make sure there is an icebreaker** – as it is likely those attending will not know each other. This can be fun and whacky, whatever is the right tone for your employees and topic.
* **Address confidentiality** – ensure all employees know whether the focus group and any views they express will be confidential or public record.
* **Use interactive activities** to encourage people to contribute to discussion; this could entail:
  o working in small groups to discuss a question – sometimes big group discussions can be intimidating
  o using Post-It notes or a mind map wall, so people can put ideas in writing
  o make a story board or a poster to visualise the ideas generated.
* **Use tools such as root cause analysis, including the Five Whys** (a technique to determine the root cause of a problem by repeating the question 'Why?') – to delve into themes, particularly where a focus group is a follow-up to a survey.
* **Use video-conferencing facilities** – if the focus group is remote, platforms such as Zoom have some great facilities, including breakout rooms for smaller discussions and an interactive whiteboard.
* **Have a note-taker present** – this enables a facilitator and participants to focus on the discussion and ideas.
* **Ensure attendees know what the next steps** are following the focus group and keep them in the loop.
* **Consider using SMART targets** to create a more meaningful and achievable action plan.
* **Ensure accountability** for delivering an action plan drawn up in the focus group – consider asking members of the group to be 'sponsors' of the actions.

- **Increase awareness** – tell the wider business about the outcome of the session. You could post a photo from the focus group on the intranet or company social platforms.
- **Gain management/business leader feedback** on the outputs of the focus group. It is key they are seen to acknowledge employee input.

For more tips on running employee focus groups, see section 18 of Engage for Success's Employee Voice Guide.

⑤ Employee forums

Employees have the right to request that their employer informs and consults them about issues in the organisation. Refer to the CIPD guide for a detailed view of employee consultation.

Employers should consider the following good practice for employee forums:

- Employee forums must be clearly defined.
- Involve nominated forum members to set out the forum's remit and agree member responsibilities.
- Once the remit and responsibilities of the forum are confirmed, share them and establish this with your workforce.

⑥ Intranet

A company intranet can empower employee voice by making it visible and promoting knowledge-sharing within an organisation.

Employers can optimise the impact of their intranet by:

- **sharing details** of upcoming focus groups, town-hall-style meetings or virtual collaborations
- **making it user-friendly**, so interested employees know how to participate
- **having a private space for forum member resources** – this can include information tools, workshops, or training sessions. See Case study 3.

See Case study 3 for how construction firm nmcn have used their company intranet to increase innovation.

Case study 3: Intranet

At nmcn, the intranet includes a community hub* for people to create private or public communities. These communities vary from personal/shared-interest hobbies to business/project-related communities.

The community hub has aided innovation and the sharing of best practice, which has in turn supported the alignment of a disparate workforce.

The community hub is a designated space on the intranet where employees can create mini-communities. These vary from CSR (corporate social responsibility), specific project work, innovation for generating new ideas, or even social communities. Though a few are closed or made private for different reasons, most are publicly open for any employee to join regardless of location, role, status, or age – as long as they have an interest in the subject matter.
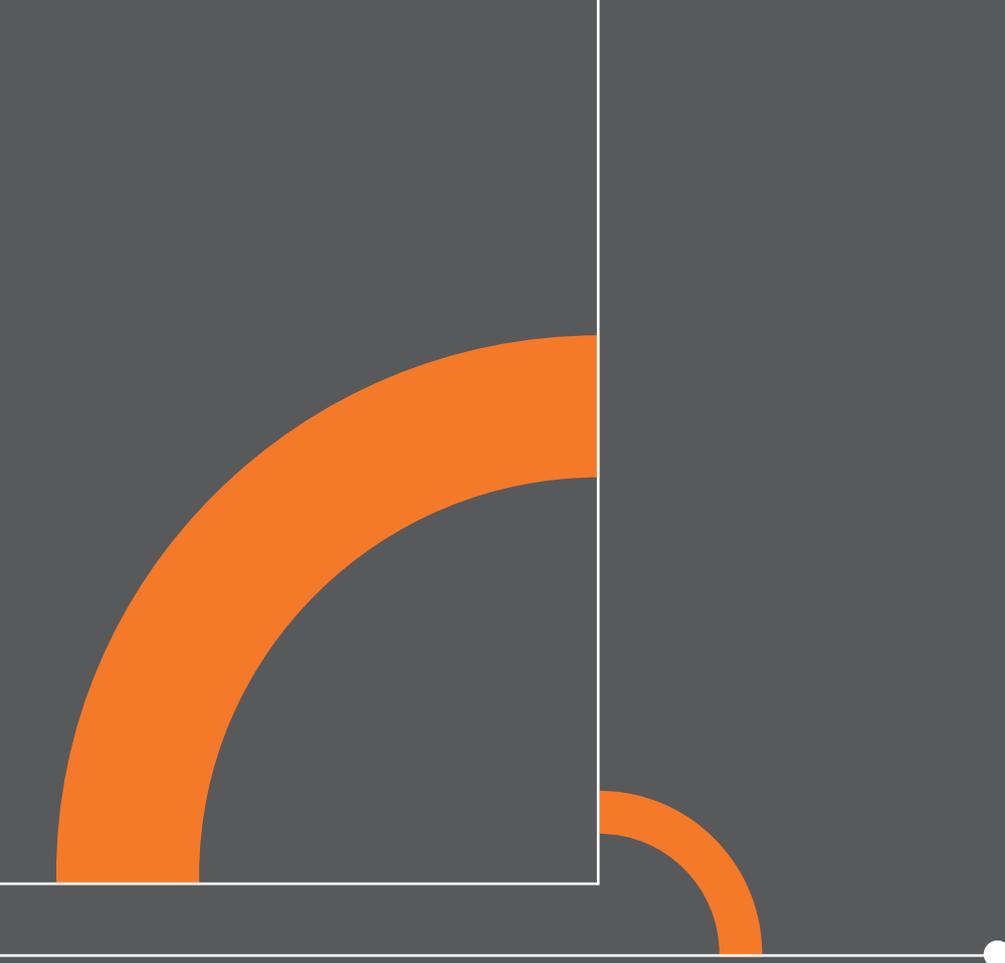

The community hub aids the open sharing of information across the business and brings colleagues together who would not normally interact. The best thing about public groups is that all their latest posts scroll across the homepage in the community newsfeed, so their activity is visible to all employees. This further encourages open dialogue through comments and often brings novel solutions from the workforce to issues raised.

These channels are by no means exhaustive. If an organisation is prepared to implement some of these fundamental frameworks to support voice, it will go a long way to creating opportunities for more of your workforce to have a say in what matters to them. By sharing knowledge, ideas and experiences, we can drive better outcomes for our businesses.

For more resources, see our employee voice topic page.

⑦ **Endnotes**

[1] Junchao et al. (2010) *Will Safety Necessarily Lead to Voice? The Moderated Effect of Individualism-Collectivism and Power Distance.* Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/238519495_Will_Safety_Necessarily_Lead_to_Voice_The_Moderated_Effect_of_Individualism-Collectivism_and_Power_Distance

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[3] Kwon, B and Farndale, E. (2020) Employee voice viewed through a cross-cultural lens. *Human Resource Management Review*, vol. 30, no. 1, 100653. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2018.06.002

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[5] Liu and Cho. (2011) *Encouraging Employee Voice in the Hospitality Industry: The Role of Organizational Culture and Leadership Styles.* Available at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.co.uk/&httpsredir=1&article=1162&context=gradconf_hospitality

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