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*A well-oiled internal communications system is fast, reliable, and efficient and contributes substantially to workplace productivity. Achieving it takes discipline and time.*

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## Making the Most of Your Internal Communications

Earlier in my career I observed that the only formally organized internal communications function in most companies was between headquarters and the salespeople. Since then, from technology to health care, internal communications has become more formalized and more important throughout a company. The reason is obvious—as companies become larger and more complex, the need for a fast, efficient, and reliable communications system is critical to meeting overall company goals and plans. Fluid, cohesive internal communications enable companies to enact change, ensure optimal company morale, and move everyone in the same direction. Achieving it takes discipline and time, project by project. Phases include:

### *Identify the Project's Overall Goals and Stakeholders*

Every internal communications project has a unique set of goals and stakeholders who “own” the message being sent. Identifying goals is always the first step. At one major Microsoft department with a worldwide audience, for instance, the project goal was to deliver a consistent, targeted communications to the right people at the right time. Another company’s goal was to develop a tactical communications plan that would give their leaders an overall roadmap for organization changes in the next year. We had one philanthropy client who wanted to build donor awareness of their mission and continued good works, in order to promote repeat giving.

Several key people are typically involved in deciding what is to be communicated, and how: a core team who defines and shepherds the plan, as well as others within the organization who will contribute information or support to the project. We’ve found that large projects with a wide impact are well served by a Steering Committee that meets every month during planning. Stakeholders outside of your immediate department are also valuable resources for getting feedback and supporting the overall project. Identifying and involving all stakeholders early creates deeper buy-in and greater project success.

### *Evaluate the Best Vehicles for Reaching Each Audience*

The next step is to identify everyone who is to receive the communications, plus the best way to reach and engage them. This involves starting with all major departments in your company and then drilling down to specific roles (or positions)

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*An area of Microsoft's sales organization that focused on cloud computing was dispersed geographically around the world. Applying a sound internal communications plan, they improved their internal portal so sales people anywhere can now access the right information at the right time. They also started a monthly departmental web presentation, enabling them to communicate key changes, rationale, best practices, and sales force recognition in a consistent and timely way.*

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in each department. The intent is to clarify each audience's underlying needs and communication style. We look at your company's current communications distribution practices and help you explore others you might not have tried (perhaps portals or social media). Often we segment the communications into "push" and "pull" channels, depending on whether an audience should passively receive (via your push) or actively obtain (via their pull) the communications they need. Specifically, we ask:

- What are your company's key strategic issues around internal communications? What are your current specific communications challenges?
- How are audiences to engage with this initiative?
- How are they to get training about it?
- How are they to stay current?
- What vehicles do you typically use—internal portals, newsletters, departmental meetings, FAQs, emails, etc.?
- How do audiences get support when they have a question? Are there established email aliases and phone numbers?

Answering the questions above lets you leverage successful channels and change less successful ones.

#### *Design and Deploy a Communications Plan*

A communications plan is a framework that delivers consistent, up-to-date, targeted communications to the right people at the right time. A good communications plan contains detailed information such as strategies, goals, deliverables, tasks, and deadlines.

With the upfront assessment complete, we develop key strategies for the communications plan. For example, for one widely dispersed organization, we employed a strategy that included connecting sales people to the division's mission by establishing a recognition program for biggest sales wins. Through vivid stories and supporting statistics, we were able to show how the sales person contributed to overall sales goals.

Often we create a matrix that outlines the name of the program (or deliverable), audience, purpose, delivery date, status, frequency, key messages and actions, responsible team members, and dependencies. The exact matrix depends on the complexity of the project.

Another important aspect of the communications plan is to identify short-term wins and a long-term gains. For example, what are your plans in the next two quarters? Are there longer term communications investments—perhaps a new portal that should be included in next year's budget?

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*A \$2 billion West Coast health care system experienced a smoother relocation of their headquarters by systematically communicating to all stakeholders what was happening, when it was affecting various groups, and the rationale behind the change.*

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### *Set Up Clear Content Governance Procedures*

Content governance is the process by which you will evaluate what content is necessary vs. what is available, identify who writes new content and how, and create a content review plan. It's what ensures that all your materials serve their primary purpose and help meet organization goals. Questions we ask here include:

- Is there an existing mechanism that regulates the creation, approval, and distribution of content?
- What processes should be implemented to ensure that your content is always current?
- Who is responsible for writing content? Do you have the right resources and are they delivering concise, targeted communications?
- Is your review process adequate for the importance of the communications?

### *Include a Measurement Strategy*

Not to be overlooked is the need to identify how you'll determine the communication plan's success in light of your goals. We often help clients establish follow-up surveys and questions to capture important measurements from both internal and external audiences. Your job is to compare that feedback against the success measures and key performance indicators you had hoped to achieve.

Typical follow-up questions we ask of recipients include:

- How do you rate the communications deliverables you receive? Which ones have you used the most?
- How easy has it been to consume and share the information provided?

Assessing recipients' pain points and whether they are getting the information they need helps inform what changes your communications strategy may require.

### *Keep Executives Informed*

Leadership will often want a regular summary of how communications are progressing. We usually recommend monthly or quarterly "Executive Check Points" that state whether projects are on track or at risk, and whether they require executive involvement to get through road blocks. The status reports can also address current constraints, accomplishments, and plans for the upcoming month.

### *We're Here To Help*

The communications framework described here is a tried-and-true approach to keeping the right people in your company informed about the right things, at just the right time. We'd be happy to assist you with this important ongoing task, project by project, initiative by initiative. Just give us a call!

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Jeanne has spent significant time with message development, market planning, PR, and business planning for Global 1000 companies such as Microsoft, Accenture, Ernst and Young, Verizon, and SAP. She serves her clients as Marketing Director, Communications Strategist, Project Director, Writer, and Jack-of-All-Trades for project management and strategic planning.