

Strategic Internal Communication for Complex Organisations

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Executive summary

FOR THOSE who take on the challenge of managing employee communication within organisations, the task has never been tougher. At a time of national skill shortage in Australia, there's more urgency than ever in trying to retain good staff. There's the great debate concerning the Baby Boomers and X and Y generations, and whether the different outlook of younger workers requires a fresh approach to organisational communication. Then, of course, communicators face the massive influx of new technology and tools, and all the opportunities and dilemmas that come with them.

This report examines these key challenges, and explores how a diverse range of organisations are dealing with them. It taps into the latest thinking from communication experts around the world, and presents the views of some Australian industry leaders. It poses the question; is internal communication now more about technology than psychology?

There's no denying that with the onslaught of technology, the complexity of the internal communicator's role has shifted up many gears. What was a simple choice of channels a few years ago involving e-mail, newsletters, CEO talks and the like, has exploded into a dizzying array of social media tools such as wikis, blogs, podcasts and tweets, to name but a few. With such a complex menu of tools, it's hardly surprising the channels themselves have taken on a life of their own.

At the same time, the basics of internal communication have not altered. Some experts warn of the danger of focusing too much on the tools, and ignoring the

fundamentals of building good relationships and fostering trust within the organisation. That is never more the case than during times of crisis or major organisational change. While enthusiasts at one end of the technological spectrum wax lyrical about the benefits of social media inventions, those on the opposite side urge caution and emphasise the importance of face-to-face communication. Many organisations examined during research for this report are striking a healthy balance and gradually introducing new media channels to their internal communication repertoire.

The report is presented in three parts. Part one provides an overview of the key issues facing internal communication practitioners today. The first chapter considers some of the dilemmas of the technological age and looks at how the entire landscape has changed in a very short period of time. It canvasses expert opinions on the value or otherwise of a range of new tools, highlights the importance of leadership and measurement in communication, and considers whether the focus on new channels has meant a diminishing emphasis on broader internal communication strategy.

The second chapter of part one continues this theme, looking at some of the latest thinking and international research on new media tools. How are these new channels being applied, and what are the main obstacles to their effectiveness?

The third chapter goes back to basics, and underlines the benefits of face-to-face communication. It highlights the dangers of relegating this method to the "old fashioned" box, and gives examples of situations when personal communication is the most effective channel.

Chapter four examines another basic aspect of solid organisational communication; building trust within a workforce. It evaluates some of the many options available within organisations to bring about a positive cultural shift and discusses the barriers to building and maintaining trust.

The fifth chapter covers a vital area for all internal communicators; communicating during organisational change. It taps into expert thinking to consider how newer tools can be introduced to enhance, not detract from, effective communication at times of turmoil within a business or agency. An important aspect here is that the communication channels are serving a higher purpose, a means to an end, not an end in themselves.

The final chapter of part one considers a highly topical issue; generational needs in the modern workforce. Do Generation Y workers really have a completely different attitude to communication than their more senior colleagues? How can an organisation ensure staff of all ages have access to consistent information when the channels appear to be diverging so radically?

Part two of the report considers a range of expert opinions, from those fully wedded to the technological revolution to those who advise caution and a re-focusing on traditional methods.

Advice from leading Australian communication experts covers such issues as dealing with cynicism, the need for a genuine desire for change before internal communication really works, the crucial role of the person at the helm of the organisation, and technology making internal communication even more important than it has been in the past.

The final section contains a series of case studies, examining how diverse

organisations have taken on specific internal communication challenges. Some case studies relate to the introduction of specific technology, while others discuss broader issues impacting on today's internal communication practitioners.

Some of the documented strategies are award winners. Others simply represent organisations quietly going about their business. Whether they relate to the education sector, to a high-tech environment, to the police force or to an international oil company, all the case studies have a common thread as practitioners strive to come to terms with the many challenges of today's internal communication environment.