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Employee communication

Learn about building an effective internal communication strategy, from tailoring communications and engaging line managers to using social media and developing two-way dialogue.

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Employee communication is an essential part of business and HR's role. Effective internal communication is important for developing trust within an organisation and is shown to have significant impact on employee engagement, organisational culture and, ultimately, productivity. Yet CIPD research suggests that many employees feel they receive limited or very little information. To be successful, communication needs management support, a clear strategy and evaluation.

This factsheet explores the role internal communication plays in developing engaged employees, achieving organisational objectives and supporting business strategy and change. It examines the components of an effective communication strategy, including the role of line managers, social media and two-way or multi-directional dialogue. Finally, it takes a closer look at planning and tailoring communications as well as roles and responsibilities in an effective communications strategy.

CIPD viewpoint

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Effective communication is a vital part of developing transparency in organisations, especially in the context of damaged trust in business and the wider world of work following numerous corporate scandals. Clear and consistent internal messaging is also needed as the nature of organisations and their workforces continues to change, driven by factors including technology and diversity of employment contracts. Good employee communication will help people to understand their organisation's purpose and strategy, identify with the organisation's values, and develop a sense of belonging by understanding how their role contributes to the wider purpose. Workers are more likely to contribute more and feel committed if there's a culture of open communication.

A successful communication strategy depends on the full support of senior leaders. Rather than being a 'top down' exercise, there needs to be two-way and multi-directional dialogue, so that people have meaningful opportunities to feed their views upwards and discuss them with colleagues. This is central to developing more effective and agile organisations, through innovation and responding to operational issues.

What is employee communication?

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This factsheet looks at internal rather than external communication - it may be helpful to read it in conjunction with our factsheet on [employee voice \(https://www.cipd.co.uk:443/knowledge/fundamentals/relations/communication/voice-factsheet/\)](https://www.cipd.co.uk:443/knowledge/fundamentals/relations/communication/voice-factsheet/) which covers the history of employee involvement, the mechanisms of two-way communications, and its potential benefits. Our factsheets on [employee engagement \(https://www.cipd.co.uk:443/knowledge/fundamentals/relations/engagement/factsheet/\)](https://www.cipd.co.uk:443/knowledge/fundamentals/relations/engagement/factsheet/) and [employer brand \(https://www.cipd.co.uk:443/knowledge/fundamentals/people/recruitment/brand-factsheet/\)](https://www.cipd.co.uk:443/knowledge/fundamentals/people/recruitment/brand-factsheet/) are also relevant.

Effective internal communications is at the heart of achieving business outcomes and it's something the whole organisation is responsible for. It supports the organisation's smooth running, successful change programmes and good leadership on vision, strategy and values.

Why does communication with employees matter?

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Communication is a critical aspect of employee engagement, which in turn promotes better performance, employee retention and well-being. Employees are more engaged when information flows freely and they're aware of organisational activities and management decisions that affect their jobs. It's also important for developing trust-based relationships between managers and staff, by demonstrating to workers that they are valued members of the organisation and are treated with respect.

However, despite the need for communication to be high up the agenda in all organisations, our [Spring 2017 Employee Outlook](http://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/relations/engagement/employee-outlook-reports/) survey found that two-fifths of employees said they receive either limited information or none at all when it comes to their organisation's strategy.

Challenges in effective organisational communication can lie across all areas of the system. Faced with change and complexity, senior leaders often struggle to communicate clearly and authentically about where the organisation is going and the impact on employees. Equally, managers can lack the skills, confidence and time needed to communicate well with their teams. Further, traditional 'static' intranets are often unwieldy and content-heavy; not designed for employee usability and this is a particular problem for people who're used to personalised, on-demand content in their private lives.

Principles of an effective employee communications strategy

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A truly effective approach to internal communication will be cohesive and strategic, and supports a culture of trust and openness. Our research report [Harnessing the power of employee communication](http://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/hr-learn-develop-database/) argues that successful communication:

- is built on a shared sense of purpose and aligned to business strategy
- receives attention and support from senior leadership
- is driven by genuine dialogue
- is part of the expectation of good people management
- draws on a range of digital channels and tools
- is reviewed and assessed for effectiveness.

We explored the principles that can enable two-way relationships between people and organisations and their role in delivering sustainable value creation for multiple stakeholders in our research report [From best to good practice HR: developing principles for the profession](http://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/strategy/hr/good-practice-report/).

The role of senior leaders and people managers

Senior leaders are a key communication channel to employees as well as the embodiment of the organisation. Where resources permit, communications professionals should partner with leaders to help them be authentic, clear and inclusive in their communication.

Good communication from senior leaders supports employees in their roles and wider organisational performance. Sharing information helps employees to make decisions and be effective in their work, and encourages them to communicate with and learn from one another.

The Winter 2015/16 edition of our [HR Outlook: Leaders' views of our profession](http://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/strategy/hr/outlook-reports/) survey report found that lack of employee trust in their organisation is one of the top five challenges identified by both HR and business leaders. The [2017 HR Outlook](http://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/strategy/hr/outlook-reports/) survey found just over a third of HR professionals believe managing difficult conversations is one of the main leadership skills needed by their organisation over the next three years, and over a quarter said the same for communicating their strategy and what it means in practice. Previous CIPD research reported in [Where has all the trust gone?](http://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/culture/ethics/has-trust-gone-report/) highlights the key role of communication in improving trust in senior leaders and organisations, including using open and honest language about the challenges being faced in the organisation.

Using social technology

Static intranets are increasingly seen as out of date and unwieldy repositories of information. In their place, or alongside them, social media is being used as a more effective communication tool.

Enterprise social networks (which work like an in-house Facebook) are a potentially game-changing shift in how internal communications work. Already, some organisations are seeing benefits from internal social media in:

- enabling employee interaction and a sense of unity
- quickly resolving operational issues, especially across a dispersed workforce
- encouraging collaboration across teams or departments
- giving employees greater voice
- gaining insight into issues that affect employees and their work.

Communication technology is a market in which new players are emerging fast. When looking at which type of system or technology will work best for an organisation, it's important to carefully consider what employees throughout the organisation need to do and what help they need to achieve it.

Two-way and multi-directional dialogue

The principle of two-way and responsive communication is extremely important. Good two-way communication supports the psychological contract and employee engagement, as employees feel listened to and valued. See more on the [psychological contract](https://www.cipd.co.uk/443/knowledge/fundamentals/relations/employees/psychological-factsheet/) (<https://www.cipd.co.uk/443/knowledge/fundamentals/relations/employees/psychological-factsheet/>) in our factsheet.

However, with the advent of enterprise social networks, communication is increasingly becoming not only two-way, but multi-directional. Employees can share their views with colleagues at the same time as feeding them 'upwards' and quickly receive responses from colleagues or leaders in any part of the organisation. As our research report [Social media and employee voice](http://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/work/technology/employee-voice-report/) (<http://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/work/technology/employee-voice-report/>) argues, this marks a significant shift in the workings and impact of internal communications.

Assessing communications effectiveness

There are two key levels for evaluating communications effectiveness:

- **Overall culture of communication within the organisation** - one effective way to measure this is to ask questions about communication in the regular employee attitude survey, for example covering:
 - whether employees feel fully informed
 - regularity and consistency of communication
 - employees' sense they're listened to
 - trust in leadership.
- **Success against specific objectives** - when launching a communications campaign it's important to establish what the aim is, for example, awareness about a particular initiative or a change in perceptions or behaviour. Once the objective is established, it's possible to measure whether the campaign makes a difference.

Communications planning

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Specific communication strategies

When facing organisational change, there's a huge benefit to be gained from developing considered communications plans that look at the appropriate timing, content, style and channels to be used. For example, our research report [The impact of mergers and acquisitions on employer brands](http://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/hr-learn-develop-database/) (<http://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/hr-learn-develop-database/>) found that there's a need to consider:

- regularity and consistency of communication
- honesty and straight talking
- clarity about the customer message.

Channel and message selection

Communications planning should start with the outcome – what do you want the audience to think, feel or do based on the communication? This gives a good basis on which to select appropriate messaging and channels.

Some methods of communication tend to be top-down, such as all-staff presentations or team briefings. Others, such as group meetings or online discussion forums, provide more opportunity for dialogue.

When dialogue is required it's important that the method chosen for communication both stimulates this two-way approach and generates an appropriate level of discussion. For example, while an enterprise social network may work well for some discussions, other more sensitive or targeted issues will benefit from face-to-face individual or group meetings. It's also important that communication channels address the diversity of individual needs in the workforce, including remote or part-time workers, or those who may feel more comfortable having one-to-one conversations rather than large group meetings.

Digital technology has transformed the range of options available for communicating with employees. However, not all employees will habitually use tools such as intranets and social networks, so communicators should consider the range of channels at their disposal, matching them with how people in the target audience prefer to receive information and communicate.

Tailoring communications

Some organisations segment employees so they can tailor communications to different audiences. This can be both for the styles of communication and the channels used – for example, using the intranet for employees who have computer access, but other approaches for employees who don't.

Organisational size is also an important factor and may be more complex in a multi-national organisation than in a single site establishment, especially where different languages and cultures are involved.

Roles and responsibilities in communication

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In large organisations, internal communications departments play a central role in developing the communication strategy, creating and curating information and enabling the flow of communication across the organisation. HR professionals need to work with internal communications specialists to ensure clear and timely communication around people management and employment issues. L&D professionals need to oversee and support the relevant skills development.

Senior leaders set the tone for communication across the organisation, both in terms of outlining the strategy and purpose, and in their own communication style and approach.

Managers are the front line of communication with employees. They need to understand the importance of communicating and listening, have the skills required, be willing to enter into dialogue with employees and be prepared to address difficult situations and have courageous conversations.

Finally, all employees play a role in ensuring effective communications. Sharing, learning, listening and collaboration between employees is increasingly becoming key to an organisation's success and adaptability.

Useful contacts and further reading

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Contacts

Acas - Employee communications and consultation (<http://www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=663>)

Books

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