



Communication: Why every organisation benefits from “cutting through” the noise



Introduction

Communication: it's the one thing that sets us apart from the rest of the animal kingdom. Our ability to inform, share and exchange ideas was the building block of modern civilization. And today we now live in a world where to escape communication would be to escape life entirely.

Every two days we now create as much information as we did from the dawn of time to 2003^[1] [or five 'exabytes' to be precise], with McKinsey finding the average business leader spends 80% of their day doing nothing else but communicating. And it's not just management, the same research found that organisations spend about 15% of their collective time in meetings and, on average, employees spend about 17 hours a week clarifying previous communication.^[2]

It's not difficult to see why. Communication is also the cornerstone of employee engagement. When staff feel involved, listened to, and have an employee voice it creates open and trusting relationships, breeding increased satisfaction.

But as this whitepaper will examine, communication has never been under greater pressure – from the sheer amount of information we all receive each day, to the numbers of different channels it is delivered through.



Creating cut-through – whether it's communicating the choices people have in their benefits, or embodying your employee value proposition – has never been more challenging. Never has more attention been needed to communicating more effectively.



What hasn't changed

Every time we receive messages – either verbally, or written – we are setting off explosions of neurons in our brain. Words in our conscious minds are being processed at a rate of 50 bits a second, causing billions of neurons to transmit signals to each other.

But we're not just processing letters and numbers. Subconsciously we're also experiencing a physical and emotional response. Communication is literally changing our brains' make-ups by boosting the production of hormones and neurotransmitters that stimulate nerve pathways that change our body's chemistry.

The extent to which our physical being reacts to communication depends of the type of communication we receive. Transactional communication – 'do this' – can create little sense of engagement. It can feel de-personalised and devoid of desire for response.

Positional communication – which involves interaction [asking us to explain what we know; or to express an opinion] stimulates much more of a reaction. Co-creating communication [sharing and discovering] ups the ante even further. This "feel good" communication triggers higher levels of dopamine and oxytocin endorphins, and other bio-chemicals that give us a sense of wellbeing. In all our communications, our primeval senses constantly kick-in.

Hardwired into our brains is also the ability to detect trust, and whether it's safe to 'open up' in response. Biologically speaking, when we feel safe, we turn down our hypothalamic pituitary adrenal axis (which lowers our stress response), and we turn-up our social engagement systems through the production of oxytocin and other prosocial hormones. In short, our response to communication is a product of millions of years of lived experience.

What has changed

As in many aspects of modern life, we now walk about in pre-modern bodies, which have not evolved fast enough to deal with the modern age. The chemistry our bodies follow has stayed largely similar, but the demands the body has to deal with have not.

All the signs are, modern life – characterised by the need to consume ever-rising volumes of communication – is having significant impact on our brain's ability to 'cope'. Thanks to more data needing consuming, the average person now loses concentration after just eight seconds – which is officially worse than that of a goldfish^[3]. Prior to 2000 – the year largely considered to be the start of the mobile age – our attention span was 12 seconds.

Evidence now suggests that our always-on lives – streaming a constant flow of online information – actually encourages divided attention spans. In fact, some believe it is even starting to shift the way we retrieve, store, and even value knowledge^[4].

We live in a world now where those aspects that fail to gain attention are quickly drowned out in the sea of other incoming information. And there are generational differences too. More than 294 billion emails were sent in 2019 – the preferred tool of Generation X still; while texting and instant messaging recently surpassed voice as the leading form of communication amongst millennials^[5]. In 2018 alone, people spent 685 billion hours on social and messaging apps, and the response time for reading 90% of messages is just three minutes.



What communicators now need to do to compete

The upshot of our increased volume of 'data' is that organisations are now fighting a new kind of 'information warfare'. Not only are the challenges this presents continually evolving (who would have guessed that widespread, and enforced remote working has also fuelled a parallel demand for face-to-face communication?), but the landscape is such that communicators now need to compete more than ever to achieve cut-through.

Advertisers have been grappling with this for years, but now the problem of achieving cut-through is just as applicable for organisations and how they communicate messages to their staff. As employees are more disconnected from their physical office, issues around communication will only get more complicated.

In 1965 Herbert E. Krugman manager of corporate public opinion research at GEC famously wrote that the three key principles of psychological awareness – curiosity, recognition, and decision – could be achieved with just three exposures to a message. Now it's just getting a message seen that's the problem.

HR & Reward Managers are increasingly aware of this. The problem they now need to confront is whether or not it's the message itself that isn't resonating with audiences or whether the message is even being noticed at all.

Employers are competing for the attentions of staff now receiving many more outside work pieces of communication as they are internal pieces of communication. As of Q1 2020, there were 2.6 billion monthly active Facebook users; 367 million monthly active users of Pinterest; and 66 million global Twitter users^[6]. More than a third of Instagram's audience is aged 25-34, and time spent on social media has increased every year since 2012, to an eye-popping 145 minutes per day last year.

Points to remember:

- ▶ **Understand that you're competing for attention:** people's lives are ruled by words. They are being bombarded by them, but if you accept this, you can start to think about what it is that could stand out from the rest.
- ▶ **Resonate, resonate, resonate:** people pick up on what chimes with their lives now. Try to think about communication tactics that will resonate with your different employee groups.
- ▶ **We're more disconnected** – so double your efforts: now's not the time to cut back on communication. It's needed now more than ever before.



Why it matters that communication is improved



The job facing employers to make their communications ‘pop’ might seem greater, but it’s worth remembering the power that great communication can still have. Around 70% of employees commonly report ‘not’ being engaged, with lack of transparency (which impacts trust) being a key constituent for half of staff.

But compare this to the 85% of staff who say they are most motivated when management offers them regular updates^[7] – which in turn leads to greater productivity and output returns (see our ‘Engagement’ whitepaper).

One of the greatest drivers of disengagement is not feeling connected, or employees having a sense that information is not being shared with them. Almost three-quarters of employees say they don’t often know what their company news is^[8], and so it is clear that great communication can work wonders to overturn this.

When companies communicate, they build a sense that there is alignment between their vision and values. When firms better communicate they transmit to staff a better understanding of goals (and employees’ place within that organisation). This in-turn breeds improved morale. One third (33%) of HR Managers cite lack of open communication as having the most negative impact on employee morale^[9].

It’s worth considering that communication is a two-way street. Research finds that employees who feel their voice is heard (and just as importantly, acted upon), have been shown to be 4.6 times more likely to feel empowered to perform and do their best work than those who are not.^[10]

But in our current climate, the need for good communication is even greater. It’s an undisputed fact that more organisations are reporting rising stress and wellbeing issues. As engagement specialist, Glint, in its ‘Employee Wellbeing Report’ (December 2020) recently

revealed, burnout is up 4% on the year before, with the reasons cited including feeling disconnected from colleagues (41%), and there being ‘little or no acknowledgement’ of their good work (26%)^[11].

In this environment, companies are being required to show ever-more empathy. Employees want their managers to recognise the challenges they face – whether it’s recognising the struggles they face trying to work remotely, or the demands that juggling care commitments has. Being communicated to about these issues matters more than ever. Empathy (and communicating it) breeds engagement. The two are intrinsically linked.

The best benefits professionals increasingly understand that any communication they create can no longer just be transactional/informative. The information they convey needs elicit and emotional response – whether it answers the ‘what’s in it for me?’ question or just gives them the sense that it is personal to them, and their unique set of circumstances.

Points to remember:

- ▶ **Communication creates alignment:** great communication doesn’t just inform it creates a genuine sense of alignment; the sense that the employer cares.
- ▶ **Show more empathy:** communication is about creating an emotional connection. Nothing demonstrates this more than when organisations put themselves in their employees’ shoes.
- ▶ **Don’t just be top down:** half of communication is being able to listen, so create mechanisms for feedback too.

How to create great communications



In our earlier engagement whitepaper we talked about the importance of creating the Employee Value Proposition (EVP) – of creating messaging that refers to and reinforces all the elements about working for an organisation (including salary and benefits, but also the culture and outlook it wants to cultivate).

When it comes to the role of communication in achieving this, there is clearly a classic chicken and egg dilemma at play. Does the EVP and ‘employer brand’ provide the ingredients for great communication, or does great communication create the EVP/employer brand in the first place? At Broadstone we believe there’s a more nuanced answer: that simply employee communication understands how the EVP relates to it.

Take, for instance, employers’ oft-intended desires to be regular sharers of information, so staff can access all they need quickly, and efficiently, and be able to get on with jobs. It’s so often the case that intention and reality seldom intersect – and this is where communication is out of quilter with the EVP.

In 2019 Canada Life found over one third (34%) of employees (around 11.2 million workers) wished their employer would communicate more about the workplace benefits available to them. It found almost one in ten (9%) had no idea which benefits, if any, they could access. Meanwhile, one in five (20%) said they only received information about the benefits available to them when they first joined and never again afterwards^[12].

Here, the spirit of the employee brand is not being reinforced by the communication strategy that should support it. At a very simple level, more communication – but maybe segmented according to different employee groups (age/ gender/lifestyle/life moments) – would make a vast difference to the feeling staff have that they are cared for and are listened to.

The same piece of research found more than a third of employees (34%) thought benefits communications weren’t communicated clearly enough. Once more, if communications provoke more questions than they do answers, they are not working to the benefit of building a cohesive and consistent employer brand.

Clarity of communication could be improved by several means. These include:

- ▶ **Creating infographics:** devices that visually explain a complex idea (such as how they save into their pension) quickly.
- ▶ **Creating commonly-asked Q&As:** building a repository of the most frequently asked questions that staff can access.
- ▶ **Providing tools:** these include aids, such as pension contribution calculators, that allow staff to play around with their contributions to see how it impacts their retirement.
- ▶ **Developing platforms:** those that give employees dashboards where they can see how they can more easily spend their benefits pot, or mix and match perks as their life events happen.

In other words, the answer to great communication is as much about how organisations are actually providing it (in terms of its ease of consumption or ability to play around with it) and not just what is being said.

And let's not also forget that being attentive to this also creates a virtuous circle. Information that is useful, and intuitive will be returned to more, and looked forward to more when distributed.

Marketers – people whose careers depend on these engagement metrics – work to a benchmark of email open-rates of 18%, and an average click-through of 2.6%^[13].

But even within this, there will be better days, better times of the day that organisations would be wise to experiment with. Mailchimp finds communications personalised with people's names have higher open rates than those that do not^[14].

It finds visuals increase readership by 80%, while studies also show visuals with added colour increase readers' attention spans by 82%^[15].

In short, make communications convenient, make them timely, relevant, informative and engaging, and they will be consumed. And this includes considering the channels they are available on – apps, intranets, and how easily staff can get access to it (such as on mobile devices outside traditional company firewalls).



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Points to remember:

- ▶ **Over-communicating is fine as long as it's relevant:** right now, employees want information, want reconnection with their organisation; want to feel involved. It is unlikely you can over-communicate at the moment, especially if it's with benefits that will interest staff.
- ▶ **Remember the EVP:** you should be guided in everything you do by whether or not what you're talking about drives, and strengthens your EVP.
- ▶ **Experiment:** Try different channels and mediums (and even timeslots). Organisations might be surprised about what works best for them.



Why this matters in benefits

The value of having highly engaged employees is now undisputed. For every 5-point increase in engagement there is a 3% increase in company revenue^[16].

While it's no longer possible to discount the role benefits play in contributing to this (79% of employees cited a competitive benefits plan as an influencer in them taking a job with a company)^[17], few organisations are really making the most of the benefits they offer to create the maximum engagement possible.

Aon recently found that a barely believable 96% of staff habitually underestimate the amount their employer spends on their benefits. Around 4 in 10 (42%) believe it to be 5% or less of employees' salary. Most employees would probably be shocked to learn that the typical amount is between 20 and 40% - and that's simply down to firms miscommunicating what they have^[18].

The fact is providing benefits is actually the easy part. But it should really just be the beginning.

EAPs often have perks and add-ons that not even employers always knew existed. Great communication corrects, and cuts-through any lack of understanding that might exist (and which could unintentionally be causing poor engagement). So it's vital companies have a proper strategy around communicating all aspect of their offerings. It is only through communicating them better at the right time, to the right people, in the right way, and through the right means/channels that employers really have a chance of making what they have go much further.

Injecting even small parts of a communications strategy can have big results. When staff understand their benefits, they are more likely to engage with what's there, and play around with what they have.

When staff understand their benefits, it has a transformative impact, with data already proving that staff will report wanting to stay at their organisation longer^[19].

Bespoke and segmented communication can get a diverse employee base all feeling like they're on the 'same page' as everyone else. It's this culture-reinforcing impact that is at the heart of what powerful communications can do. It makes the EVP seem 'right' – evenly balanced, for both staff and their employer.

And to anyone that is afraid of really shouting about the benefits – don't be! While it might feel un-British to boast, nowadays organisations can no longer afford **NOT** to take this chance. The war for talent will only intensify, and holding onto and attracting the best talent will now be the primary role of a good employee benefits communications strategy.



Points to remember:

- ▶ **Don't underestimate the link between communication and engagement:** it's there, and it's there in black and white. Communicate to engage rather than communicate for the sake of it.
- ▶ **Promote understanding of benefits:** it's often taken for granted that staff understand all of the intricacies of their benefits. It's much more likely they do not, so use this an opportunity to explain.

Conclusion

There's little doubt we live in a world where our brains have reached saturation level - perhaps even reaching information overload.

But if there's one thing our brains have become expert at doing, it's being able to sort the wheat from the chaff, being able to notice a sparkling email, or video, or other form of communication that stands out from the rest.

See how our engagement platform can improve communications

As human beings we all still need our interests to be piqued – it's purely second nature to be forever questing for a satisfying nugget, or piece of information that makes a difference to our lives.

Benefits chiefs still have a great opportunity to tap people's desire to see something that resonates with them, and which helps create empathy and a sense of longing. It's no easy task, but in these less than ordinary times, the less ordinary your communications are, the better they'll be.



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