

Running an effective, internal communications department

Skills Guide

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1 Introduction

Great internal communication is key to helping organisations manage their reputation and improve their performance. Internal communication helps to set the tone for an organisation's brand internally and externally. This guide will help PR professionals in their early or mid-career to understand the purpose of an effective, internal communications department, or any individual who is embarking on running an internal communications department. This guide explores the different roles an internal communication department can play from content creation and curation, managing communication channels and understanding employee views, to driving employee engagement and managing change.

2 Learning objectives

This skills guide aims to provide essential skills for professionals involved in setting up and running an internal communications team or department. It also provides a useful overview for non-communications professionals to better understand the value of internal communication and the role of the team within your organisation.

3 Define the purpose of internal communications

There is no one-size fits all for internal communication departments. The role, purpose and structure varies from organisation to organisation. It is therefore essential to define how internal communication can help your business achieve its goals. Working with your Chief Executive and executive team will be essential in defining the scope and purpose of your internal communication department.

According to the Making It Count research study from CIPR Inside, published in November 2017, internal communicators have become recognised as “the custodians of translating strategy, company values and priorities, enabling others to understand the part they play.”

That study revealed that:

senior leaders identify a link between good internal communication and strong financial performance;

CEOs acknowledge the difficulty of measuring the effectiveness of internal communication as a contributing factor of engagement and culture;

internal communicators have earned the trust of senior leaders to develop strategic messages;

there is a need to clearly define internal communication and provide clarity on how it differs from employee engagement; and

culture has a big impact on the work and function of internal communication and can dictate how its value is perceived.

The purpose of an internal communication department can be both strategic and operational. Undoubtedly, a core part of the role of the internal communications team will be to manage channels and content that help to communicate messages and listen to your workforce. However, it can also be much broader. For example, the purpose of internal communications might be to help drive employee engagement. This can only be achieved alongside other functions, like human resources or organisational development, with a collective view of the organisation's strategy around areas like line management and reward and recognition.

Some organisations are exploring this in depth, analysing employee experience, which is an outcome of engagement. However, for most, particularly if they haven't had an internal communication

function before, they start with the basics. This is curating and creating content inside the organisation and driving employee voice. You need two-way channels in place to ensure communication is not to, but for and with employees.

4 Vision and strategy

Every great leader has a clear, compelling vision and the same applies to internal communication. Everything an internal communications function does has to link to the organisational strategy. Its purpose is to help the organisation achieve its purpose.

How can you do that? Define where you want to go with the function and include a link back to the organisation's objectives, desired outcomes and the kind of culture you want to encourage. Take time to craft a clear 'value proposition' for your team or department, explaining in clear terms why you exist and how you add value. It isn't about what you can deliver individually, but how the organisation can achieve its aims and objectives through effective internal communication.

Regardless of where internal communications sits in your organisation, the principles of motivating and inspiring staff to go the extra mile should underpin your strategy. Put employee engagement at the heart of your internal communications approach. Work in partnership with your executive and HR teams to define the organisation's employee engagement priorities and identify how internal communications will support them. If done well your employees will be your organisation's biggest advocates. The reverse is also true.

Hint: Research the Four Drivers of Employee Engagement from Engage for Success to provide a framework and structure to your thinking.

Once you have defined your vision, having a clear strategy and plan for internal communications will help ensure you are proactive. Whether you are a two-person function or a large team, work with those around you and your partners in the organisation, for example human resources, to explore and define your approach. The best strategies clearly link the objectives and desired outcomes of internal communication to the businesses goals. At the outset of thinking about your strategy spend some time researching and benchmarking what you already know, what data is available to inform your strategy? Is there any insight into what your employees think, or preferred ways of accessing information that helps them do their jobs? If this does not exist you may want to consider conducting an internal communication audit.

At its most basic the strategic planning process involves addressing six important questions:

- 01** Why are you communicating?
- 02** Who are you communicating with?
- 03** What do you want them to think, feel or do?
- 04** When should you communicate?
- 05** How should you communicate?
- 06** How will you know if your message has achieved its desired outcome?



5 SMART objectives

Setting clear and meaningful objectives is a critical part of internal communications planning. It's the basis for ensuring that you achieve the right results and are able to demonstrate your progress and where you need to work to improve. The starting point should always be the aims and objectives of the organisation itself – what is its purpose, vision, mission, strategy, values and focus? Weave the business objectives into a clear articulation of what outcomes – particularly changes in behaviour – you want to achieve and what communication objectives are going to help you achieve them. Undertake a proper situation analysis – conduct some research at the outset to understand what your audience is currently thinking, feeling, doing or saying. This enables you to know what needs to change and, therefore, what your communication needs to achieve. As communication is increasingly fragmented, it is also important to understand the external environment and impact of your communications. Your workforce will undoubtedly be using social media, so understanding how they consume and use external media is also important.

Most importantly ensure that your communication objectives are SMART:

- **Specific:** Objectives should specify what they want to achieve.
- **Measurable:** You should be able to measure whether you are meeting the objectives or not.
- **Achievable:** Are the objectives you set, achievable and attainable?
- **Realistic:** Can you realistically achieve the objectives with the resources you have?
- **Timely:** When do you want to achieve the set objectives?

6 Communication is the sister of leadership

A clear strategy, purpose and vision supported by an employee engagement approach will only succeed if the internal communications function has a good reputation with the organisation's leadership, including your senior board. Map your stakeholders – those people you need to have on side – and build relationships with them, regularly interact with them so that the internal communications function understands the business thoroughly, delivers results and can demonstrate how it can support the businesses objectives.

Where is the right 'home' for internal communication? HR? Marketing? PR? Reporting directly to the CEO? Embedded within business units? Whatever your view, this is one topic that is guaranteed to spark debate whenever a bunch of internal communicators get together. Industry research shows that, at this point in time at least, there is very little consensus on where the function should sit within the organisational structure. HR appears to be the most popular choice, typically favoured by around 50 per cent of organisations, but there remain many organisations that feel closer alignment with externally-focused communicators is favourable.



Internal communication is multi-disciplinary in its focus – wherever it sits in your organisation, it simply cannot function effectively without the buy-in and support of a number of critical functions. Given our focus on engaging employees and influencing the day-to-day practices of leaders and line managers, HR is one of those critical links. Marketing will also be key for many organisations – particularly service-based businesses where the brand is built primarily around the behaviour of employees. Ultimately, don't get too hung up on structure – the important thing is that you partner with those functions that matter inside your organisation.

7 Developing skills and nurturing talent

It goes without saying that, in order to have a strong, effective and flexible internal communication department, you need to focus time and energy on those people who are part of it. Make sure you understand the skills and competencies of your team members and then plug the gaps by investing in some focused training from organisations like the CIPR. The Institute of Internal Communications also has a competency framework designed to help internal communicators build their knowledge skills and behaviours. <https://www.ioic.org.uk/frontpage/ioic-competency-framework>

Also understand how the internal communication skills of your entire organisation can be improved; where are the internal skills gaps of the leadership team, executives, managers, HR teams etc? Can the internal communications team add value in helping develop them? Internal communication may be in the job titles of your communications team, but it will be in the job description for most of your organisation.

8 Insight and evaluation

A commitment to measurement and evaluation is another hallmark of a great internal communications team. We have already discussed the importance of setting clear, meaningful objectives but it's equally important to then measure against them. Strong teams plan and execute internal communications based on real intelligence – about the business, about the mood of employees and, most importantly, about the behavioural changes that are prompted or influenced by their activities. Research doesn't however, have to cost the earth – there is a huge amount that can be achieved on a shoestring. Work with other areas of your business to gain insight into your workforce. For example, understand feedback from your customers and look at how your workforce are using social media. Look for ways to piggy-back existing research like the annual employee survey and get into the habit of running focus groups and conducting quick-fire 'pulse surveys'.

Tip: See the measurement matrix developed by CIPR Inside (2012) to understand the questions to ask.



9 Leaders and line managers

Leaders and line managers are your communication front line. You can have the best employee magazine in the world, or a cutting-edge intranet, but if your leaders and managers are not communicating effectively all will be lost. Focus much of your effort in these two areas as they will pay the biggest dividends. Understand the communication styles of your leaders and then coach them to play to their strengths. Help them communicate the big picture – the vision, values and direction of the organisation, and then translate what it means for their teams. Safeguard against mixed messages by keeping a lookout for a mismatch between what they say and what they do. Likewise, assess the communication skills of your line managers and develop and deliver training if they need up-skilling (many do). Help them run great meetings and facilitate dialogue and translate strategy into action. Provide the tools and the information they need to do their jobs well.

10 Internal communications in a crisis

A great internal communication team will have a good relationship with business continuity colleagues and will have a clear process of how to communicate with its workforce during a major incident or issue. This could include anything from a natural disaster like a flood to something like an IT outage. Having a clear approach and internal communication major incident plan is essential to ensure business continuity.

It's not good enough to just have a plan, it also needs to be well practiced, so if you or your team have not been involved in an exercise you may want to consider running one to practice your responses. Ensure you communicate your crisis channels regularly so employees know what will be used. For example, is there a particular number they need to store in their mobiles?

11 Integrating internal and external communications

As communication channels become increasingly fragmented and the lines between different types of communication become blurred, it is more important than ever to ensure that internal and external communications are integrated. In planning content for your internal communication, ensure you are aware and have an understanding of the broader communication landscape. In making external announcements ensure there is a plan to engage and communicate with your workforce first, wherever possible. Joined up planning across different communication disciplines is essential. When creating content, consider it from both an internal and external perspective and see if you can repurpose content or edit slightly to suit. Many organisations do this now.



12 Use of technology in internal communications

As the profession of internal communication is maturing so too is the use of technology within it. It is important for communications practitioners to have good understanding of emerging technologies and their use in internal communications and how businesses communicate with their workforce. This will involve building relationships with IT and information governance colleagues. Technology is increasingly being used for internal social media channels, web based apps that aid team working and a variety of systems that support online broadcasts. Ensuring that the internal communications function understands this technology and develops new skills alongside more traditional ones will be key to ensure the sustainability and value of internal communications for the future.

Case study: UCL Partners and NHS Digital have produced a series of case studies called #DigitalDiaries exploring how new technology is being used across healthcare to improve communications for example, Workplace, Slack, Twitter and Instagram. You can view the case studies on their website <https://uclpartners.com/introducing-digitaldiaries/>

Sources of further information

- CIPR Inside Group – <http://www.ciprinside.co.uk/>
- CIPR training on internal Communications: <https://www.cipr.co.uk/coursefinder?coursetitle=&category%5B%5D=12829>
- Liam Fitzpatrick and Klavs Valskov, 2014, Internal Communications. Kogan Page
- Lyn Smith and Pamela Mounter, 2008, Effective Internal Communication. Kogan Page
- Rachel Miller, 2017, What do CEOs think of internal communication? All Things IC 2 November (blog) Available at: <https://www.allthingsic.com/what-do-ceos-think-of-internal-communication/>

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