

Internal Communication

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E-mail and Internal Communication: Enemies or Allies?

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E-mail and internal communication: enemies or allies?

Consultant Paul Hewitt argues that whilst e-mail and internal communications are not natural bedfellows, new evidence has emerged, which suggests that e-mail can contribute to internal communications objectives...if used according to a new three-factor model

There are two major developments happening in organisations across the globe right now, which are highly significant for communicators – and for business.

Firstly, electronic mail (e-mail) is threatening to overtake face-to-face communication as the preferred communication tool in the workplace; studies charting use of e-mail have reported a year-on-year increase in the average number of minutes employees spend using it.

But whilst e-mail undoubtedly has found its place, and few would argue that it helps them to do their jobs more efficiently, concern over its prevalence in the workplace is increasing. This concern is evidenced by the growing popularity of 'e-mail free' days.

E-mails between employees and their managers situated just metres apart, 'all user' messages relevant to just a handful of recipients, and confidential notes accidentally sent to an unintended audience, are just three examples of the reasons why companies are questioning whether e-mail can do business more harm than good.

Companies are now encouraging their workers to go back to basics when it comes to relationship building; getting up from their desks and walking the corridors to colleagues.

Secondly, alongside this e-mail revolution, heads of organisations and senior executives are at last making the connection between good internal

communication and the success of their business; employee engagement is intrinsically linked to customer loyalty, satisfaction, growth and profit, and an increasing number of studies support this link.

In a recent Crystal Interactive study of internal communications in UK companies (published in the Oct/Nov issue of *Internal Communication*) researchers were able to make a connection between the quality of internal communication – specifically how they made efforts to involve their employees – and the success of the company. Moreover 51 per cent of the company representatives surveyed said that internal events can really impact on corporate performance.

And according to Crystal Interactive, a 2005 ISR study showed that companies with low levels of employee engagement saw net profit fall by 1.38 per cent over a 36-month period, and operating profit fall by 2.01 per cent.

For years organisations have focussed on and polished their external communication activities, but now, in all kinds of workplaces, internal communicators are starting to have the same kind of credibility as their counterparts in the marketing and media departments; a cursory glance at the media recruitment pages will show you there has never been a better time for internal communications professionals to start a career, go contracting, or shop around for a new employer.



AUTHOR NOTES

Paul Hewitt is a leading communications consultant who has helped devise communication strategies and tactics for Norwich Union Healthcare, BT Consulting, Parkside Housing Group and, Hampshire Fire and Rescue, among others. Paul has an MSc in Corporate Communication, and in 2006 set up consultancy Ogam ICE. www.ogam-marketing.com Tel: 07792 930980

In fact organisations across all sectors are investing in people with the right skills and knowledge to 'engage' a critical mass of staff, and public sector organisations in particular are investing in internal communications experts right now. For many, like the police and fire and rescue services, this is the first time they have brought this kind of skill in-house.

So with e-mail firmly established as an internal communications tool, and the topic of employee engagement high, or at the very least featuring on most organisations' agendas, it would seem logical that businesses would want to look at how best to harness what can be a strength, but so often today can potentially be a real danger; misuse of e-mail can cost you dear in terms of damaged reputation and relationships, and the danger comes from a lack of policies and guidelines surrounding e-mail use, and the lack of a clear strategic purpose.

Strangely though to date, little discussion has taken place around the connection between e-mail and internal communication. And where e-mail use is controlled; it is usually by the IT department and concentrates on protecting the employers' liability from e-mails that pass outside the organisation.

Perhaps e-mail's lack of richness means it does not even register on the internal communicator's radar? And why would it? Researchers describe e-mail as a lean medium, bereft of situational cues and ineffective at building relationships and facilitating a dialogue.

Bill Quirke's 'communication escalator' theory supports the view that e-mail lacks interactivity. In describing his escalator, Bill says that to create commitment and involvement from staff (getting to the top of the escalator), you must invest a great deal of time talking to staff and engaging them in a dialogue.

However whilst I remain a strong advocate of face-to-face communication, I maintain an open mind as to whether e-mail can play a part in achieving internal communications (and therefore business) objectives. The key I believe, is using it with a specific purpose in mind.

The findings of a study I conducted recently in a group of social businesses in the not-for-profit sector certainly offers some optimism around, and insight into, the potential of e-mail as a strategic internal communications tool.

The 120 employees from all levels of the organisation who took part in this study have provided what I believe to be the first evidence that e-mail could have a positive impact on internal communication - in three out of four key areas.

This study (Hewitt, P. (2006) Electronic mail and internal communication: a three-factor model, *International Journal of Corporate Communication*, Vol. 11, No. 1) looked at whether e-mail is in fact now the predominant method of communication in organisations. It also considered its impact on: 1) Communication culture; 2) Line manager-employee relationships; 3) Shared objectives and goal alignment; 4)

Perceived External Prestige - the employees' perception of how the outside world sees the company they work for

It investigated the impact of e-mail on these four key areas of internal communication through a survey of a statistically representative sample of the 500 employees of the not-for-profit organisation, and through focus groups and the keeping of diaries.

The study found that e-mail use in the organisation was prevalent; those who kept diaries ranked e-mail as a critical internal communications tool, a close second behind face-to-face communication. Interestingly they also ranked e-mail more prominently as an internal communications tool than an external one, providing further evidence that internal communicators need to start building a policy around e-mail into their strategic plan.

These findings tie in well with those of the Crystal Interactive (2006) study, which also indicated a communication process with a high dependency on e-mail. When asked how their senior team make important announcements to staff, 79 per cent of respondents cited e-mail as their answer.

Unsurprisingly the impact of e-mail overall on internal communication was found to be minimal (which makes the previous statement quite frightening). Participants in this study provided firm evidence that e-mail was far less effective at building dialogue, and therefore relationships, than face-to-face communication. And none of the top seven survey scores, those with mean scores of 1.0 or higher, related to the potential of e-mail to positively influence internal communications:

Table 1: Top seven survey scores:

- F2F communication helps me develop strong relationships (1.25)
- F2F communication is important in maintaining a strong image for this organisation (1.22)
- E-mail helps me to do my job (1.22)
- F2F communication encourages a culture of openness and trust (1.13)
- My line manager communicates effectively (1.1)
- My relationship with my line manager is strong (1.01)
- My organisation is a good company to work for (1)

N.B. Mean scores are in brackets and a score of 1.0 or higher is taken as agreement (Industrial Society, 2000).

But a deeper dive into the results highlights some interesting areas for discussion. Yes, e-mail use is more likely to reflect an organisation's culture rather than have



direct influence on it; those who took part in the study claimed to be using it well, or misusing it, according to the level of openness and trust that pre-existed.

However the study also found that e-mail can support the development of a healthy communication climate, by providing a method for employees to feed their views up to senior people; survey participants gave a mean score of 0.79 for the statement "e-mail allows me to provide feedback to management."

Giving employees the opportunity to feed their views to management via e-mail can be said to be particularly useful where no formal method for upward feedback exists, and where employees are unwilling to express their true feelings face-to-face. In the focus groups I conducted staff talked about how much more willing people were to say what they really thought through e-mail and how they welcomed a channel for upward comments which had a level of perceived anonymity. "People are much more assertive by e-mail", commented one focus group participant, "and sometimes that surprises me."

So in organisations where formal mechanisms for providing upward feedback are limited, arguably e-mail could be used to facilitate it. And this result assumes heightened importance when we look at the results of a nationwide survey of over 5,000 employees in US firms. In Argenti's (2003) survey, the biggest criticism employees had of their companies was that they did not encourage upward as well as downward communication.

I also found positive indications for e-mail use in the area of shared objectives and goal alignment. One of the key goals, if not the key goal, of internal communicators, is to increase understanding amongst staff of what they are there to do and how they contribute to the bigger picture – achieving the organisation's vision.

Whilst the study found that e-mail does not help people understand their jobs, it found it did help them understand the bigger picture. The survey results showed no positive impact of e-mail on shared objectives and goal alignment; in fact the mean scores were in the negative (disagreement) end of the scale:

- E-mail helps me understand my role in the organisation (-0.16)
- E-mail helps me understand how my role contributes to the objectives of the organisation (-0.12)

However the focus group participants were very positive about the use of e-mail to send corporate documents to staff, for example corporate plans, annual reports and staff magazines, and this is one area where the value of focus group dialogue came into play in this study.

On the basis of the focus group discussions I concluded that e-mail did not help staff understand their roles better. But it did help them understand how their roles contributed to the objectives of the organisation – the bigger picture.

Finally this study shed light on a third area where e-

mail may impact internal communication – by influencing how they view the organisation (Perceived External Prestige).

Staff tend to identify much more positively with successful organisations, and internal communicators can help this identification, therefore organisations are advised to share their successes with staff.

The focus group participants in this study argued strongly that e-mail helped the organisation to share its successes.

"I find the e-mail links to news on the intranet and the web site really helpful", remarked one participant. "It helps to keep me up-to-date with what's happening and helps me to feel involved", offered another.

The survey statements around this area of internal communication were also positive, and close to agreement:

- E-mail helps the organisation communicate its successes to staff (0.86)
- E-mail helps the organisation share its positive publicity with staff (0.88)

Whilst this study was conducted in a single organisation, it certainly provides food for thought. In a 2001 Gartner study participants were using e-mail at work for an average of 49 minutes each day. Four years on, in the e-mail study I've discussed here, participants were using e-mail at work for an average of 74 minutes each day.

One year on, I wouldn't be at all surprised to find a large number of employees today using e-mail in excess of two hours each day. Some of us are more easily distracted than others, and it's particularly difficult to get work done if you are the kind of employee who insists on abandoning the task in hand to answer every e-mail as it comes in. Monica Seeley's 'Managing in the e-mail office' offers many useful tips around e-mail discipline.

Even though the number of e-mail boxes continues to grow year on year, and organisations are inclined to suffer from the side effects of e-mail use, many organisations still do not have an agreed policy for e-mail use. Arguably they are not using this highly effective tool, one that we would not wish now to be without, to its best advantage.

E-mail is here to stay so we need to consider how to manage it before it manages us. But more than that, it offers potential as an internal communications tool if used along the lines described here.

As e-mail use grows and internal communications raises its profile, the two are on a potential collision course. I put it to you therefore, as professional communicators looking to leverage every new opportunity to help your organisation achieve its objectives, that it's time get involved in how e-mail is used. We should play a greater role in moderating its use and defining policy.

Take a look at the evidence offered here by the three-factor model for e-mail use and ask yourself this question: "Is it time you viewed a communication enemy, as a possible ally?"

