

Second Edition

Strategic Internal Communication for Complex Organisations

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Chapter 1: Internal communication in the age of social media

At a time when it's never been easier to access information, the role of the internal communicator has become even more complex.

With staff bombarded with messages from a variety of sources, there is a pressing need to have someone make sense of it all and place it into context. Corporate communicators must also be data interpreters, shining a guiding light through the confusing haze of conflicting and competing information. Employees are looking to their supervisors and their organisation's senior management to set clear direction and provide an official version of events. Where that is not forthcoming, they have plenty of other options – many of them far less official – to fill in the blanks.

At the same time, organisations have access to a dizzying array of tools, not only to disseminate information and encourage staff collaboration across the organisational structure divide, but also to cross the fuzzy boundary into empowering workers to become internal communicators in their own right. Those charged with the task of internal communication must come to terms with the available technology and decide how it best fits their business. They must also balance the new with the old, and cater for staff who are less ready to embrace the new media age. They must negotiate the minefield of shifting organisational culture as social networking tools place new pressure on traditional structures. And all the while they must not lose sight of the principles of

communication, ensuring messages are clear and sincere, and reflected in the behaviour of the organisation's leaders.

Internal communication is more important now than ever

It has always made very good sense for an organisation to keep its employees informed about major events, initiatives and issues that will impact on their work. Theoretically, an informed workforce is an empowered workforce, able to go about its business with minimal fuss. As online communication specialist Lee Hopkins writes, employees are the "single most important public you will ever engage with."¹

The advent of rapid and sophisticated worldwide communication channels has changed forever the long-held pattern of messages flowing from senior management and other 'official' sources to the passive ears of the workforce. The reality is that if an organisation's workers are not being informed from the inside, they will be hearing the news from someone else, and with breathtaking speed. Even worse, if employees are not up to date or have lost trust in their management, they can use those same rapid-fire communication channels to undermine their own organisation. Quoting Shel Holtz of Holtz Communication and Technology, Hopkins writes that "employees can overcome the worst external communications and undermine the best."

As all this communication swirls around them, staff must also cope with the sheer

volume of material thrust with every mouse click. Organisations continue to seek better ways to sift through and store data captured in the onslaught. Mark R. Nelson describes the daily assault delivered to us courtesy of the information age: "Society is being held hostage by a battery of information which threatens to exceed our ability to manage it. Information overload costs businesses and individuals valuable time, effort and additional resources... and the cost is rising."²

In *Communication and Business, Strategies and Skills*³ Judith Dwyer emphasises the importance of the various communication patterns within an organisation, from top-down communication and its focus on instructions, guidelines, management and monitoring, to upward communication and its thrust on ideas, complaints and reports, to lateral or horizontal communication across the same levels of the organisation, and diagonal communication from a lower level to a higher level in a different section.

"For business decisions to be effective and relevant, timely and appropriate information has to be obtained and communicated throughout the organisation," Dwyer says.

"The successful business or government department is the one that has effective communication both within the organisation and with customers and other organisations. In fact, information flow is crucial to any organisation and the better the flow, the more successful the company or organisation. However, a problem exists if there is too much useless information flowing through the organisation. People lose sight of what is important."

Slade and Lewis write in *Critical Communication*⁴ about the relationship between internal communication and the structure of an organisation, and how the

approach to communication impacts the organisation's culture. "Communication is the organisation's lifeblood, but its bones are the organisational structure," they state.

Their view is that the effectiveness of communication depends on the formal design of the prescribed chain of command in the organisation. A distinction is drawn between 'mechanistic' communication from a highly centralised source, and 'organic' where the control is much more diverse and communication occurs more laterally.

"Most organisations aim to strike a balance between centralisation and decentralisation. There is likely to be an inverse relation between formal and informal communication channels. The less formal the structure, the greater will be the development of informal communication channels," they write.

One could contend that the growth of social media in the workplace in the last few years has greatly muted the impact of those formal channels. Hopkins writes, "Naturally, with the advent of smart, internet-enabled mobile phones it matters very little what the 'official' company policy is: 'always on, always connected' employees of all ages simply turn to their iPhones, Blackberrys, Nokias and Samsungs when they want to get their message out, or read and contribute to what their industry peers or friends have to say."⁵

Managed well, social media tools have the potential to solve some workplace ills when it comes to communication. Dealt with poorly, they might just aggravate them. Graham Andrewartha, writing in *Be Understood or Be Overlooked: Mastering communication in the workplace*⁶ says research clearly establishes that communication gone wrong is the number one problem in many workplaces.

"There is so much literature on poor communication and its negative impact on

the workplace,” he says, adding that this is equally true of large companies spread over many sites, small family businesses, and the government and private sectors. Poor communication “wastes vast amounts of our time and is a massive hidden cost that drains a country’s gross national product. It contributes to friction, occupational health and safety incidents, lowered morale, decreased productivity and loss of employment.”

So many tools, so little time

Confronting the stampede of interactive tools and catchily-named communication products available today can be daunting and overwhelming. Identifying a starting point can seem like trying to find the end of a ball of wool that may suddenly unravel and rapidly get out of control. There are literally hundreds of websites, magazine articles and books dedicated to the subject, not to be confused with the sales pitches of companies coming forward with their latest products. Many organisations now embrace selected new media tools as part of their day-to-day business, while others dip a more cautious toe in the water and the laggards continue to resist altogether. Hopkins writes that “the need for business to communicate effectively has never gone away. But these days the channels that we have available to use are more varied and numerous than ever before.”⁷

It must be acknowledged that the arrival of new media tools has opened up an expansive array of opportunities and challenges for managers and internal communication practitioners. In the past they were limited to forms of communication including newsletters, meetings, memos, static websites and e-mails. Now, the focus is on dynamic information services and environments that encourage sharing, participation and collaboration. In the time

between researching and publishing this report, those tools will have mushroomed and new names and initiatives will be on the market, so this document is not intended to be a comprehensive guide or even an attempt to produce a current list. However, here are some relevant examples:

- **Blogs** – websites allowing managers and employees to publish their own comments, with the content presented in reverse chronological order so you can see how the conversation has unfolded;
- **Wikis** – web pages that can be edited collaboratively;
- **Social networking sites** – online places where people or organisations can create a profile for themselves and exchange information, in a diverse variety of formats, with others;
- **Microblogging platforms** – allowing users to post short updates on what they are doing, for example, Twitter;
- **Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds** – allowing users to subscribe to sites or blogs of interest, and have updated content delivered to them;
- **Podcasts** – described by Cook and Hopkins as “the automatic delivery of audio media (usually an MP3 file) via RSS to subscribers”⁸; and
- **Tagging, or folksonomies** – allowing people to add descriptive words to pages or sites so they and others can find them again.

Cook and Hopkins say people now have access to information, through text, audio and video, in a way that was impossible through sole reliance on print-based documents, e-mail or static internet websites. “The new web tools are cheap (often free), easy to use and fast to produce. Communicating can become seamlessly

integrated with your 'regular' workload. Everyone can communicate – not just the corporate communications team!”

There are some compelling reasons for internal communication practitioners to integrate one or many of these tools into their strategies:

- The ability to interact with large segments of the workforce quickly and cheaply;
- Employees will increasingly come to expect it, in line with their social networking activities outside the workplace. According to an October 2009 whitepaper by IT security firm MessageLabs, “People now come into an organisation expecting to use the internet and web-based applications, and to regularly interact with and post to networking websites – not just Facebook, YouTube and MySpace, but also sites like Digg, Slashdot, del.icio.us, Reddit, StumbleUpon, the list is endless. There is now huge pressure on IT departments to allow access to Web 2.0 technologies such as Instant Messaging, Voice over IP (VoIP), RSS feeds, webmail and so on”⁹; and
- If an organisation is not providing clear information about its vision and activities, staff can easily find unofficial versions elsewhere.

On the other hand, executives are likely to feel nervous about the interactivity of the tools and the fact that they encourage user-generated content. Is it desirable to open up the potential for negative comments about the chief executive (CEO) to appear on the corporate blog? Will the internal communication section lose control of the corporate message? What if negative content finds its way into the external environment? The answers to those questions depend largely on the culture of the individual

organisation and the willingness to take risks. Baltatzis, Ormrod and Grainger cite a 2007 study of 200 companies in Ontario that “found that 46 per cent of these firms explicitly block access to such (social networking) sites; while 49 per cent tolerate employee use of such sites, and a rather small 3 per cent encourage their use.”¹⁰

Communication experts interviewed for Part Two of this report argue that despite the range and sophistication of today’s tools, the basics of internal communication have not changed. There must still be a clear, consistent and sincere message with a focus on communicating with people as individuals. The tools are there to assist the process as required but should not be an end in themselves. In other words, the psychology must drive the technology, rather than the other way around.

That leads to an even greater distinction between the overarching word ‘communication’ and the plural form, ‘communications’, which relates to the individual tools. According to Cielens and Aquino in *The Business of Communicating* “the singular word ‘communication’, refers to the process of communicating... The plural word ‘communications’, refers to the technology, the organisations that deal with message transmission, and the electrical and mechanical systems used to carry messages.”¹¹

Balancing the old and the new

Which tools are most appropriate for specific types of information? Some of the traditional forms of communication still hold their own, depending on the type of message to be sent. TJ and Sandar Larkin of Larkin Communication Consulting suggest that while web-based communication is ideal for short, quick information retrieval, it still falls behind paper-based methods for anything involving new, long, complicated ideas.¹²

They argue that a person's level of online comprehension has nothing to do with their age, but everything to do with the distraction of links. "The Web's use of hyperlinks is the reason for its lower comprehension," they write. "Links focus the mind on navigating, squeezing out the mental energy left for comprehending."

The Larkins recommend paper-based communication for strategic changes in business direction, new software systems and changes to benefit plans. However, they say formal communication, whether through large meetings, e-mails or other methods, does not change employee behaviour. To overcome resistance to change, the preferred method has to be face-to-face communication.

"Choose face-to-face communication when you need to overcome employee resistance. More than 50 years of research into how words change behaviour is clear: People change their behaviour when someone in their group whom they know and trust adopts the new behaviour and recommends it to the others," they write.

Even without taking the plunge into newer forms of social media, combining print and online communication can be an easy and effective way of adding interest to organisational newsletters and other previously static forms. It can be as simple as adding supplementary content to a newsletter story by referring staff to the intranet. For example, a story about an employee doing something out of the ordinary can point staff to the portal, where they can view a video of the person in action. The story can take on a new dimension and attract added interest through the use of basic media tools.

The importance of leadership

All the best tools in the world will not be effective if an organisation is lacking in the fundamental qualities of leadership.

While upward and lateral communication is important and becoming increasingly accepted, there is no doubt the communication agenda of the organisation is set by the behaviour of its leaders. Not only does the organisation or team leader hold a large share of responsibility for what is said, when it is said and how it is expressed, the management style at the top also impacts on the level and quality of feedback flowing from the workforce.

According to Dwyer, "Successful upward communication is very difficult to achieve because it is often impeded by the egos of supervisors, a lack of incentive to put forward ideas, and a poor response to previous upward communication."¹³

Karen Le Rossignol lists her definition of the qualities of a good communicator:¹⁴

- They usually care how others will react to their messages;
- They can explain complex ideas simply and directly;
- They don't prejudge or stereotype people, because they listen well;
- They are aware of the non-verbal signals of both the people they communicate with, and themselves;
- They can see situations from other people's perspectives;
- They help each individual to feel important, to feel that their message is being understood;
- They are sensitive to feedback and will vary their communications to match; and
- It is a pleasure working with them.

Andrewartha writes that in a majority of surveys, most senior managers think the communication in their organisation is quite effective. An examination of the content alone, or the amount of information disseminated, seems to bear this out. Yet the

reality can be very different. "The answer lies in the nature of the communication. The content of the message has been communicated, often quite clearly. But it is the way in which the message has been presented that causes the problem. The meaning is missing."¹⁵

Andrewartha says the message may be ambiguous, or interpreted as deceitful, unfair, inconsiderate, thoughtless or unkind. The speaker needs to mean what they say and to value the message themselves, while the recipient must have some shared understanding of the meaning being conveyed. Highly negative practices include threats, yelling, e-mailing complicated information or delivering the message in a casual or humorous way so that it is not taken seriously. He believes poor communication "is the biggest cause of conflict in the workplace; conflict which is not always obvious. It is the leading symptom of poor managers and ineffective leaders."

Shel Holtz cites a United States (US) study carried out by a human resources firm, Novation, where more than 2,000 human resources (HR) practitioners surveyed gave senior executives a poor rating in the communication stakes.¹⁶ Asked to rank the effectiveness of senior management's communication with employees, the participants gave nearly half a C or poorer result. Reasons cited included relying too much on e-mail, assuming one message was adequate, and not having appropriate feedback mechanisms.

Holtz says the result is no surprise whatsoever, given the scant resources most organisations allocate to internal communication and the fact that most managers have risen through the ranks because of their technical skills, not their talents in communication. "Employees are not promoted into jobs with supervisory

responsibilities based on their communication skills," he says. "Rather, the promotion track eventually leads to a job with managerial responsibilities, after which few companies require managers to complete any kind of communication skills training."

Jay Coleman, Chair of the International Association of Business Communicators' Excellence in Communication Awards, says good leaders must possess the ability to clearly communicate the company's vision, setting a clear path so employees know where the organisation is going, how the leader intends to get there, and what part the workers will play in that.¹⁷ He also believes it's crucial for the leader to have a personal connection with the rest of the workforce. "Are these leaders truly in touch with their employees' needs and concerns?" he asks.

He argues that the best leaders will have a real interest, even a passion, for communication. Rather than waiting for advice from their communication team, they will often be the ones suggesting new techniques, and they work to ensure communication happens in an honest and credible way. At the same time, they face the challenge of balancing the demands of their role with the need to connect with their staff.

Coleman says it's a matter of looking at the mix and affirming that communication with staff and other audiences is so important that it deserves the required time and attention. A good leader will believe, "I can't shirk my communication responsibility, it's so key to how we run this company," he says.

In addition to the need to drive communication from the top, best practice organisations have realised some social networking tools lend themselves particularly well to upward communication. The *Wall*

Street Journal uses the example of the international retail company Best Buy, which “learned the hard way that rank-and-file employees – not bosses – determine the fate of clever-sounding software tools designed to share knowledge within big organisations. Best Buy’s bosses have bought several such tools and urged employees to embrace them.” The tools were not widely used, and instead front-line employees created their own site for sharing “tips, gripes and personal interests. It’s proven far more popular than its management-driven predecessors.”¹⁸

The opening up of lateral communication channels enables organisations to expand their internal communication firepower. Bill Quirke of Synopsis Communication Consulting suggests creating a network of all staff across the business who have any sort of role in employee communication. This can avoid duplication, reduce cost and improve message consistency.¹⁹

He writes that at Vodafone, the internal communication network involved quarterly meetings for planning and developing best practice. “Rather than simply swapping good ideas, network members identify the key areas of internal communication they need to develop, such as face-to-face communication, communication skills for managers and measurement. They agree which operating company will develop a solution, which will then be piloted in one market before being transferred to the others. This means that the global centre’s role is to foster collaboration, rather than be the source of all wisdom.”

Measuring communication results

Does internal communication make a significant difference to an organisation’s performance? Some experts believe the

majority of organisations will never know, because they do not measure the impact of their employee communication activities.

However, according to a December 2007 survey by global human resources and finance firm Watson Wyatt, companies with the most effective communication programmes had a 47 per cent higher total return to shareholders from 2002 to 2006, compared with companies that communicated least effectively.²⁰

The study identified that high-performing companies demonstrated the following practices:

- Focusing managers and other employees on customer needs;
- Engaging employees in running the business;
- Helping managers communicate effectively;
- Leveraging the talents of internal communicators to manage change effectively;
- Measuring the impact of employee communication; and
- Branding the employee experience.

“Top-performing companies treat communication as a key business driver,” said Kathryn Yates, Watson Wyatt’s global director of communication consulting, in a company media release.

Making an impact on the bottom line or achieving some other significant outcome starts with motivating employees to act in a different way. In Chapter 7, Rodney Gray of Employee Communication & Surveys expands on his argument that “the ultimate success or otherwise of communication depends on how far it moves employee behaviour.”²¹ He believes that while most corporate communicators understand the importance of measurement, they don’t carry out true evaluation of the contribution their

internal communication efforts make to the organisation.

Conducting evaluation might be seen by some as an additional workload for internal communicators already struggling to get adequate resources, but it can also be a powerful tool for gaining more focus on the communication function. Kim Harrison of Cutting Edge PR suggests specifically measuring the communication performance of the CEO, given that trust in the leader or management team is critical to employee satisfaction.²² He puts forward the following methods:

- Testing supervisor and manager understanding of issues;
- Employee surveys, which measure the CEO directly or give an upward appraisal on communication;
- Telephone follow-up to staff about CEO presentations; and
- E-mail feedback response systems to assess the extent to which issues are understood and accepted by employees

Whether through lack of resources, difficulty formulating ways to measure some of the intangible benefits of communication or lack of appreciation for the value of measurement itself, it seems there is much more work to be done in the area of evaluation. Organisations would do well to further investigate the benefits, which could throw some new light on their overall performance.

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