Every organisation, irrelevant of size, industry, product or service, requires some level of internal communications. Effective communications is the make or break factor for a business. Communications is an essential tool not just for staff socialisation but for delivering effective problem-solving and decision-making.
1. WHAT IS EFFECTIVE INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS?

1.1 The purpose of internal communications

Internal comms has been proven to play a significant role in helping to cultivate values and behaviours. Smaller businesses may deliver internal communications on a more ad-hoc basis, but leaders in larger enterprises have identified the significant benefits of delivering a structured internal communications strategy where the most effective communication methods are adopted and executed.

When delivered effectively, internal communication not only works as a function to deliver communication, but it has shown to significantly improve employee productivity and performance, encouraging employees to be committed both to their brand and their business goals.

According to the Towers Watson Communication ROI Study Report (1), companies that were highly effective communicators had 47% higher total returns to shareholders over a five year period, compared with firms that were the least effective communicators.

Delivering an effective internal communications strategy can be a substantial driver in setting one company apart from another, giving them a competitive advantage. By working strategically to select the most effective channels and messages, to not only inform but to enthuse each and every employee to deliver business goals is becoming an increasingly important process.

“Effective internal communications can keep employees engaged in the business and help companies retain key talent, provide consistent value to customers, and deliver superior financial performance to shareholders”

Watson Wyatt (Towers Watson)

1.2 The changing role of internal communications

Internal communication is changing. Not so long ago, the majority of internal communication was delivered either through the HR function or seemingly placed in a back-seat position. However, with the growing realisation that effective internal communications can directly influence employee engagement, the role of internal communications has more recently been propelled into the foreground and is becoming ever more visible within organisations. With shifting business practices, an increasingly competitive marketplace and the impact of new technology development, internal communication practices are constantly having to adapt to meet the needs of this changing landscape.

Over the last decade, we have seen a significant shift from PC-based activity to smartphone-based activity. The advances in technology and the meteoric adoption of smartphones have not only fundamentally altered the way we communicate, but have also shifted our expectations both at home and in a work environment.

Source: (1) 2009/2010 Towers Watson Communication ROI Study Report: Capitalizing on effective communication. Five Year period referred to covers the period from mid-2004 to mid-2009
Employees have become familiar with interacting with technology using a two-way communication model. They have instant access to mobile communication and a growing desire to interact with it.

The adoption of smartphone technology into our daily lives has had a significant impact on the employee, who no longer feels fulfilled to simply receive information from their employer via a one-way communication model. The new employee craves the opportunity to feedback, add value and gain a deeper understanding into exactly what their contribution to the company is. The employee wants to be more involved and more participatory. This has led to a shift in the balance of power from employer to employee.

Research has shown that employees regularly cite poor communication as one of the main reasons for disengagement at work, including mentioning the feeling they are not given sufficient opportunity for feedback and two-way communication.

When given the opportunity, employees are now contributing content in the form of blogs, videos & pictures, asking questions or sharing ideas, transferring knowledge and driving collaboration within an internal social communication platform. This is not only helping to deepen employee engagement, but employees themselves are increasingly becoming brand advocates, supporting the external marketing function. Employee generated content (EGC) is gaining popularity, in part because it can relieve the pressure on ICs for generating content and also because it gives employees a voice in a space where hierarchy doesn’t influence thought or expression.

Smartphones are emerging as the US population’s preferred device for communications, with already 77% smartphone penetration. Given the employee’s desire for two-way communication with their employer, it’s hardly surprising that mobile apps are starting to emerge as not just a viable but a highly effective channel for distributing internal communications.

Although internal communication professionals are beginning to realise the capabilities that mobile apps can offer, they are still in their infancy when compared to the more traditional methods of communication.

Results taken from The App Garden Employee Engagement Survey (1) showed that although mobile apps are beginning to emerge as a means of keeping employees updated on company news and events, currently only 14% are using them for this purpose. Email remains the preferred choice (85%) and intranet as the second choice (78%). Other methods being used include more traditional magazines, newsletters and face to face meetings, along with a growing popularity of ESNs.

This instantly raises a concern of how organisations are communicating with their growing non-desk employee (NDE) sector, who may not have their own email or access to a computer.

However, when looking to the near future, 47% of the businesses surveyed stated they were planning to launch an internal communications, or employee engagement app within the next 3 years or had already done so. This goes some way to demonstrating how apps are being considered an increasingly important part of an internal communications strategy and have moved into the early majority phase of technology adoption.

Source: (1) The App Garden Employee Engagement Survey March 2015
(2) Nielsen Mobile Insights survey March 2015


1.3 Measuring the effectiveness of internal communications

Measurement of communications is essential for organisations to quantify the effectiveness and value of their internal communications. The aim of measuring communications is to highlight how effective communications affects employee awareness and behaviour, and most importantly how they support the wider business goals.

For the IC professional, putting precise measurable objectives in place for each and every communication will facilitate the measuring of those actions.

Organisations that are less effective communicators have been reported to be up to three times as likely, as highly effective communicators, to have no formal measurements of communication effectiveness in place, (1).

IC professionals agree that the measurement of their work is critical. However, according to Our Social Times (2), 56% are not measuring either the efficiency or the cost of their internal comms.

Part of the issue is there is no real standardisation of metrics across the board and there is a general overriding feeling that data, statistics and analytics are a complex field. Advances are taking place in the evaluation of the effectiveness of internal communications, nonetheless, it is generally agreed that improved evaluation methods are needed to fully gauge the effectiveness of communications and their direct result on ROI.

Employee surveys are one of the most widely used communication measurement tools. Gaining employee feedback in this quantitative form is proven to be an effective measurement tool for both internal and external benchmarking. Surveys are typically circulated either on an annual, monthly, pulse or ad-hoc basis and can capture relevant information such as the level of employee engagement, how the employee is relating to the company and the workforce’s shifting feelings and attitudes.

When carrying out staff surveys, encouraging participation from staff can be one of the greatest challenges. Poor response rates, insufficient or unclear information and a failure to use the survey to drive actions are just some of the reported issues. Although provided surveys are carefully structured and effectively delivered and measured, they can be used to great effect.

Integrating staff surveys into an internal communications app enables the simple delivery and distribution of the survey through an engaging, intuitive, technologically-driven solution. And it enables easy capture of data. In addition, surveys can be targeted to specific employees or groups of employees and can collect information from individuals based on demographics or preferences. This information can then be used to target certain groups or the particular preferences of groups at a later stage. Push notifications can be used to remind those employees who have not yet completed the survey to take action.

In addition to the quantitative measures of communication effectiveness which can be collated through the staff survey, qualitative communication measurement can be equally important. Face-to-face contact and focus groups are frequently considered the best option for qualitative communication measurement. The less formal two-way communication solution offered by internal social networks (e.g. Jive or Yammer) have become increasingly important in this area. Organisations with highly effective communication departments are considerably more likely to have processes in place to measure the effectiveness of their social networks.

Discussion forums can be initiated through internal social media to explore particular issues or ideas. Although there is currently no formal tool for gathering social metrics; thoughts, ideas and opinions can be monitored and used to gather qualitative results to include data such as number of views, posts, likes or comments.
COMING SOON...
PART 2: HOW THE FUTURE OF WORK AFFECTS INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

In part 2 we will be discussing a hot topic right now - the future of work - and how that is expected to impact internal communications. Key areas that will be addressed include catering for the non-desk based workforce, the millenial generation, BYOD and internal social behaviour.

Keep an eye out for Part 2 in your inbox, coming soon!

You can also keep up to date with the latest in internal comms and employee engagement from our twitter feed.

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