
The business case for world-class internal communication

Working the future 

ORGANISATION (noun)

A group of people who work together in an organised way for a shared purpose

(Source: Cambridge Dictionary)

COMMUNICATE (verb)

To share information with others by speaking, writing, moving your body or using other signals

(Source: Cambridge Dictionary)

ENGAGE (verb)

To interest someone in something and keep them thinking about it

(Source: Cambridge Dictionary)



For organisations to survive, they must relearn the art and skill of meaningful communication. There's a global crisis of disinformation, fake news and inadequate communication. We're losing our ability to respectfully communicate, and we don't even know it... The main reason we're losing it is because we take communication for granted.

Cathryn Barnard, Partner – Working the Future

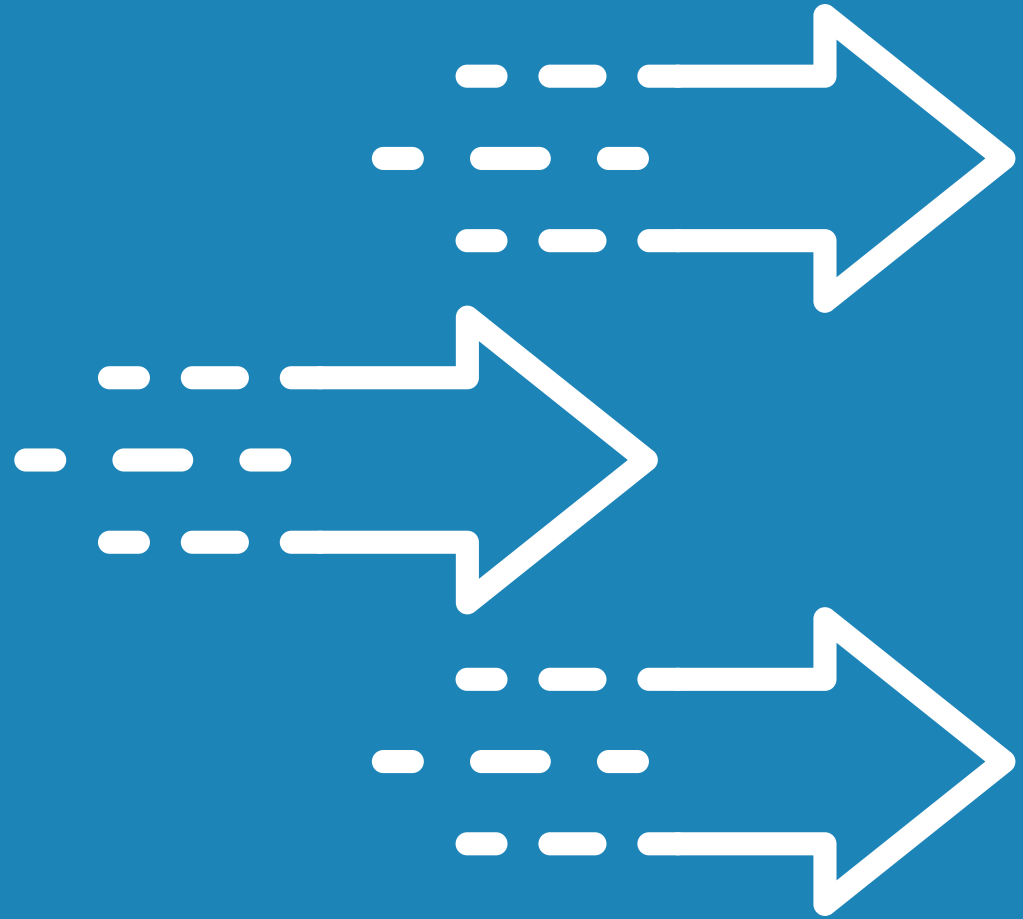


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1.

EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY



2020 will go down in history as the year everything changed.

As an internal communication professional, you'll know exactly the moment that your work became centre-stage critical as the COVID-19 pandemic took hold, causing governments around the world to enforce lockdown in an effort to limit spread of the virus.

Throughout the working world, lockdown resulted in several things. For those organisations where it was possible, it led to the immediate introduction of remote working. Where staff were physically prevented from fulfilling their duties, it led to furlough – or a comparative job retention scheme, depending on geography and jurisdiction – an extreme measure taken to subsidise salaries and prevent significant job loss. It's also led to a sharp rise in projects and contracts being cancelled, kick-starting a global unemployment crisis that is yet to fully unravel.

If one thing's certain, it's that 2020 marks the end of "business as usual" and "life as we know it". The fallout of the pandemic will last for years to come – entirely changing the way we live and work.



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WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE INTERNAL COMMUNICATION PROFESSION?

The months and years ahead will require an entire rethink of how we structure our organisations. While digital technology will drive efficiency, dynamic and future-proof organisations will leverage human talents to solve the complex social, economic and environmental challenges of our times. Creative skills will deliver the next generation of products and services that serve humanity, rather than hinder it.

Organisations across all sectors and verticals are on the cusp of a dramatic reset.

Leaders will need to rethink their entire organising methods, models, and frameworks for how "work gets done". Given the unprecedented nature of this challenge, there are few, if any, examples to draw from. It will require courageous and creative leadership skills, which in turn will entirely transform our perception of what a good leader looks like.

How change is communicated within organisations will be integral to success and longer-term survival.

Where the pandemic has already re-shaped the role and scope of the internal communication profession, the future of work will present further game-changing opportunity.



THE EVOLUTION OF INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

PAST

- Newsletter
- Town halls
- Events management
- Engagement surveys
- Benefits communication
- Change communication



PRESENT

- Daily team check-ins
- Furlough comms
- Safety & wellbeing check-ins
- Virtual team-building
- Distributed & personalised communication
- Audience segmentation



FUTURE

- The social CEO
- Emotionally intelligent communication
- Alignment of people and organisation
- Communicator as facilitator
- Multi-directional communication flows
- Omni-channel communication
- Trust & transparency as first principles
- Communication across a wider talent ecosystem
- Communication for knowledge exchange



The scope and potential for internal communicators has amplified over the past 10 years. The range of activities that modern internal communication professionals undertake is dynamic – every organisation has its own preferred approaches, practices and techniques.

And yet, in the digital, distributed and networked age, and during times of tumultuous change, there's a pressing need for us to relearn how to communicate with one another respectfully.

This means listening as well as speaking. It means communicating for knowledge exchange, not just for knowledge transfer. It means digging deep into the “art” of meaningful conversation, and practising techniques that build connection, belonging, trust and rapport.

The business case for internal communication within organisations has never been clearer.

The content and quality of intra-company communication is a direct representation of culture – of “the way we do things round here”. The quality of respectful and inclusive

internal conversation inextricably links with colleague engagement. And that engagement – how we gain and retain the interest and commitment of our fellow human beings, in pursuit of a shared goal – won't happen without clear, consistent and empathic communication. Effective communication builds alignment and shared understanding – both essential for purposeful movement forward.

#wematteratwork

We believe people are the lifeblood of organisations. People drive successful organisational outcomes through connection and shared meaning, to deliver higher performance, productivity and brand reputation.

The future of all organisational survival is dependent on internal cultures that promote and support human collaboration, ideation and co-creation. All these things rely on the quality of our shared intelligence.

The sooner internal communication is prioritised at the heart of leadership strategy, the sooner our organisations will flourish in the future of work.



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2.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF COMMUNICATION



INTRODUCTION

Our ability to communicate with one another sits at the heart of what it means to be human.

The ways in which we speak and listen to each other enable us to build rapport, empathy and connection. This feeds our innate need to belong. Communication also underscores learning – the stories we tell one another facilitate the spread of information, acting as a signpost for how we make sense of the world.

As a species, our intelligence and sophisticated methods of communication have positioned us at the top of the animal kingdom. While there's still much we don't know about the origins of language, the fact remains that our ability to communicate and our enhanced cognitive function have provided the foundation for human beings to evolve to the advanced level of civilisation we enjoy today.

WHY DO WE COMMUNICATE?

Human communication starts in the womb. According to scientists, hearing is the first sense to develop.

An unborn child develops the capacity for hearing at around 18 weeks of gestation. Interestingly, hearing is also one of the last senses we lose at the end of life. Those who recover from coma or near-death experiences report being able to hear, even as their lives are being saved. This paints a compelling picture of the essential role of communication in our lives.

Non-verbal communication starts as soon as a baby opens its eyes. All parents remember the moment when their child actively sought out eye contact for the first time.

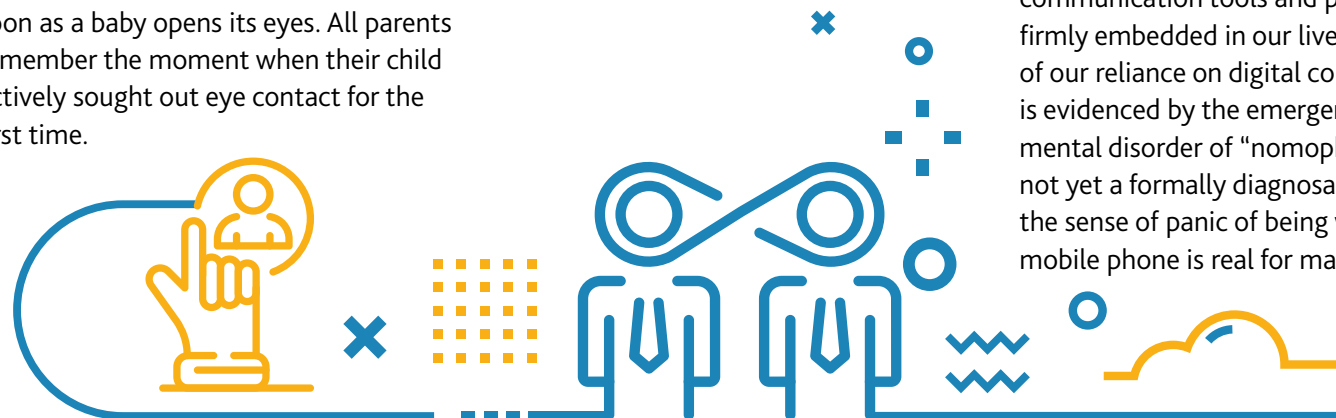
Psychologists have long examined the role of non-verbal communication in human attachment formation, with particular focus on reciprocity – the interactions between infant and caregiver that build affection and relationship.

Interactional synchrony describes how two human beings interact by mirroring the facial and body movements of the other party. It's an instinctive response that starts soon after birth, eliciting feelings of connection and belonging.

THE ERA OF DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

The 19th century saw enormous progress in our ability to communicate with one another. It was a century of great innovation that heralded the arrival of first the telegraph, then the telephone, and finally the radio. The 20th century saw a further explosion of invention. Following the Second World War, computer scientists began making inroads into the digital communication technology that surrounds us today.

Now, we're more connected than at any other point in human history – communication tools and platforms are firmly embedded in our lives. The extent of our reliance on digital communications is evidenced by the emergence of the mental disorder of "nomophobia". While not yet a formally diagnosable disorder, the sense of panic of being without your mobile phone is real for many.



A CRISIS OF COMMUNICATION

Digital communication has entirely transformed life and work in the 21st century.

Today, we're able to reach wider online audiences than we ever dreamed possible. In 2020, for individuals and organisations alike, the number of followers on any social media platform is regarded as a key measure of success.

Yet, arguably, digital communication acts as a broadcast mechanism. It's one-way traffic and, at times, it can feel that we're increasingly screaming into the abyss, competing in a cacophony of noise, in an effort to be seen and heard.

Our human brains are continuously bombarded with electronic notifications – each one desperately trying to capture attention and persuade us to do something, if only for a second.

As we continuously strive to up our online game, presenting ourselves in a way we hope will help us stand out, we're fighting a losing battle. Despite the promise of enhanced outreach, digital communication also fuels a sense of disconnectedness at times, leaving us feeling isolated, confused and abandoned.

Our need for social connection is primal, and there's growing concern that over-reliance on digital technology as a go-to channel of communication is fuelling our mental health crisis.

Put bluntly, the quality of our relationships matters far more than the *quantity* of them.

THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION AT WORK

Even before COVID-19, our workplaces were already undergoing the early stages of profound transformation. We shared some key trends driving these changes in our Future of Work Trends Report published earlier this year.

Coronavirus and the ensuing economic fallout have tipped life as we know it on its head.

In times of crisis and tumultuous change, it's imperative that we feel as connected and cohesive as we can. Human beings crave structure and connectedness above all else. We need to know we're all in it together. More critically, we need to feel hope for a better future. Without these, we're all vulnerable to acute stress, anxiety and depression.

In addition to the global health crisis, research shows we're in the midst of a trust crisis, fuelled largely by growing inequality and the ubiquity of fake news disseminated via the Internet. Interestingly, the 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer highlighted an overarching belief that business can be a force for good in the world.

While rising unemployment looks inevitable as the economic fallout of COVID-19 becomes more apparent, for those of us fortunate enough to remain employed, internal communication and the ways in which we communicate at work have never been more important.

If the pandemic has highlighted one positive thing, it's that our human sense of community and helpfulness prevails in times of crisis. Business recovery will entirely depend upon this sense of community – of employees, customers and suppliers pulling together, aligned to a common purpose of navigating the downturn as optimally as possible. Strong internal communication will continue to play a key role in underpinning workforce engagement and performance.

We've already seen the damage that poor internal communication does to organisations. Social media is littered with stories of employers who've done badly by their staff during lockdown.

Equally, we've heard intensely heart-warming internal communication stories that substantially enhance brand reputation.

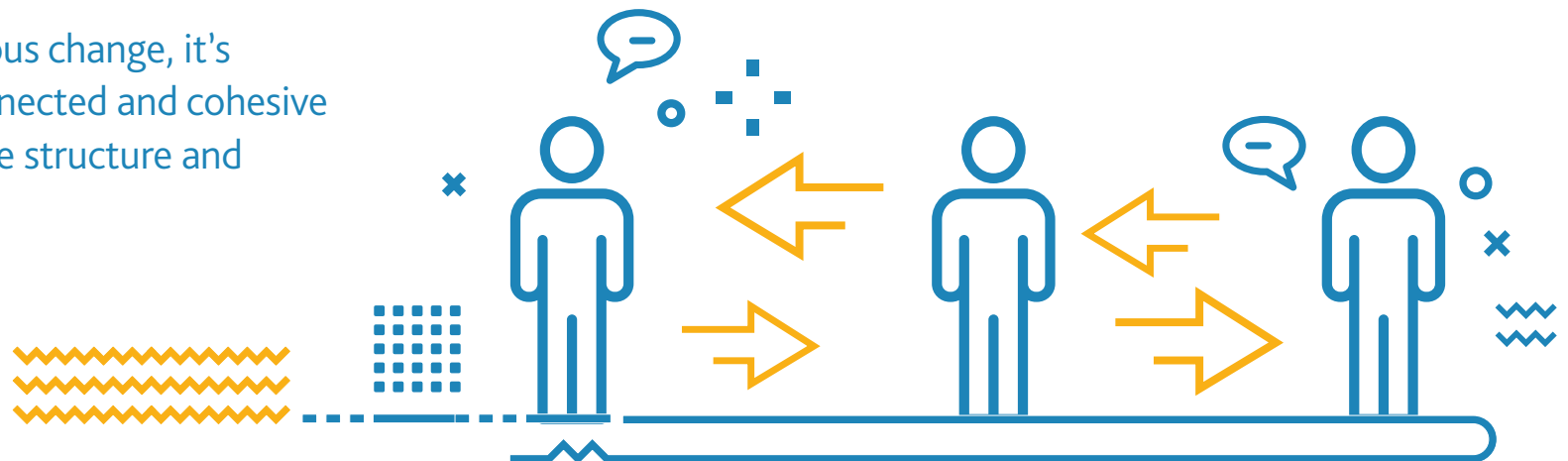
Continuous change is here to stay, as we learn to adjust to a world that looks entirely different to the one we lived in just a few months ago. How we communicate with one another will determine our ability to collectively #BuildBackBetter. We matter at work.

Let's seize this opportunity to embed world-class communication into our organisations – goodness knows the world is going to need it.

Let's unpack the key reasons why...

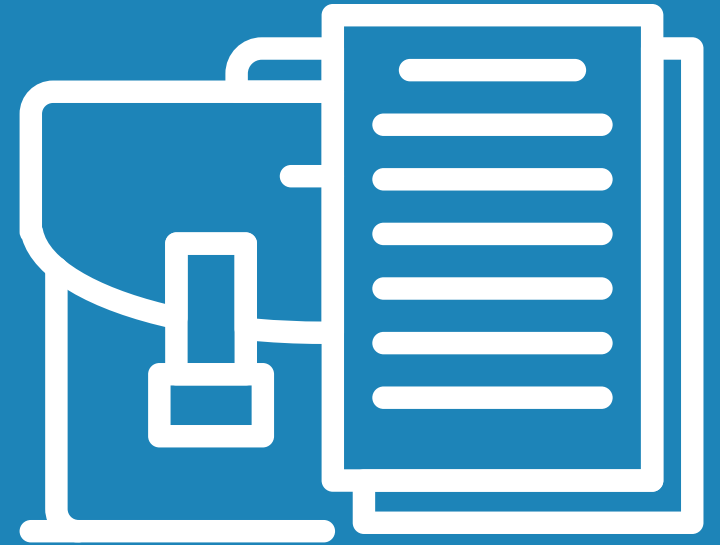


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3.

THE BUSINESS
CASE FOR INTERNAL
COMMUNICATION



3.1



DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IS DRIVING CONTINUOUS CHANGE

The digital revolution will almost certainly be accelerated by coronavirus. Automation holds the promise of reduced operating costs, and the threat of infection fuels the need for a contactless world.

Organisations of all shapes and sizes will now be carefully evaluating the power and potential of enterprise technology like never before.

As technology becomes more integrated into every corner of our work lives, it creates profound shifts in both our daily activities, and the ways in which we run our organisations.

As routine and repetitive work tasks get automated, we'll each be subject to continuous adaptation loops, taking on new tasks to fill our time, or adopting different work patterns.

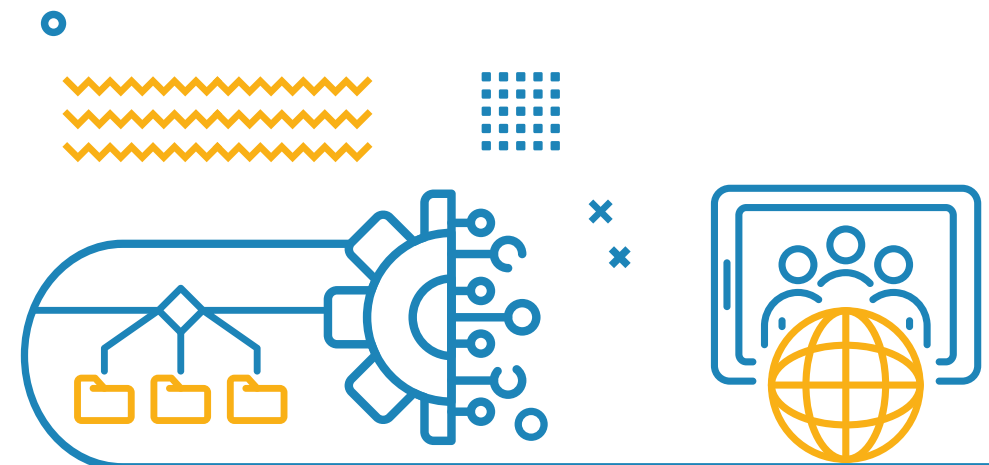
Either way, this continuous change will require strong internal communication to ensure continued engagement and to prevent a sense of overwhelm.

Management consultancy McKinsey has identified the lack of adequate internal communication as a key reason for change programme failure – poorly managed communication easily leads to active disengagement.

For organisations to transform, as they will have to, world-class multi-directional and inclusive internal communication is key. Failure to embrace this has the potential to destroy employer brand reputation and ultimately inhibit long-term survival.

KEY TAKEAWAYS/ACTIONS

- 1 Identify and prioritise areas and activities within your organisation that are facing change/transformation.
- 2 Meet with change leaders and department/team leads to discuss the critical role of internal communication in facilitating change.
- 3 Create a communication strategy for change, remembering to tweak at regular intervals for continued relevance and engagement.



3.2



FEEDBACK LOOPS ARE INCREASINGLY CRITICAL

Traditional approaches to internal communication have tended towards broadcast methods – intermittent transmission of key updates from the boardroom to the workforce on a “need-to-know” basis.

This reflects the old-school way of business, which was far more hierarchical, and where leaders and managers issued tasks to employees.

Today's organisations don't operate this way. **In fast-paced and competitive commercial landscapes, organisations need to listen hard to identify the emergent needs of their customers.** Listening to customer feedback is core to lean and agile business innovation. Simply put, there's no point investing time and money in the development of new products and services that ultimately aren't of interest to customers.

Continuous feedback loops are key to 21st century business success. They enable an organisation to gather information about what's going on externally and use those insights to remain relevant.

This drives the case for a shift away from occasional broadcasting, towards a multi-directional, facilitated, style of communication that helps organisational leaders learn and adapt the strategy as required.

This shift in approach is a major change in and of itself, and leaders and employees alike will need help and support to learn new styles of communication for knowledge exchange, rather than knowledge transfer.



KEY TAKEAWAYS/ACTIONS

- 1 Evaluate how your organisation captures employee feedback and how it acts upon that information.**
- 2 Organise a conversation between managers and innovation leads to identify and agree how best to track and measure feedback on proposed new product and service offerings.**
- 3 Identify a minimum viable audience of your organisation's biggest advocates and create a strategy to strengthen rapport and connection that in turn facilitates greater market understanding.**



3.3



CHANGING WORKFORCE DEMOGRAPHICS

Every generation brings with it new attitudes and behaviours influenced by the world and context in which it comes of age.

Mainstream media often paints a gloomy picture of the communication skills of young people today, suggesting that a dependency on smartphones is inhibiting their social skills. In some respects, this may be true, but it's also an overly simplistic view.

Younger workers today are in fact voracious communicators. Far more digitally dexterous perhaps than older cohorts, young people today are hyper-connected, using multiple platforms concurrently to communicate.

To engage *everyone* within an organisation, internal communicators must build strategies that optimise multiple channels for optimal inclusion.

As #BlackLivesMatter has shown, inclusion is a battle cry for many, so failing to build an inclusive communication strategy is dangerous ground.

Of course, wages and remuneration are, and will always be, incredibly important, but, in parallel, an escalating undercurrent is emerging. People want to know that they matter at work.

Most modern workers want to know they're working for organisations that

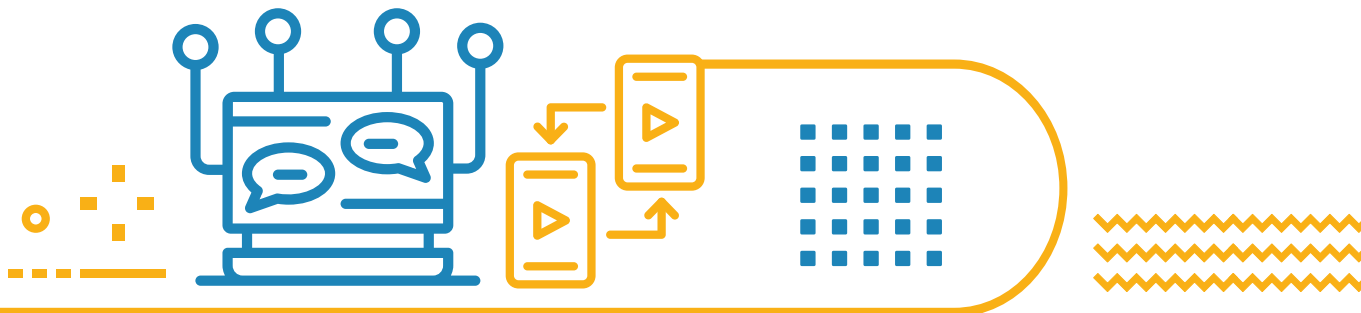
care – about their people, about the planet and about society. At the same time, they want to feel that their contribution matters – that it makes a difference either to organisational outcomes or to the wider world outside.

How we feel about our work directly feeds into how engaged we feel, so creating and maintaining an environment where colleagues feel connected, included, valued and purposeful is key. Internal communicators have a key role to play in helping to shape that sense of internal connection.



KEY TAKEAWAYS/ACTIONS

- 1 Survey (or, better still, have a conversation with) colleagues to identify preferred communication channels.**
- 2 Keep track of all the emergent messaging and communication applications. Liaise with IT colleagues to identify those most suited to company-wide communication.**
- 3 Map the demographics within your organisation to build audience segmentation.**
- 4 Survey or interview colleagues to understand personal motivations and drivers at work. Use this to build a longer-term strategy for employee engagement.**



3.4



NEW APPROACHES TO WORKFORCE OPTIMISATION

We've come a huge way in the past 20 years in our understanding of psychology, neuroscience and behavioural economics. We know far more today about what motivates people and how to get better results, both as individuals and as teams.

While sport and the military proactively make use of these knowledge gains, it's surprising how little progress has been made in effectively transferring these tools and techniques to business environments.

Yet some organisations have made vast leaps forward, and their documented practices underscore emergent approaches to optimising workforce potential.

In 2012, Google embarked on a quest to understand great team performance. Using input from business psychologists, sociologists, and statisticians, Project Aristotle studied all manner of possible reasons why some teams achieved exceptional levels of performance, whereas others rarely moved beyond average.

The project's findings have since been widely documented. **Three key ingredients are essential for a high-performance culture: alignment around a clearly articulated common purpose, leadership vulnerability and psychological safety.** Each of these are contingent on the free flow of open, honest internal communication.

Google's status as a global behemoth renders it a role-model to most business leaders today. That it's opened its learnings up for public review means that achieving psychological safety in the workplace is an aspirational goal for most forward-thinking organisations today.

Psychological safety can't be achieved without safe, empathic and inclusive communication that respects the opinions and contributions of all stakeholders.

Prevailing communication styles within most organisations are in need of an upgrade if high performance is to be achieved. The case for internal communication is clear – organisational productivity will increasingly depend on it.



KEY TAKEAWAYS/ACTIONS

- 1 Organisational performance is contingent on alignment – the shared mental models within groups, about purpose or goals. How well does your organisation align, and how can you facilitate this process?**
- 2 How well do your leaders and managers practice more empathic communication styles? Consider how you can encourage more emotionally intelligent communication.**
- 3 Keep one eye on the horizon for those shifts and undercurrents that may impact your ability to deliver on the above.**



3.5



HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Even before coronavirus, we were in the midst of another accelerating pandemic – a mental health crisis sweeping across developed nations.

The reasons for deteriorating mental health are complex and varied. There's a huge body of evidence, however, that points towards loneliness as being a key driver in mental illness. Human beings aren't designed to live in isolation – we're social creatures, hardwired for connection and community.

But 21st century living – and working – increasingly fuels our sense of disconnection. All too often, we depend on digital online interactions as our primary means of communication, and we're actively traumatised when our messages aren't reciprocated.

Work too, for many people, has become a demoralising experience. Hiring processes are outdated and transactional, with insufficient feedback to job seekers. Onboarding and talent development can be lacklustre for all but those perceived as having "high-potential". With job insecurity on the rise, increasingly it can feel like work is overly competitive and precarious.

Yet, as much as technology is augmenting what we do in the workplace, human contribution is still an essential component of organisational success.

And for humans to optimise these success outcomes, they need to feel connected, valued and as though their contribution matters.

The fastest way to build workforce engagement, wellbeing and, by default, productivity is to place inclusive communication at the heart of organisational activity.

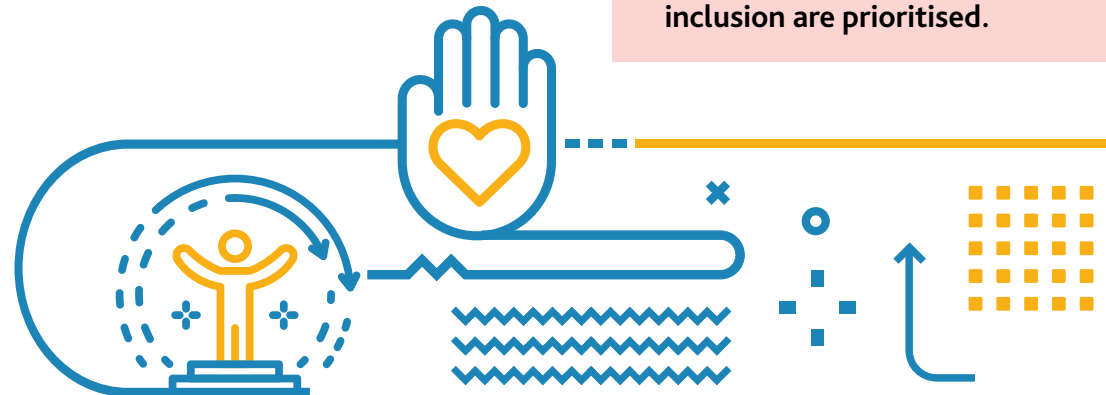
We need to find new ways of building connection and rapport at work that underpin team performance. Leaders and managers across the piste must find new ways of engaging with staff, that go beyond the transactional, to build mutually beneficial trusted relationships.

We seem to have lost that edge at work in the last 20 years. Internal communication professionals have a key role to play in helping get it back.



KEY TAKEAWAYS/ACTIONS

- 1 Build a list of all the ways in which your organisation currently promotes employee health and wellbeing, and ensure staff awareness.**
- 2 Identify and road-test rapport-building activities that promote connection and belonging throughout your organisation.**
- 3 Coordinate with your organisation's nominated employee wellbeing representatives to ensure that workforce connection and inclusion are prioritised.**



3.6



THE RISE OF AGILE WORKING

We're rapidly transitioning towards an age of flexible and fluid "on-demand" working. This has been accelerated by COVID-19 and the continued requirement for social distancing.

Dynamic and volatile market forces drive the need for organisational agility. This in turn fuels the rise of more blended workforces, comprising more equal numbers of permanent and impermanent teams.

Interim, contract or temporary labour have rarely been given much consideration when considering workplace engagement and productivity, however. Regarded as "ancillary", the impermanence of these contributors has somehow marginalised their influence on overall organisational culture.

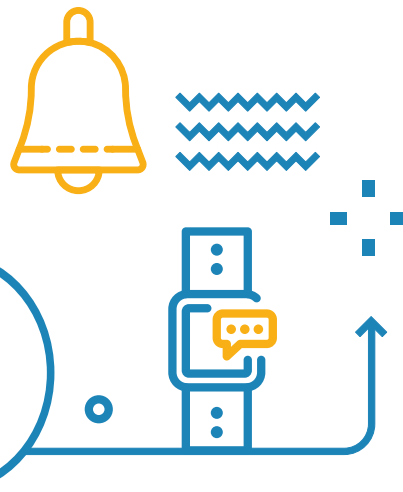
This is somewhat myopic.

More and more people are choosing each year to go self-employed. It's increasingly a lifestyle choice. In a world of decreasing security and stability, self-employment is also seen as a means of de-risking your career, particularly when portfolio working is adopted.

The attitudes and behaviours of all participants in any system go on to impact its overall culture. **If we're to create high-performance cultures in increasingly fluid workspaces, inclusion must be prioritised, regardless of employment status.**

We shouldn't overlook the plurality of perspective that impermanent team members can bring to the party. An alternative worldview, based on experiences beyond the walls of an organisation, adds substance and depth to complex problem-solving endeavours.

Creating and maintaining inclusive workplaces, where every contributor feels seen and heard, once again depends on the ability of an organisation to honour and value smooth two-way communication. Listening to, and building on, a wide range of perspectives is invaluable for long-term organisational resilience.



KEY TAKEAWAYS/ACTIONS

- 1 Consider the future make-up of your organisation's workforce. How can communication foster connection and community beyond traditional employment boundaries?
- 2 How well does your organisation communicate with temporary staff members? What could you do to improve this?
- 3 Does your organisation already have an alumni network? Plan how you could create one.

3.7



RETAINING CRITICAL KNOWLEDGE

As organisational structures are challenged to become more fluid and agile, maintaining organisational knowledge becomes key. Baked-in, tacit knowledge of exiting workers is often overlooked. Yet it's a high-value asset when set against the time and effort required to nurture new hires for optimal productivity.

It makes perfect sense, therefore, for ambitious organisations to develop a far more progressive, and human-centred approach towards offboarding. **By taking a longer-term and more holistic view, forward-thinking employers can build talent "ecosystems" that are underscored by commitment to ongoing human relationships and that enable on-demand, agile working.**

We've already seen some evidence of this in the way that some organisations have chosen to build alumni networks. When nurtured, these networks have huge potential, as they allow for boomerang working (i.e. when former employees return to the payroll), and for organisational tacit knowledge to be retained through goodwill and mutual respect.

The role of robust, human-centred internal communication here is clear.

KEY TAKEAWAYS/ACTIONS

- 1 What does your organisation do currently to protect and preserve the knowledge that exists within your organisation? Identify ways to improve this.
- 2 What customs, rituals, signs, and symbols are unique to your organisation and its narrative? Consider how your organisation recognises, values and honours these.
- 3 How do you collect and capture the essence of what it feels like to work at your organisation?



3.8



THE CHANGING FACE OF LEADERSHIP

In myriad ways, how we organise ourselves at work is in the early stages of profound transformation. It's entirely likely that 20 years from now, the shape and structure of our organisations will be almost unrecognisable.

As the way we work changes, so too do the skills and attributes we require from our leaders.

Most organisational leaders have little experience of the kind of uncertainty that exists today. Yet all organisations are threatened by a triumvirate of social, economic and environmental challenges that undermine stability and longer-term survival.

Leaders in 2020 must figure out a new strategic roadmap and identify new ways of leading that address the challenges of our times. Because we're in uncharted territory, there's no playbook for this, and so the entire DNA of leadership and management will be under scrutiny.

If we're venturing into the unknown, we want to be led by people who motivate and inspire us, and yet who are approachable, empathic and "real".

As landscapes shift at lightning speed, we need openness, honesty, and transparency. The "post-truth" era demands human-centred leadership that places people and planet on an equal footing with any kind of profit maximisation. The emotional contract that accompanies work has shifted.

For some leaders, this openness and transparency will come naturally. But this is a significant sea-change in business, and many others will need help and support with how they interact and communicate with their team members and wider staff. Enter the age of communicator as facilitator.

Forward-thinking internal communication professionals will welcome the opportunity to provide coaching support to leaders and managers, helping them to embrace a communication style that fosters connection, alignment and collaboration. It's an opportunity to reshape how we communicate within our organisations, and how we connect at a visceral level across teams, departments, geographies and silos.



KEY TAKEAWAYS/ACTIONS

- 1 Design and run an "empathy survey" to establish how your colleagues feel about current levels of internal empathy.**
- 2 Liaise with those colleagues in charge of leadership development to identify interventions that will strengthen empathic communication within the leadership and management community.**
- 3 Share with your leaders the new "science" of empathic leadership.**



4.

CONCLUSION



CONCLUSION

Our world is changing so fast now, it's all we can do to hold on to the routines and rituals that provide structure within our daily lives.

Communication and conversation are how we make sense of life – through the stories we tell each other about what it means to live in the 21st century. These stories give life to our experiences and make us who we are.

Without conversation and connection, a primary human response to change is fear – we easily feel threatened by uncertainty and the perceived “risks” that might come with the unknown.

As we navigate our way towards and through the future of work, we'll find ourselves exposed to new situations, circumstances and challenges. Conversation and inclusive communication will help us unpack these challenges and reframe them as opportunities. In this way, fear becomes repackaged into hope for the future.

Communication is the linchpin by which our organisations will survive and thrive.