

Case study
July 2014

Putting social media to work

Devon and Cornwall Police



WORK



WORKFORCE



WORKPLACE

Championing better work and working lives

The CIPD's purpose is to **champion better work and working lives** by improving practices in people and organisation development, for the benefit of individuals, businesses, economies and society. Our research work plays a critical role – providing the content and credibility for us to drive practice, raise standards and offer advice, guidance and practical support to the profession. Our research also informs our advocacy and engagement with policy-makers and other opinion-formers on behalf of the profession we represent.

To increase our impact, in service of our purpose, we're focusing our research agenda on three core themes: the future of **work**, the diverse and changing nature of the **workforce**, and the culture and organisation of the **workplace**.

WORK

Our focus on work includes what work is and where, when and how work takes place, as well as trends and changes in skills and job needs, changing career patterns, global mobility, technological developments and new ways of working.



WORKFORCE

Our focus on the workforce includes demographics, generational shifts, attitudes and expectations, the changing skills base and trends in learning and education.

WORKPLACE

Our focus on the workplace includes how organisations are evolving and adapting, understanding of culture, trust and engagement, and how people are best organised, developed, managed, motivated and rewarded to perform at their best.

About us

The CIPD is the professional body for HR and people development. We have over 130,000 members internationally – working in HR, learning and development, people management and consulting across private businesses and organisations in the public and voluntary sectors. We are an independent and not-for-profit organisation, guided in our work by the evidence and the front-line experience of our members.

Putting social media to work

Devon and Cornwall Police case study

This case study forms part of a research project conducted in 2014. The main research report and other case studies can be found at [here](#).

The context

Devon and Cornwall Police has approximately 6,000 staff and 500 volunteers and covers a population of about 1.5 million residents.

Since 2009, one of the changes that the force has been making is to move towards a shared services model, when the various HR functions across the force were centralised and HR responsibilities started to be handed to line management more. The force is thus actively encouraging staff, especially line managers, to be more self-sufficient in finding out information, rather than relying on the force to publish everything they need to know. This has required new uses of digital technology.

Part of this change has been to rebrand the HR department to People and Leadership and lead a move away from a command-and-control culture to more distributed leadership. The force is now three years into this journey to change its culture and has made some tangible progress. But probably like other key public services, the police face a particular challenge in this. On the one hand, getting staff at all levels to take on more responsibility and leadership is a natural extension of much of their day-to-day work; but on the other hand, there is a common tendency to cover one's back by relying on supervisors' instructions.

Every constable is an individual decision-maker on the streets. No one can tell them how to respond

to an incident, not even the chief constable. They have to make their own decision and they will be accountable in court for their decision. So that almost generates [self-sufficiency] ... except the complete opposite tends to happen. To keep my nose clean and do the right thing, I want to be told exactly what to do. So you have that dichotomy and that paradox. (Chris Haselden)

As we discuss below, this culture change is something that both is supported by social media and enables its effective use.

Over recent years, as with all police forces, Devon and Cornwall Police has had to work with increasingly tight budgets due to public sector cuts.

The innovation

Devon and Cornwall Police is using a range of social technologies to facilitate communication with and between staff, and with local communities. These include SharePoint, Twitter, Facebook and mobile devices.

External use of social media

Over recent years, an increasing number of staff have started using Twitter to publicise their activities. As Chris Haselden, Director of People and Leadership, describes it, the aim of this is:

to demonstrate how they are undertaking the policing activity, to reassure the public that we are doing the right things and

what they're up to. It's also ... [to] present themselves as individuals as much as officials of the state. At the most extreme end, a police officer will be seen as an unwelcome invader into a community. At best they're seen as a member of the community that's supporting the community infrastructure. ... Twitter has helped to make individual officers feel more like individuals within the community, because they talk to people in a way that people are used to receiving information. (Chris Haselden)

As well as personal accounts, there have more recently been an increasing number of community-focused accounts being set up. The force also has a Facebook page which is used to communicate police-related news feeds and engage with the public.

This use of social media builds on a Community Messaging System, which is an online and email-based channel for communicating with the local community. Over the course of time, key leaders in the community are identified, including but not restricted to people with official community-based posts. They are then kept informed by email of police activity and broadcast those messages within their parts of the community.

So they've received the message from us and then they're able to spread it out. The messages are free to be spread, they are not confidential messages. They're

just another mechanism for getting out. What we are finding is that some of those people are using other mechanisms for then passing on the messages. So they might use Twitter or a Facebook account or go to a meeting or whatever. / (Chris Haselden)

Having a wide range of channels is considered important, so that all parts of the community can be reached.

Internal social media

A major development in internal communications has been the use of MS SharePoint. It is used in four broad ways: as an intranet mechanism for general communications; as a learning and development portal; for group-specific collaboration; and for open discussions across the force.

SharePoint is used as a traditional intranet to disseminate information across the force and within the 200 or so neighbourhoods. For example, it is used as a bulletin board and, more recently, to show video messages from senior leaders on pertinent issues, such as change programmes and cost savings.

Its use for learning and development resources aligns with the Police Online Knowledge Area (POLKA), a national learning and collaboration tool run by the College of Policing.

[POLKA] seeks to give further information to learners, and further information to trainers as well. It also provides an online space to speak, to coach questions, forums. / (Jon Back)

Both tools support the force's drive to hand people management activity to line management more (see *The context*, above). Social media blurs the traditional

boundaries of learning and development. Sharing information and pointing to resources naturally leads to learner-led development, whereby people find out what they need to know when they need to know it. This is facilitated by bite-sized pieces of learning. More recently, the learning and development department has been facilitating blogs from senior leaders, but the most established resource is the simple step-by-step guides for people management processes. For the moment, information on operational policing has kept its in-depth detail, but the force is considering developing similar step-by-step guides for these too.

[The guides] make it much easier for people to understand when they aren't being taught from scratch. They often want to do the activity but need reminding how to do something they haven't done for a little while: 'What process? What do I do next?' / (Chris Haselden)

It's taking a long time to educate managers to [rely on the guides] ... to go and find that [information]. We're still having to refer people to step-by-steps. They ring up and say, 'I need to do so and so.' / (Mark Hurford)

SharePoint's use for project-specific collaboration is more ad hoc, with online spaces set up by a department or a team. This enables staff across the group to communicate and share and work jointly on documents.

Finally, SharePoint's use to facilitate organisation-wide discussions focuses on five forums that cover the areas of associations (for example for black and ethnic minority staff), job evaluation, organisational change programme, saving money and sports and

social. This is the most socially networked use of the tool and provides the main focus of this case study.

Mobile technology

This is an area of ongoing development and potential, as currently mobile technology is not utilised as much as it could be, in particular as a communications tool for officers 'on the beat'. In the meantime, a number of officers are using their own mobile devices for certain things, such as Twitter.

The journey

Throughout the force's social media journey, the biggest technical issue has been to enable communication on a secure internal network. Getting approval for external use of social media was a challenging process because of the perceived risk of compromising sensitive information.

The force's Facebook page was set up about three years ago without much issue and the corporate communications team has kept it updated with news feeds and responded to messages from the public. The use of Twitter by individual officers is mainly done through personal mobile devices, which is a grey area for data security, but is currently accepted.

They're talking as the police to the public so if their phone isn't locked down somebody could get access to it. In that way it's a security risk for us ... obviously somebody then could potentially have access to one of their accounts. You've got 3,000 followers who believe you're a police officer and then a rogue message goes out, that's not a very good reputation for the force. / (Reuben Millard)

Take-up and use

External social media

About 130 police officers and staff use Twitter for work purposes – mainly those in front-line policing, neighbourhood and response officers and police community support officers (PCSOs). Officers who use Twitter generally do so while they are on the move and between doing other things.

‘To them it isn’t an extra effort, it’s: I’m just walking down the street from one meeting to go and see some people that have got an issue; whilst I’m walking along I’m doing my Twitter. Because they do it naturally. ... If it became extra work then it would become a distraction from what they’re doing, because they have very little time when they’re not allocated tasks.’ (Chris Haselden)

Nonetheless, while staff are limited in how much time they can spend on social media with the public, it is seen as contributing in an important way to their work.

‘An amount of hours per week were spent not doing policing work but updating the Internet site – that arguably is not the best use of a police officer’s time. However, reassuring the public is a priority overall. If by communicating with them they are reassured and they feel safer and they go about their business in a better way, that is part of policing.’ (Chris Haselden)

Staff do have to be careful what information they convey on Twitter, although this is not a new challenge (they regularly talk to members of the public anyway) so much as learning to use a new medium.

‘Obviously a lot of what we are doing is sensitive and confidential. They have to be wary that they don’t present that on Twitter, but they can present the fact that ... they’ve just been to a school ... [or] they’re going out to the high street to deal with issues. ... Corporate Comms do keep an eye on what is being said and in what way it is being said, so if we identify people that are maybe being too generous with the information we can just let them know they need to be a little more circumspect. ... We’re not in the game, however, of censorship. ... It’s just ... if you’re using it you need to be responsible for it and you are accountable for what you personally do with it.’ (Chris Haselden)

Internal discussion boards

The internal use of SharePoint as a discussion board is mainly to discuss organisational change, rather than policies and procedures or day-to-day operations. For example, discussions might focus on where job cuts are being made, or how certain organisational issues are going to be resolved.

The benefits of the discussion board are ones typically cited for employee voice. In particular, it helps the organisation obtain employee insight; and the dialogue is seen to help staff understand changes and feel more engaged with the organisation and its vision.

‘It is a piece of internal intelligence for what is going on in the organisation. ... [It] puts us in a better place to pick up the issues that are affecting our staff and gives us a heads-up of the things we should be dealing with to make their life at work as good as we can make it, in order that they are as productive as possible.’ (Chris Haselden)

Given the context of budget cuts and large-scale organisational change, it is perhaps not surprising that much of the discussion concerns things people are unhappy about. Even though they are not anonymous on the discussion boards, many staff are very open with criticisms, sometimes to the point where negative comments seem to overwhelm everything else.

‘The problem from where I’m sitting is that [the] voice is overwhelmingly negative. I’m not saying that’s not justified at all, but by broadcasting negativity they can drag other people down with them. Someone has actually referred to it as ‘officially sanctioned primal scream therapy’. How can you manage that to try and turn it round? Because it’s not even factually correct half the time, it’s just angry, unhappy people shouting. ... By and large, what we try and do as a department is to get official responses to those queries ... [but] there are times when because they’ve heard it from their mate Bob, they don’t believe the official view, they believe what Bob said. ... I think the idea of giving an employee voice is great, but for me the key is that voice is heard and responded to. ... Forums give staff, or customers, or whoever it is a voice and allows feedback but it is a two-way process, and the benefits can be enormous, but actually very little talks about managing large amounts of negativity.’ (Nikki Cann)

Notwithstanding this, HR Director Chris Haselden insists that facilitating open discussion is worthwhile.

‘People are going to say these things anyway ... and it is better

that we actually have some medium by which people can vent their frustrations ... [so] that it will be taken notice of. And it's in-house, so it's something which is a release valve for the organisation, for individuals. ... The minority that have a gripe will tend to be more vocal. So yes, it is a bit of a challenge and some parts of the organisation will say it allows [negativity] to prevail and to spread more ... but overall the balance seems to be more communication, more transparency, more openness – from an engagement and effectiveness and satisfaction point of view for staff – far outweighs [that]. ... We're trying to promote openness, transparency, we want managers to explain why they're making the decisions they're making. / (Chris Haselden)

Where our interviews showed a difference of opinion was whose responsibility it should be to respond to negative or challenging comments on the discussion boards. Some people felt that it is a role for the senior leaders, as they are seen to have the legitimacy needed to give convincing responses, and ideally they would get more involved in these discussions.

/ What will happen is people will post up loads of things and the senior officer will get back and say, 'Thank you for your posts. X, Y, and Z isn't happening. We're reviewing Y in February. We'll be in touch.' Then what will happen is a load of people will get back saying, 'Thanks for this, but you haven't answered A, B, C, and D' – but no further answers are forthcoming so it'll be a one-off rather than a continual engagement process. / (Nikki Cann)

However, there was also recognition that senior leaders would not often have the time to get involved with such continual engagement.

Moreover, the view of the senior leadership is that the most powerful responses actually come from colleagues with an alternative view, especially if they have area expertise.

/ You do recognise regular contributors and you do see why some of them are in that bad place in the organisation, because what they were comfortable with a few years ago has basically disappeared and there is virtually nothing left for them of a comfortable nature. Everything seems to have changed adversely for them and they will therefore have a dissatisfaction with a whole range of things. ... What we have found in practice is that when people have made observations about generally how bad something is, there are other staff, not management, who will sometimes counter those views. ... [It's] absolutely, far more effective, because [if a senior leader wades in] all you get is propaganda accusations: 'Well you would say that, wouldn't you? You live in a different world from us,' and all those sorts of things that makes your response, as management, particularly as senior management, inappropriate to the individual. / (Chris Haselden)

Being online makes it feel less confrontational to disagree with colleagues in this way than it would face to face, but there is a sense that many staff are still reticent to engage in such conversations on discussion boards.

/ The posts are not inappropriate, [but] sometimes they're quite aggressively written and you

wouldn't necessarily want to enter into a debate or an argument if you disagreed with that point of view. / (Nikki Cann)

Chris Haselden believes there can be a place for senior leaders to respond to negative posts but care needs to be taken. In broad terms, it needs to be conversational, in line with the general online discussion, and not seen to be clamping down on dissent.

/ The difficulty with having that conversation on a discussion board is it tends to be a very lengthy, comparatively, explanation that people then don't actually read very often. Whereas 'I'm unhappy with ___ ; this is terrible; management are doing this again', tends to be three or four lines or at best a paragraph. You don't see many postings on the discussion board from individuals that are longer than that. The explanation, however, might have to be much longer and then it looks like it's a bit of a diatribe and a bit of overkill. ... If it's part of just engaging in the discussion, it tends to be seen or interpreted as we're trying to close it down, rather than letting it run. So you have to choose how and to what extent, and actually a lot of the time it's best to sit on your hands and other members of staff will often then put alternative views forward, which then tends to modify or counteract some of the negativity. / (Chris Haselden)

The force is encouraging other staff with relevant expertise (for example in an HR or organisational development role) to step in to discussions on policies and organisation-wide change, but for this to work well involves a more general change from a command-and-control culture in which leadership is expected to come from the top.

‘The reason why it has not sat comfortably in the organisation is that in order for it to be taken as proper, official information, it needed to have the tag of a senior leader saying it. We got to the point ... that the only people who could ever make a decision that stood in the organisation was a chief officer. If you were not a chief officer, you could think you’re making the decision but there’ll always be someone who will try and undo it and say you’re not the valid person. ... So we’re trying to move away from that ... and to say, it is role, not rank, that matters.’ (Chris Haselden)

Heads of department and other officers do now see themselves as legitimately being able to make and communicate more decisions that affect the wider organisation. This important cultural shift towards a more distributed leadership opens up the potential for tools such as the discussion board to be used in a more positive and inclusive way; to be seen as a network of colleagues, rather than a Q&A service to the eight most senior people in the force. In a reciprocal way, the discussion board has also been a good tool to help make the change. For example, senior leaders can support the legitimacy of more junior colleagues through chipping in to discussions, showing support to their comments and noting that they are in line with wider expectations or the overall vision.

‘It’s influence, not decision-making, not control. You have to be very careful and it’s very easy, particularly in a command-and-control environment such as policing, to drop back into, ‘Just do it because I’ve said so.’ (Chris Haselden)

Business impacts

External use of Twitter by officers: in the main a question of supporting the trust and the confidence that the public has in the police, which supports satisfaction with the service. It is one more channel that the police can use; not something it would want to be reliant upon, but useful nonetheless to reach a certain demographic.

‘It’s to do with public engagement. I mean in this day and age, the traditional police officer walking the beat has obviously been long gone. They’re in cars and moving around. They’re in offices dealing with day-to-day stuff. To make them more visible, social media works for us, especially with more rural communities and the more digital age.’ (Reuben Millard)

‘Many officers have for many years talked to the public and they tell people what’s going on. That is as reassuring as a Twitter message. What we’ve recognised is that social media is a mechanism by which [we can communicate with] parts of the public and it is actually: every mechanism is only for a minority of users ... Facebook, Twitter, intranet pages, flyers through letterboxes, posters on the wall all are only seen by a group of people. ... We’ve got to hit all of those in order to get to all those people. ... They might get the same message three times. That is no bad thing because if they’re getting the same message consistently three times, that is even more reassuring that the right things are going on.’ (Chris Haselden)

Occasionally, the force has put out calls for help through Twitter to assist their investigations and has received useful information from the public which it probably

wouldn’t have got as quickly otherwise. The public also engages with the police through Facebook, which is thought to have reduced non-emergency 101 phone calls.

‘A lot of things are dealt with on a local level. People are now reporting maybe small minor stuff that they might not have bothered with or they might have phoned up the 101 number. They’re now actually just going to the local Facebook page and saying, ‘There’s some new graffiti here,’ or, ‘There are some youths hanging around on a corner down here that’s not being dealt with.’ It’s dealt with almost more like the traditional way where you actually used to speak to the police officer directly and say what your concern was, and they just dealt with it as part of their day-to-day business. I guess that’s where social media is going except in a more digital age.’ (Reuben Millard)

Next steps

Social media

Devon and Cornwall Police see plenty more room for development in how they make use of social technology.

While Facebook and Twitter are used externally to recognise the force’s achievements, one challenge is to encourage more use of the discussion boards for such interaction, both to celebrate good work and share good practice.

At the time of research, the force was still looking at how it could best respond to the negative and challenging views that come up on the discussion boards. One idea is to run regular Q&A chat-room sessions with senior leaders – either a live one-hour slot or a period (for example a day) where staff can

post questions which will then be answered. This would give people the visibility of senior leaders that they want, while not being too much of a drain on the leadership's time.

Although that balance needs to be struck.

To help strike this balance between efficient use of time and effective communication with the public through social media, the corporate communications team is reviewing which channels get to the maximum number of people, so that, for example, one post can ultimately be disseminated through multiple channels.

It is also considering reintroducing force incident managers, who would be located within the communications function and able to use Twitter and other media more actively, to notify the public of up-to-date information that can affect them, such as traffic accidents.

It could be the middle of the night. It's a good way of them getting that information out and obviously helping manage what's happening. (Reuben Millard)

There is also seen to be potential in how social media is used to work across organisational boundaries with external partners.

Even our limited use of Twitter is already showing that we have made bridges and contacts with partners and agencies that we wouldn't have thought to. ... We've already had contact from victims' groups, for example, that we didn't even know existed. ... So I think it will dramatically accelerate our engagement with partner agencies and with the communities. (Jon Back)

Mobile technology

Devon and Cornwall Police is less developed in its use of mobile digital devices, although as already mentioned, some staff are already using personal devices for social media. However, working within the budgetary, security and other constraints that it faces, the force is making inroads in this area.

The force has started to use interactive tablet-based learning to make training courses more flexible and reduce barriers to access. To date, this has been done with core training for special constabulary roles. This was an obvious place to start, because the training is less involved and legally detailed than other training (for example for officers and PCSOs) and also because these roles are voluntary and part-time, so flexibility in course structure was particularly relevant. But the potential is seen to roll out this use of mobile technology to other areas of training.

Closer to day-to-day operations, the force is investigating how it can securely use mobile technology to reduce the time officers and PCSOs need to be at their office and increase the numbers of staff 'on the beat'. The potential includes being able to digitally record and submit data in real time at the scenes of incidents, and even tasking people remotely so they don't need to come into the police station at the beginning of a shift.

The main barriers are the set-up, running and maintenance costs, which will be especially high because the data security would have to be appropriate for the level of confidentiality required, and which are hard to find when budgets are tight. Another barrier is compatibility of technology and the reliability of mobile communication across the whole force area.

With radios there are dead spots, there are good reception areas and bad reception areas. We might face the same sort of issue with mobile data because it uses virtually the same sort of technology. (Chris Haselden)

It would also mark a cultural change that needs to be considered:

People are used to and find a comfort in returning to a base station from time to time during the day and not being completely out. There is a sense of togetherness from that. ... Some officers are, however, saying, 'It's just a pain having to come back every five minutes to go and record something before I go off and do the next job. I just want to be out there doing it, just give me the technology.' (Chris Haselden)

Lessons

The police is clearly a challenging setting in which to make use of social technology, yet one in which there are equally very clear gains to be had. Restrictions for security and budgetary reasons make the adoption of new technology slower, and the fact that negative views from staff struggling with organisational changes can overpower any more positive, upbeat uses.

Finding the time to send updates and engage with people through another channel is a challenge, especially for senior leaders. But the more interesting point of learning on senior leaders' involvement in social media regards how their input is viewed. In the case of Devon and Cornwall Police, there is still a reliance on this, which is a legacy of a command-and-control culture. But as much as changing this will open up the potential to use social media more effectively, in a circular way social media is

also being used to help inculcate more distributed leadership. Senior leaders' role in encouraging experts throughout the organisation to step up to the plate is an important part of this.

Interestingly, social networking has been a more natural or easier fit externally with the public than internally across the organisation. Certainly, the discussions that happen externally on Facebook and Twitter tend to be more positive, whereas the internal conversations often reflect gripes with organisational change. Further, the public's desire to engage with the police through social media is strong. Although the police do not encourage social media to be used in place of 999 calls, there is felt to be a certain inevitability about the medium being used in this way.

“You've opened a channel, you can't then ignore it. The fact is that the users might want to use it differently from the way we use it. ... Within minutes of [the 2013 helicopter crash in Vauxhall] happening, there were photos posted on social media before the police knew about it. I can't see how you can get any more emergency or as quick as that.”
(Reuben Millard)

Acknowledgements

Chris Haselden, Director of Human Resources, Devon and Cornwall Police

Jon Back, Chief Inspector Leadership and Workforce Development, Devon and Cornwall Police

Mark Hurford, Resourcing Team Leader, Devon and Cornwall Police

Nikki Cann, Internal Communications Support Officer, Devon and Cornwall Police

Reuben Millard, Web Design and Digital Media Officer, Devon and Cornwall Police



Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
151 The Broadway London SW19 1JQ UK
Tel: +44 (0)20 8612 6200 Fax: +44 (0)20 8612 6201
Email: cipd@cipd.co.uk Website: cipd.co.uk
Incorporated by Royal Charter Registered charity no.1079797