

Best Practices in Employee Communications:
Clarity, Community, Context, Convergence and Customization.

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Introduction

As a public relations (PR) practitioner with nearly 30 years of experience, I have seen the profession change dramatically, especially in the last decade. Understanding the needs of our varied constituents, considering how people will respond and then creating strategies to engage them and earn their trust has always been, and remains, critical to effective communications. Evolving technology, however, has dramatically changed the way we communicate with our constituents. It has also caused a convergence—a blurring of the lines between marketing and public relations and between public relations and human resources (HR). With four generations now sharing the workplace, there are additional considerations and complications to the already difficult task of communicating with and engaging employees. The various positions I've held in corporate communications dealt strictly with external communications, but my area of oversight in academia over the last 12 years has included employee communications as well.

This independent research project attempts to outline best practices in the area of employee communications. This project included a review of scholarly and trade journals and mainstream media as well as the implementation of primary research to:

1. Review the literature that is available on employee communication.
2. Identify important strategies, principles of communication that should be considered.
3. Outline the tools that are used by companies today for employee communication.
4. Identify any trends in employee communication.
5. Find which companies are doing the best job in employee communications.
6. Outline the communications that are required by companies (legal compliance).
7. Find, if any, what connections there are between effective communication and employee satisfaction and productivity.

Components of the Research

My search began with extensive online research. After discovering and purchasing "Best Practices in Employee Communication: A Study of Global Challenges and Approaches," I thought I would need to look no further. Unfortunately, the survey of 472 organizations worldwide by Right Management Consultants (Philadelphia) and the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) was published in 2005, so the case studies and much of the data is now seven years old. The study did provide some interesting information, which will be addressed throughout this paper. It also highlighted the "four critical challenges" identified by the authors that communicators were facing at the time worldwide (Gay, C, Mahony, M & Graves, J., 2005), which I believe are still the same, if not more pronounced, in 2012:

1. Motivating employees to align with the business strategy—creating a line of sight between employees and the organizational strategy.
2. Leadership and management communication—educating and engaging leaders and managers in their role in employee communication.
3. Managing information overload—breaking through the communication "clutter."
4. Measuring the ROI of internal communication—linking communication to business results.

Multiple online searches of scholarly and trade journals (dated from 2000 through 2012) were conducted using the following terms: "best practices" AND "employee or internal communication," "communication" AND "internal public relations." While hundreds of potential articles were uncovered using those terms, I only found 22 of those articles to be timely enough and applicable for further review. In addition to these online searches, I searched the databases of both the *Journal of Business Communication* and the *Journal of Employee Communication Management* (JECM) and created indexes of the articles that were published

between 2000 and 2012 (see Indexes). In many cases, full text of the articles from the *Journal of Business Communication* was only available by purchase, but I found and retained two articles that were applicable to my study. Four searches of JECM using the terms “best practices,” “new tools,” “effective” and “evolution” yielded 25 possible articles, of which 14 were selected for further review. *The Journal of Employee Communication Management* was only published until 2008 and it then became *The Ragan Report* (visit ragan.com). Ragan.com issues e-newsletters and provides an extensive website with useful “news and ideas for communicators” on employee communication, executive communication, public relations and social media. There is also a range of other information (webinars, studies, literature) available for purchase. I corresponded via e-mail, however, with the former editor of JECM who went on to become the first editor of *The Ragan Report*, David Murray. Murray is an avid blogger and currently serves as the editor of *Vital Speeches of the Day*. He provided me with a pdf of his White Paper “Employee Communication Is Different,” which is excerpted from a series on his personal blog Writing Boots. I also interviewed the current editor of *The Ragan Report*, Bill Sweetland, for his insights into employee communications from his vantage point.

Other online searches of mainstream media included:

- *Communication World*—Articles were only available to IABC members though some were published in their entirety by the authors on their websites. Also, IABC connected me to Brad Whitworth, ABC, IABC Fellow, contributing author of the employee communication chapter of *The IABC Handbook of Organizational Communication*. Currently Senior Communications Manager, Emerging Solutions Ecosystems at Cisco, San Francisco, California, Whitworth shared the *Handbook* chapter and two other white papers free of charge.
- The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) website—I am a student member and found five applicable articles.
- The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) website—I am a member and found seven applicable articles.
- *Harvard Business Review*—I found a five-article series on “The Happiness Factor,” which was purchased through a colleague.
- General search—I found five applicable articles written by Bill Quirke, managing director of Synopsis, a U.K.-based consulting firm, available on the company’s website at no charge.

In addition to these online searches, I conducted phone interviews with two top consultants: John Finney, senior consultant with Towers Watson’s Communication and Change Management Practice, and Gary Grates, a globally renowned expert in organizational change, employee engagement and corporate strategy. Finney and Grates generously shared multiple white papers and studies at no cost. Other interviews included: Mary Ruth Houston, esquire; Charlotte McDonald, a human resources professional and board member of Central Florida Human Resources Association, and colleagues at Siemens Power Generation, Rollins College and Valencia College. Research previously conducted with Zappos is included in this report, but efforts to reach human resources professionals at the other nine companies identified by *Fortune* magazine as the *Top 10 Happiest Companies* proved relatively unsuccessful. Those remaining companies are Adobe, American Express, Google, IBM, KPMG, Pepsico International, Southwest Airlines, Starbuck’s and UBS. For security purposes, identifying and contacting human resources professionals at companies is understandably very difficult. My efforts included online research, research through the SHRM website to identify contacts in human resources at the company headquarters followed up by personal e-mails, and trying to make contact through mutual connections on LinkedIn. Out of five companies contacted with a five-question survey—Adobe, American Express, Google, Southwest Airlines and Starbucks—only Southwest Airlines responded to the query.

Multiple online searches for books on the topic were conducted and one search uncovered Rodney Gray, principal consultant and managing director of Employee Communication & Surveys Pty. Ltd, Australia, who offered a suggested list of “Best Books for Communicators” (Gray, 2012). See Support Materials for the list. Reviews of the

following books were read: *Communicating for Change, The Leader as Communicator, Communicating Corporate Change, Take the Lead, Tribal Leadership, Walking the Talk* and *The Wisdom of Crowds*. The following books were scanned or read for this research project: *Breakthrough Nonprofit Branding, Brand from the Inside, Contented Cows Give More Milk, Innovative Employee Communication, Linchpin, Management Communication on Controversial Topics* and *The Tipping Point*.

The Findings

No matter what the topic, it's always easiest to start at the beginning. In this case, I found the beginning to be a book cited by David Murray as "the first book written on employee communication" (Murray, 2009). Titled *Sharing Information with Employees*, the book was written by Alexander Heron and was published in 1942 by Stanford University Press. Heron worked as "Director of Industrial Relations for a large and far flung enterprise" (Murray, 2009). Murray's White Paper, "Employee Communications is Different," cites many passages from Heron's book, but one point that Murray highlighted that resonated most was that "employees inherently have an ownership of their jobs, and it's the company's responsibility to honor that ownership and help make the employee a more intelligent, broad-thinking actor" (Murray, 2009). Written following the industrial revolution, but before the advent of technology and automation, America's factories were primarily producing consumer goods and military hardware. Educating employees about the business and making the work meaningful to them, however, was important even then. So as I read the "four critical challenges" identified in the IABC study, the adage "something old is new again" rang true. This effort is evergreen and remains essential to employee engagement and ultimately the success of the organization.

For this research, I consulted nearly 100 resources—articles, books, online sources as well as conducting interviews with some of the top communication experts in today's

marketplace (see Project Background). With an unlimited budget and/or more professional memberships, I likely would have found even more available literature on the broad topic of communications. IABC had a number of other books and studies available for purchase. For human resources professionals who are members, the SHRM website provided a variety of literature, including five articles that provided good insights into employee communications. The article “Organizational Communications” cited the following 10 Key Principles for a

Successful Communications Program:

1. Role of CEO.
2. Role of senior management.
3. Create a communications strategy.
4. Use multiple communication vehicles.
5. Communications training.
6. Safeguard credibility.
7. Actively listen.
8. Seek input.
9. Provide feedback.
10. Revisit communications strategy.

(SHRM, 2003)

“Effective Employee Communication Practice for Managers” emphasized the need for communications to foster two-way communication system rather than disseminating information (SHRM, 2004). The Workplace Communication Series Parts 1, 2 and 3 addressed respectively “Communication Basics,” “Employee Involvement,” and “Communication and Technology.” “Communication Basics” offered a range of tips and addressed information overload (SHRM 1, 2007). “Employee Involvement” emphasized the importance of empowering employees, involving employees in strategic planning, and listening to “employee voice” (SHRM 2, 2007). “Communication Technology” addressed the use of social media and the virtual workplace (SHRM 3, 2007).

While my research focuses primarily on employee communications, it's important to acknowledge the ties and synergies to be gained through the coordination with external communications as well as the "big picture" of communications.

"Organizational communication is the lifeblood of the enterprise," according to Gary Grates, a globally renowned expert in organizational change, employee engagement and corporate strategy. "[Organizational communication] has got to be looked at holistically. It's about making sure that people not only have a grasp of strategy and a line of sight between job and marketplace and purpose, but that every single person in the organization is responsible for the ultimate success of that organization."

The Challenges

Connecting to employees is difficult for a number of reasons. Depending on the size and complexity of the organization, communication may be complicated by lack of proximity. Many companies have plants or locations in other cities or countries and more employees are working remotely. According to a Cisco study on the international workplace, the mobile workforce is now business-as-usual for enterprises around the world (Par, 2011). In 2004, JetBlue allowed 700 customer service representatives to work from home with no central office (oDesk, 2009). Despite the company size or industry, however, many communicators face a general lack of buy in from their management to provide the needed human and financial resources and/or to be an active part of the communications effort. But perhaps no challenge is more pervasive and damaging to the implementation of strategic communication initiatives and creating clarity than today's information overload.

The IABC study pointed out that with this communication overload comes increased competition for "employee mindshare" from both internal and external resources. E-mail in particular is "used and abused" in the workplace. Research published by Pitney Bowes in 2000,

which was cited in the 2005 IABC study, “indicated that people receive an average of 160-170 messages per day (Gay, C, Mahony, M & Graves, J., 2005). This one-way, “push button” method of sharing information is overwhelming and participants in that study stated that messages were repetitive, not integrated, and sometimes conflicting. This frustration continues to be true in 2012. In addition to being overwhelming and confusing, it’s also important to recognize that information overload can also have a negative impact on productivity, performance and morale. While an update to the Pitney Bowes study couldn’t be located, LexisNexis commissioned WorldOne to conduct a study in five countries—United States, United Kingdom, China, South Africa and Australia. According to the LexisNexis 2010 International Workplace Productivity Survey, an average of half (51 percent) of all professionals surveyed in each country say that if the amount of information they receive continues to increase, they will soon reach a breaking point at which they will be unable to handle any more (LexisNexis, 2010).

The problem, which began in the ’90s, has continued to grow because, according to the Information Overload Research Group (IORG), information overload goes beyond excessive e-mail to encompass social media habits, work interruptions, new gadgetry, Internet search results and more. A group of researchers, practitioners and technologists from academia, corporations, solution vendors and consultancies, IORG provides thought leadership and access to cutting-edge solutions and ideas, promotes collaboration between industry and academia and hopes to help shape the science of combating information overload. According to research published by Basex, a knowledge economy research firm and IORG member, information overload cost the U.S. economy at least \$997 billion per year in reduced productivity and innovation as of 2010, reflecting a loss of 25 percent of the working day for most knowledge workers. (IORG, 2012).

A number of themes emerged throughout the research, which will be covered under the categories of strategies, tools and trends.

The Strategies

Connecting the Dots

Having “informed” employees is no longer enough. Educating employees about the business and their role in its success is critical. And authenticity is also key—perhaps in today’s economy more than ever. Multiple studies and articles emphasized the importance of business acumen for all employees at all levels of the organization—not just for the C-suite. In particular, several white papers and strategy briefs published by Gary F. Grates, a Principal at W20 Group, the parent company of WCG, Twist Marketing, W20 Ventures, and NextWorks, outlined the ties between organizational effectiveness and strategic communication. Highlights include:

- “... no organization can grow, prosper or even survive without a knowledgeable, engaged and aware workforce.” (Grates, G., March 14, 2012).
- “... organizations are increasingly using communications to improve the business rather than the more conventional closed loop of using communications to improve communications.” (WCG, March 1, 2012).
- “Redesigning internal communications to achieve organizational confidence [results in] a smarter, more confident workforce.” (WCG, March 1, 2012).
- “... employees feel more respected when their leaders deal with the reality of the business situation rather than sugarcoating things.” (WCG, March 1, 2012).

“In organizations today, the number one problem that is plaguing organizational success is clarity,” said Grates. “A recent study said that only one in five employees understand the direction of their organization and believe it’s their responsibility to get the organization to where it needs to go.”

Educating employees was not only also cited as important by Towers Watson, it was cited as the top priority. In the fifth year of its study, Towers Watson expanded its research to include change management. The 2011 – 2012 Towers Watson Change and Communication ROI Study includes responses from 604 organizations in various industries from around the world and

describes what the companies that communicate and manage change effectively are doing. The themes of the report focused on clarity (the direction of the company and how employees contribute to the enterprise), confidence (supporting development of leaders and managers to better deliver confidence) and community (building a shared experience). The seven practices for effective communication (in rank order from highest to lowest importance) cited are:

1. Helping employees understand the business
2. Providing information on organizational performance and financial objectives to employees
3. Educating employees about organizational culture and values
4. Integrating new employees into the organization
5. Communicating to employees how their actions affect the customer
6. Providing individuals with information about the true value of their total compensation package
7. Asking for rapid feedback from employees about their opinions on the company
(Towers Watson, 2011-2012).

As noted in item number 6, more and more companies are demonstrating total compensation value by communicating an employee value proposition. According to Towers Watson, “an employee value proposition (EVP) positions a company’s employment deal as unique and helps bind employees to an organization (Towers Watson, 2011-2012). Additionally, the study found that “among companies with high communication effectiveness, roughly two thirds (62 percent) have a clearly articulated EVP” (Towers Watson, 2011-2012).

“From our study, despite all of those things that got changed in the economic downturn, only about one in six companies were recalibrating their deal to their employees,” said Finney. “Letting employees figure it out for themselves isn’t good for your retention practices. I think there’s some recognition that things have changed and companies are slowly starting to look at how they reposition the employment deal. And it’s two-fold—it’s not just what the employees can expect from the company, but what the company expects from the employees.”

Increased Role of Management in Communication

Management has a key role in connecting the dots. It's not only important to gain buy-in from the administration about the importance of employee communication, but actually engaging them in the communication process can positively impact success. Bill Quirke, managing director for Synopsis, London, England, and a leading authority on internal communication, engagement and change, wrote a number of articles on this topic from 2003 through 2011. Companies should implement training programs for their leadership team to properly equip senior administrators and managers. Speaking in plain language to place information in context for employees is one of the key skills that are necessary (Quirke, B. and Walters, D., 2003). In order for leaders to engage with their people, however, "communicators must engage with their leaders" (Quirke, B., July/August 2011). Quirke outlines four broad types of leaders and their communication styles—the director, the visionary, the empathizer and the structurer (Quirke, B., 2011). Communicators need to mirror the styles of their leaders and speak their language. Communicators can further support their leaders and bring clarity and consistency to the messages by helping them crystallize the messages, challenging their viewpoint, keeping the leadership team aligned, helping them specify the implications for different employee groups, and helping them grow their communication styles (Quirke, B., 2011). Using the FAME model—Focus, Articulate, Model, Engage—leaders can fulfill those four communication responsibilities, while engaging employees and making the connection between the organization's agenda and the individual's needs (Quirke, B. and Walters, D., 2003).

Rodney Gray, principal consultant and managing director of Employee Communication & Surveys Pty Ltd, and Larry Robertson, principal of Robertson Burns, both in Australia, echoed these sentiments in the article "Effective Internal Communication Starts at the Top." According

to the article, employees said senior executives weren't visible, gave few clues as to the direction of the company, were not open and honest, didn't involve or consult those affected by change, failed to recognize achievement, and sometimes punished those who raised issues. Research revealed that improving the communication of senior executives, especially the CEO, may be the most cost-effective way to improve satisfaction with communication in organizations. The authors also emphasized the importance of communicators using their own personal communications skills to connect. "We must seize every opportunity to engage spontaneously and meaningfully in our own affable style with others in the workplace," they advised. (Gray, R., & Robertson, L., 2005). While there may be more efforts and attention today to training managers and engaging them in the communication efforts, Towers Watson has found that evaluating managers on their effectiveness is not pervasive. The gap is a global issue and has been consistent across all five of the company's studies (Towers Watson, 2011-2012).

"Unfortunately, only a small percentage of companies actually arm those managers with the information and tools to make it turnkey and easy for them to communicate effectively," said Finney, "and even fewer recognize or reward those managers for being effective communicators."

The Tools

A Mix of Tools

As communication professionals we must not only create clear and consistent messages, we must control the channels through which those messages are delivered to break through the clutter. We must use a mix of communication vehicles, including more interactive and creative ways to engage and educate employees.

"Technology has tremendous benefits, but it always has to be tempered with the need for human interaction," said Grates. "We still have, in very many respects, a very outdated,

very pedantic look at organizational communications. It's still dominated by people that are more interested in communications as a tactic than they are in communications as a strategic enabler for knowledge, collaboration and engagement."

Bill Sweetland, editor of *The Ragan Report*, agrees. "There are all kinds of new avenues for an internal communicator to take and digital communications is just one of them, but it will never, ever supplant face-to-face," he said. "If you can't have a face-to-face conversation, the telephone is still a wonderful way to get to know another person better ... and I don't think we pay enough attention to this old medium."

Particularly with four generations now in the workplace, using a mix of communication vehicles is important to implementing effective communications. Traditionalists and Baby Boomers prefer to communicate via face-to-face meetings or over the phone, while Generation Xers and Millennials prefer e-mail and text messaging (Kapoor, C., & Solomon, N., 2011). And choosing the right tool for the message is also important. According to the Towers Watson Wyatt 2009 – 2010 Communication ROI Study, which surveyed 328 companies from various regions around the world, traditional communication channels remain the most popular for many of the employers' messages. According to the report, most employers prefer to communicate changes to business performance via staff meetings (73 percent). Employers view financial education as best delivered through their intranet (43 percent). And employers still prefer communicating changes to pay and job security face-to-face (58 percent and 48 percent respectively). (Towers Watson, 2009).

According to John Finney, senior consultant with Towers Watson's Communication and Change Management Practice, print seems to be on the decline. "Companies are proactively sending out less paper, but they're putting a lot information online, which a lot of people are

looking at and then printing,” he said. “It’s cheaper than the production and mailing, but I think paper still serves a role.”

Some companies are also using Office Communicator for instant messaging and Yammer, the enterprise social network, for communication and collaboration. Others are experimenting with gaming theory.

“We’re moving from an era in which we learned by listening, into an era in which we learn by doing,” according to Bing Gordon, founder of Electronic Arts and board member of Amazon and Zynga. “Gamers don’t read manuals. They see a door and they open it. Games are a system for creating meaning.” (Skerik, S., March 9, 2012).

Finney agrees: “We’re starting to see game theory growing in popularity as a different way to educate and engage employees. If you look at the top 50 applications for the iPhone, probably 43 or 44 of them are games. So the idea is to match those kinds of trends and tailor your messaging and media to those avenues.”

Finney noted that tablets are being used to deliver and access information. Other uses of technology and gaming might include “Benefits Jeopardy” where, instead of reading a 60-page printed enrollment guide, employees go online, play the game and earn points while learning about the benefits package. “Some companies are moving to Avatars for wellness programs,” he said. As you exercise, the “virtual you” earns points by walking to another location where the company has a plant. When you arrive, you may watch a video about the plant so you’ve just been educated about the company as you improved your wellness by walking around the globe.

To engage its tech savvy work force, eBay launched a Web radio program to keep employees up to date on financial news and hot topics, created an online game patterned after the popular game “You Don’t Know Jack” to educate employees about stock options, and launched a “directory on ‘roids” to connect employees with similar hobbies and interests (Allen, J., 2008).

“It’s that kind of customization and community that I think is key,” said Finney. “In the old days, mailing wasn’t communicating and today posting isn’t communicating. Just because you post it doesn’t mean you’ve communicated it. For global communication, translating isn’t communicating.”

According to Finney, modernizing the communication channels at work is also critical. “I call it the ‘five o’clock shadow,’” said Finney. “How you get information at work until 5 p.m. is delivered in one way—e-mails, town hall meetings, memos, desk drops. Then, when you go home, you converse with your friends and relatives and colleagues and various interest groups online, you’re surfing the web, you’re chatting in real time. Communication at home is probably two to two-and-a-half generations ahead of communications at work.”

Grates agrees. “Social media is not a tool but a mindset,” he wrote in his white paper titled “A Perspective ...” Interactive discussion and a philosophy of openness and transparency is critical to employee engagement. “Social media is a reflection of how people live and behave in an information oriented society.” (Grates, G., March 14, 2012)

In addition to finding ways for employees to use the same tools in the same way they are used to using them outside of work, Finney advises more use of portals and better navigation. Portals offer more collaboration and access to videos and interactive tools.

“There’s already tons of information out there,” said Finney, “The challenge is keeping it current and, more importantly, helping employees navigate to find the information they need quickly.”

Finding the right mix of tools for your organization, asking employees what they want, letting them drive adoption and encouraging feedback produces results. The Internal Communication chapter in *The IABC Handbook of Organizational Communication* addressed

this with the three fundamental building blocks to any internal communications program: hierarchical communications (active role by CEOs and other administrators including frontline supervisors); mass-media communication (newsletters, e-mail, videos, blogs, etc. for broad reach), and social networks (invisible communicators who spread the word) (Whitworth, 2011). “Layered on top of these three elements,” wrote Whitworth, “are the comparatively new social media tools—such as LinkedIn, FaceBook, Twitter, delicious, YouTube, Plaxo—that are migrating from the ‘real world’ into the corporate environment” (Whitworth, 2011).

A number of articles from the *Journal of Employee Communication Management* including: “The Right Vehicle for the Right Communication” (Duschene, D., 2007), “Social Media and the Evolution of Communication” (Hopkins, 2007), “An Insider’s Look: How BT Communicators persuaded Leaders to Embrace Social Media” (McAdams, 2008) , “AAA’s ‘Feedback String’ Encourages Company Dialogue” (Crescenzo, 2008), and “Productive Management Communication” (Kupritz, Virginia W.; Cowell, Eva., 2011) also supported this course of action.

“There is no such thing as one size fits all and your communications system has to be a mosaic of a number of different platforms,” said Grates. “Studies have told us that people have to hear things three to five times before they believe it. And they have to hear it from multiple sources so you need that kind of diversity of channel to start building credibility and to build trust.”

The Resurgence of Face to Face Communications

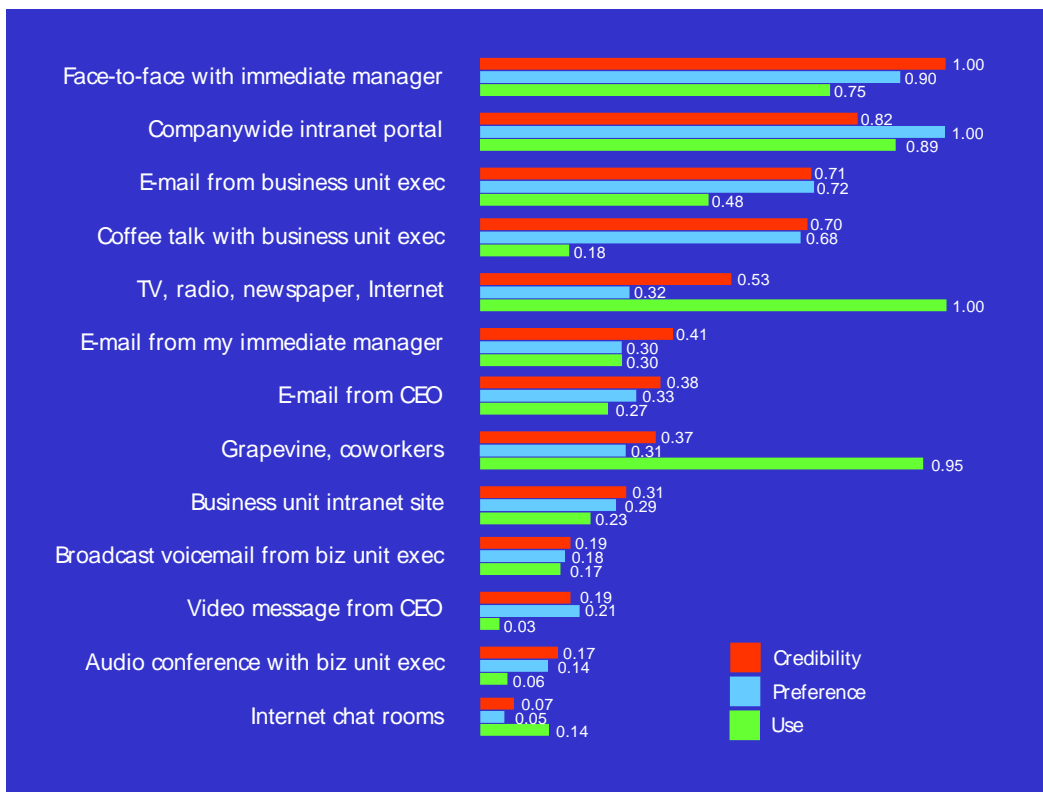
Despite the range of technology that is available, face-to-face communications still remains one of the most effective methods. Listening and answering questions is also critical and achieving that is often done most effectively through face-to-face communication by managers.

“Good old-fashioned face-to-face—or personality communications as they call it—is making a bit of a comeback,” said Finney. “I think the pendulum has swung a long way from where everything was supposed to be posted online. Now you’re starting to see companies that are advertising this as sort of a differentiator ‘you can talk to a real person in your own country.’ It’s interesting how far the pendulum has swung in that regard.”

Finney points out that the immediate supervisors are still the most credible source of information. “They’re the most trusted and they’re assumed to be ‘in the know,’” he said. “The employees whose managers are good communicators tend to be more engaged, they tend to be happier, and they feel they belong a little more.”

The article “Productive Management Communication,” in the *Journal of Employee Communication Management* examined which medium—face to face or e-mail distribution—was preferred by employees for the communication of different types of information. Employees responded that they wanted private confidential information face-to-face and that e-mail was the only mode of communication that was productive in time-sensitive situations. The study also supported the research that misuse of e-mail can negatively impact the bottom line. (Kupritz, Virginia W. & Cowell, Eva., 2011).

In “Management Communications: Unlocking Higher Employee Performance,” Brad Whitworth and Betsy Riccomini studied the rankings of the 13 sources of credibility, preference and use (Whitworth, B. & Riccomini, B., 2005). The authors wondered if communication professionals were putting effort into the wrong channels (see figure on page 18). Face-to-face communications with the immediate manager had the highest credibility over any other method while the highest use was television, radio, newspaper and the Internet followed closely by the grapevine.



(Whitworth, B. & Riccomini, B., 2005).

Unfortunately, the reality of the economy in 2012 is that many managers have been downsized and those who haven't lost their jobs now have a lot more operational responsibility. World-class organizations, however, are recognizing the need to rely less on new technologies and more on face-to-face communications to share knowledge, engender dialogue, and strengthen relationships (WCG, March 1, 2012).

The Trends

Employees as a Community

To achieve employee education and engagement, employees can no longer be treated like a passive audience; they must be treated like a community. "Employees must be treated as if they are a public constituency capable of opinion-shaping, decision-making and ultimately, organizational success—which they are," wrote Grates. "This means providing facts, interaction,

discussion, debate, dialogue and open communication.” (Grates, G., March 14, 2012).

According to *Contented Cows Give Better Milk: The Plain Truth about Employee Relations and Your Bottom Line*, employees want meaningful work, high standards, balanced “worth-its,” a clear sense of purpose and direction, level playing fields, and to be and feel competent (Catlette, B. & Hadden, R.,1998). Engaging employees in efforts not only educates them, it connects them with one another and with customers. Malcolm Gladwell’s *The Tipping Point* examines what it takes to create social epidemics. He identifies three types of people: *Connectors*—the people who "link us up with the world ... people with a special gift for bringing the world together;" *Mavens*—"information specialists," or "people we rely upon to connect us with new information," and *Salesmen*—"persuaders," charismatic people with powerful negotiation skills. (Gladwell, M., 2000). By identifying and engaging these individuals, organizations may see results—internally and externally.

The authors of *Brand from the Inside: Eight Essentials to Emotionally Connect Your Employees to Your Business*, who helped to build employer brands at Southwest Airlines and Yahoo!, advocate building the brand from the inside out (Sartain, L, & Schumann, M., 2006). Sartain and Schumann contend that brand is shorthand for the emotional connection with customers ... and employees.

According to “Methodology ... The Three Dimensions of World Class Internal Communications,” an open, fluid, and purposeful internal communications architecture builds and nurtures relationships (WCG, February 12, 2012). That is achieved by being strategic (linked to the organization’s strategy), being creative (appealing to people’s senses and emotions) and creating community. (WCG, February 12, 2012).

Creating community is described as promoting “socialization of strategy and innovation encouraging ideation and knowledge sharing between and among people regardless of title or level” (WCG, February 12, 2012). The white paper showcases efforts by GM and eBay:

- **General Motors**—Following its 2009 bankruptcy, the company worked to increase employee engagement with two initiatives. The company distributed a 5-7 minute daily news style broadcast with updates and reports on the business, competition, issues, products, services, financial performance, insights, opinions, etc. via satellite to all GM facilities in North America. GM employees have consistently rated the broadcast the most effective communications vehicle in the company. GM also is engaging employees directly in the business beyond just their individual jobs. Each month a group of employees from different areas of the business embark on a four-day intensive learning program to different parts of the country talking with dealers, meeting with customers, listening to complaints, spending time in service departments, and driving competitive vehicles in order assimilate to the real world and take those lessons back to their respective locations. Employees have help redesign work and processes and both customers and employees are more engaged.
- **eBay**—eBay employees weren’t engaging on behalf of eBay in social media internally or externally; historically there had been little success encouraging interaction and employee satisfaction was low. There was a core group excited about social media, but holding back erring on the side of caution. eBay found a passionate group of people and enabled them. The company developed and executed a Social Media Mavens training framework and program. By making interaction and commentary important and providing the tools and time to properly act, eBay employees continue to gain confidence in the process. The bottom-line is that new voices and ideas are permeating the business, which is having positive impact on everything from engagement to product development and services.

(WCG, February 12, 2012)

“A company’s external reputation starts with its internal reputation and effective internal communications is a key driver to an engaged workforce,” said Grates

Valencia College in Orlando, Florida, launched a new department in 2011 to enhance employee communication and engagement. Serving more than 70,000 students, the four-campus community college became a college last year and is on the brink of additional growth. The department of Organizational Communication and Development is trying to build all of the tools to support communication for the nearly 3,000 employees.

“All of the work we do is about building our employee brand,” said Amy Bosley associate vice president of Organizational Communication and Development.

According to Bosley, when the office was first formed, over 30 percent of employees responded to Valencia Experience (an employee engagement survey), and more than 96 percent of respondents understood and believed in the College’s mission. (Bosley, A., February 29, 2012). “There’s no way to build that unless you’re building it in authentic ways,” she said.

Zappos.com, an online shoe and apparel shop based in Henderson, Nevada, is known for its unique culture of fun and “delivering happiness” to customers through employee engagement and empowerment. Employee communications is handled by the change management team. According to Holly Delaney, human resources manager, most of the organization’s communication is through e-mail, but the company found that a lot of information was getting lost in the clutter so Zappos started a “Daily Buzz” e-mail to capture highlights. In addition to internal websites where information is posted and an HR website that can be accessed outside of work, the company uses events, parades and videos for engagement and communication. (Delaney, H., November 16, 2011).

In an environment where anything can happen—from sudden outbursts of song and dance to employees showing up to work in costume—the company often uses games and activities to educate and engage employees. (Delaney, H., November 16, 2011).

“With the ‘Face Game,’ when employees log onto their computer, the face of a randomly selected employee is displayed and the user is given a multiple choice test to name that employee,” said Delaney. Afterward, the profile and bio of the person is shown. There’s no penalty if the employee doesn’t get it right, but a record of scores is kept.

According to Towers Watson Change and Communication ROI Study Report, “building a shared experience is [a] hallmark of highly effective organizations” (Towers Watson, 2011-2012). A number of scholarly and trade articles supported these findings—in both small and large companies. “Employee Communication is No Small Wonder” noted that trust is built from a foundation of effective communication practices and contributes to productivity and business success (Gillis, T.L., 2007). “A Managerial Look at the Interaction Between Internal Communication and Corporate Reputation” stated that employees play a key role in helping companies achieve their business results (Dortok, A., 2006). “Rethinking Internal Communication: A Stakeholder Approach” identified the four dimensions of internal communications—line management, team peers, project peers and corporate—and the importance of each (Welch, M., & Jackson, P. R., 2007). “On the Quest for World-Class Internal Communication” offered a variety of suggestions for increasing interaction with employees including two-way dialogue, controlling the channels, having a clear agenda and integrating internal and external communications (Alexander, J., Lindsay-Smith, S., & Joerin, C., 2009). “The Central Role of Communication in Developing Trust and its Effect on Employee Involvement” offered a theoretical model of perceived communication, trust, experienced openness, and the effect on employee involvement in organizational goals (Thomas, G.F., 2009). “The Engine Behind Employee Communication Success” discussed corporate social responsibility as a valuable way to achieve employee engagement goals (Mamantov, C., 2009).

“Engaging the heart,” which is the theme of the book *Breakthrough Nonprofit Branding, Seven Principles to Extraordinary Results*, is also another way to engage employees. The authors cite the most successful organizations as those that understand their constituents, segment efforts to positively affect the varied citizens they serve and use communications to enhance

engagement. People—internally and externally—will support an organization if they understand that organization and its relevance to their lives. (Daw, J. S., Cone, C., Erhard, A. & Merenda, K.D., 2011).

Story Telling or Brand Journalism

Many companies are using storytelling or brand journalism to bring things to life and better connect employees to the organization.

“According to the American Literacy Council, 54 percent of employees remember facts and figures and 83 percent remember stories,” said Finney. “Tell the story that makes a difference to them . . . make it real.”

In Jacob Chung’s article titled “Bleeding of Journalism and Corporate Marketing,” John Earnhardt, director of corporate communications at Cisco discussed the shift in organizational communications from internal updates to industry specific stories sponsored by a company.

“When we’re not getting what we need from journalists, we’re doing it ourselves,” he told Chung. “What where’re trying to do is start a conversation.” (Chung, J., February 14, 2012). According to the article, Cisco’s own news site—*The Network*—has evolved since its launch in 2000 to include good original stories written by contributing journalists from major publications like *Forbes*, *BusinessWeek*, *The New York Times*, etc.

Several articles outlined the move to brand journalism by several large corporations—including American Express, Intuit, P&G, Johnson & Johnson, Guilt and Degree (Snow, S, 2012). The article “4 Business Models That Will ‘Save’ Journalism in the Next 5 Years,” written by Shane Snow, co-founder of Contently, explains that “brand journalism provides a way for good journalists to create quality, entertaining, and thought-provoking content” (Snow, S., 2012). Many companies like Nissan are hiring journalists, while others outsource to companies like Contently, which retains freelance journalists (Sebastian, M., January 9, 2012).

“Cisco is beginning an intensive brand journalism effort,” said Sweetland. “And American Express has a wonderful site called ‘Open Forum’ where they feature stories on many companies that they have commercial relationships.”

These efforts humanize and “put a face” on the company, both internally and externally. “An organization’s reputation today is the sum of its communication. Beginning inside and flowing to its external audiences,” according to Grates. “Every company no matter how large or small and regardless of product, service, or business model is a media company. That is, they create and disseminate content and convey stories that reflect consumer and customer attitudes, interests, and values as much as strategy and brands.” (Grates, G., March 14, 2012).

Measurement

Measuring the return on investment and effectiveness of communication efforts has never been more important than in today’s cluttered environment.

“A lot of companies make the fatal mistake of not obtaining an employee worldview,” said Grates. “It should be a comprehensive survey implemented at least every year, if not every two years.”

Grates recommends looking at how employees interact with information: how they seek it, how they share it, how they inventory it, and how they respond to it. Determine if employees look for the CEO’s message; search for commentary on the company from outside sources; seek out fellow employees’ ideas or opinions. By looking both inside and outside of the company, communicators should strive to get a macro view about how active and informed employees are.

According to Towers Watson Change and Communication ROI Study Report, only 28 percent of their respondents reported that social media tools were cost effective and only 15 percent had measurement tools in place (Towers Watson, 2011-2012). The iPass 2012 Mobile Workforce Report, however, reported that 67 percent of mobile workers now use social media

for work with LinkedIn ranking as the social network of choice for 79 percent of mobile workers, followed closely by Facebook at 76 percent (iPass, 2011). With these kinds of statistics, measurement of social media activities is also important.

“Think of how much time and money companies are spending on social media,” said Finney. “When companies say it’s effective, how do you know? With online, do hits really matter or can you track the number of people who came to your site and then did something with the information you gave them?”

According to Towers Watson, organizations that report social media is cost effective are investing in new social media tools, especially instant messaging, social networks, and leadership journals and blogs. These companies use these tools to support collaboration or share new ideas, cultivate community or team building and share feedback with senior management. (Towers Watson, 2011-2012).

Listening to social media is also a form of measurement. According to Sarah Skerik, PR Newswire’s vice president of social media, “listening is the foundation of agile engagement.” In addition to active listening in the workplace, social media provides opportunities to listen to “social echo,” which describes the way messages reverberate. Social media tools including Twitter, forums and discussion groups and search engines (for keyword research) are a way to monitor conversations. (Skerik, S., November 1, 2011).

Grates agrees. “A large part of communication is listening ... a big part of it, particularly today. With so much distraction, so much noise, trying to break through.”

Communicators should look and listen to all of their mediums for trends, to see how people are they behaving, what they’re paying attention to and getting involved with.

“This can help determine how that affects not only your current business, but your future planning and product development work,” said Grates.

WCG also recommends measuring employee engagement. In the white paper “Why Engagement Surveys Neither Engage or Inform in a Meaningful Way,” WCG notes that “Engagement is about individual behavior. People who have both an emotional and intellectual bond to the organization. Disengaged employees not only exhibit less than satisfactory behavior as it relates to performance, they actually produce less revenue for the business” (WCG, 2009).

The firm offers the following suggestions for better measurement:

- Above all, instead of just tracking and reporting on engagement across a spectrum of areas such as “management interaction” or “adherence to values” compile an overall statement reflecting the situation pointing to the organization’s management model. Doing so mitigates the knee jerk reaction to apply actions against each of the areas vs. developing an overall strategy.
- Recognize the real audience. It’s not employees! The real audience is leadership! Engagement is an outcome of the company’s current management model. At a minimum, the model needs to be recalibrated to deliver a more engaged workforce. If you believe employees are the audience, then all the effort is communicating results of the survey back to them instead of fixing the areas they identified.
- Make Engagement a senior leadership priority! Once the results are in, have senior leaders brief the organization on the findings and the solutions.
- Be consistent: implement these surveys at least once a year. Once every other year is OK as long as you have mechanisms in place to gather feedback in the intervening years. One communicator interviewed above says his organization implements “mini surveys” in the years between more extensive surveying.
- Be objective: for many companies, it makes sense to engage a third party to provide an additional perspective analyzing engagement surveys, to avoid bias and make employees more confident that their anonymity will be preserved.
- Finally... be level-headed: Almost as bad as ignoring feedback is responding too aggressively, too quickly. Take the time to truly assess the feedback and what it says about leadership’s effectiveness.

(WCG, 2009).

According to “Raise Your Internal Communication Game,” examining the channels and the possible competition or duplication between them can help identify gaps (Quirke, 2009). The article “A Definitive Framework for Internal Communication” emphasizes the need for “research

to guide and prioritize communication decisions, strategies and tactics” (Mellor, V. & Dewhurst, S., 2009). Additionally, “Six Communication Secrets of Top-Performing Organizations” states that highly effective organizations do a better job of measuring “the impact of communication on such business metrics as the retention of critical talent, workforce productivity, employee engagement, and business performance” (Trahan, B., 2008).

At eBay, the internal communications team frequently uses pulse surveys, which gauge employee retention of information to determine what types of communication are working (Allen, J., 2008). The eBay team uses three ways to poll employees: pulse survey (snapshot of culture), communication measurement survey (in-depth communication audit), and Watson Wyatt study (where the company stands in comparison to competitors) (Allen, J., 2008).

“The Watson Wyatt study results provided us with a linkage of great communication inside the company to better business performance,” according to David Knight, one of eBay’s internal communication team leaders. “And when you’re talking to your CEO, that’s a great kind of number to put in front of them.” (Allen, J., 2008).

The Future

Some of the external and internal factors that are currently impacting communication and change management are also evergreen. A decade ago, external factors cited included new technology, changes in the marketplace, changing customer expectations, competitor activities and economic cycles while internal factors included management philosophy, organizational structure, culture as well as the systems of internal power and control (Kitchen, P. J., & Daly, F., 2002). So ... “something old is new again.” What certainly is new and different, however, is today’s virtual workplace. Work used to be a place we went; now it’s what we do.

Siemens AG, a global powerhouse in electronics and electrical engineering, operating in the industry, energy and healthcare sectors, is one of the many companies experimenting with “hotel offices” (Forbrick, April 12, 2012). With 35 percent of companies using a mobility program, Siemens is trying on the “activity-based work environments” (Siemens, 2011). Mobile employees have access to work areas near their work team and other affiliated teams, which creates a “neighborhood.” They plug their laptop in at a workstation and unload and reload their keyboard and other items from a box that is locked and stored into a file cabinet at day’s end. For years, “in real estate, the mantra is location, location, location. At work, the mantra is communication, communication, communication” (oDesk, 2009). Designed to reduce the carbon footprint, protect the environment, support work/life balance, flexibility and trust to retain the best talent (Siemens, 2012), Siemens’ “New Way of Working” concept is being met with mixed reviews.

“Unfortunately, if employees don’t get in early enough, they may not get a spot near their team or in their ‘neighborhood,’” said Melanie Forbrick, vice president of corporate communications, North America at Siemens Energy, Inc. “And employees want more face time with their managers, not less.”

Globalization will likely continue this movement and perhaps bring a realization of the projections for “shramrock organizations,” which are organizations based on three-levels of workers—a core of essential, key executives supported by project experts (interim contractors) and finally, lower-level task workers (temporary employees) (Flex Execs, 2012). The phrase was coined in 1989 by Charles Handy in his book the *Age of Unreason*. This trend is a result of the shift from manufacturing- to service-based economy (Flex Execs Management Solutions, 2012).

This will not only further complicate communications, but it will further enhance the need for organizations to create a well-oiled internal communication system.

Convergence

My graduate studies have reinforced for me that public relations is a fine balance of art and science. Public relations professionals may wax poetic, but we are social scientists—right alongside anthropologists and sociologists. Partnering with our human resources colleagues can give us additional human insights and we can reciprocate with our communication skillset. Many of the courses I've completed during my graduate studies and many of the sessions that I attended at the 2011 Society for Human Resources Management conference as an elective for my master's degree stressed the importance to “communicate, communicate, communicate.” Professional communicators know that open, honest and frequent communication is key to building trust with any and all stakeholders. All too often human resources professionals simply pass on information, communicate official policies with jargon or communicate out of necessity to promote benefits, enrollment, etc. (Quirke, 2002). Regular collaboration between the two functions is critical to making sure that all of the organization's communicators are speaking with one clear voice internally and externally. And that communication is comprehensive, has context and is engaging.

There is no standard structure for the implementation of employee communication. In some cases, the human resources department handles internal communication while the public relations department (also known as corporate communications) implements external communication. In some cases, HR maintains certain notifications while PR implements both internal and external communications. Trends that have triggered the blurring of the lines include technology and the recognition of communication as a key driver to employee engagement and reputation protection (McAdams, S., 2007). According to Grates, “Communication must be viewed as an important component of the management model. It can no longer be viewed as a separate function” (Grates, G., March 14, 2012).

A number of articles as early as a decade ago emphasized the need for collaboration. In the article “Are You Ready to Take on the Communication Challenge,” the author stated “Communication is a partnership, not a solo effort. HR, marketing and corporate communications must all combine to make sure communication is vital, effective and business-focused” (Quirke, B., 2002). The article “Change communication: Using strategic employee communication to facilitate major change” advocates the creation of a strategic communication team, which should include management and non-communication staff (Barrett, D. J., 2002).

In addition to creating convergence between public relations and marketing and now public relations and human resources, technology—particularly the growth of social and new media—has made it nearly impossible to implement a “family first” method of communication. With collaboration, however, rolling out communications internally then externally is more doable and this method of operation is recommended at all times and critical during emergencies or times of change.

“Internal and external communications are merging, especially in social media,” said Sweetland. “It’s happening in other ways, too, because employees are being treated more and more like another external audience. Their opinions are solicited and their opinions get delivered to the company.”

The article “A Thin Line Between ‘Them’ and ‘Us’” noted the evolution of employees as a company’s most important public and the resulting dissolution of the distinction between internal and external communicators (McAdams, S., 2007). Three other articles “How can the HR team improve internal communication?” (Mulkeen, D., 2008), “Are you ready to take on the communication challenge? Building synergy between HR and communication to add value” (Quirke, B., 2002), and “Building an internal communication network” (Quirke, B., 2005),

recommended establishing an internal network to strengthen the communication community and build a more coordinated and cohesive team.

Creating a cross functional team for communication is the best way to achieve synergies, reduce redundancies and enhance communication internally and externally. And the burgeoning of the mobile workforce and new technology to support it heightens the need to bring information technology to the team. The article “Communicators and IT Folks: A Modern Marriage” offered 10 tips for partnering with IT, which included inviting the IT leaders to join the communications council (Vitiello, J., 2007).

“The only true differentiator today is your perspective and your point of view,” said Grates. “It doesn’t matter if you sit in HR or communications or design or manufacturing or legal. The biggest thing that we can do in communications is to get to the cause versus the symptom.”

Best Practices Companies

Several examples of “best practices” in effective employee communications were presented throughout this paper: American Express, Cisco, eBay, GM and Zappos to name a few. While benchmarking is valuable and can spark new ideas, it’s important to recognize that what works at one company may not work at another. And there is no substitute for creativity, innovation and customization.

“I think that some internal communicators would like there to be a digest or a roundup or a bible of best practices, but I don’t think that one exists,” said Sweetland. “I think the very concept itself may harm internal communications because it keeps communicators from thinking for themselves. I’m such a firm believer in the fact that every institution, every business, every company is radically different in its internal ethos, its culture.”

Case in point—Southwest Airlines. From connecting the dots to creating community, Southwest has a comprehensive communications program. Julie Weber, Vice President of People for Southwest Airlines responded via e-mail to my informal survey. Southwest’s Culture and Communications department handles all corporate communications, which includes employee communications and public relations. The company employs a range of communication vehicles to keep employees engaged, including a very interactive intranet that is updated daily with news blogs. That same news blog is sent via daily e-mail and is also accessible through the company’s smart phone app. Southwest CEO Gary Kelly records a news line every Monday that employees may access by phone, and the transcript is also available through the news blog. Many departments use instant messaging for internal communications, though that isn't implemented corporate wide. Employees may opt-in to emergency text messaging. The company also publishes a bi-monthly magazine. (Weber, J., April 23, 2012).

“There are also five or six annual ‘state of the union’ meetings held throughout the country during the month of February where employees and their families can hear directly from Gary Kelly,” wrote Weber. “The meetings are very ‘Southwesty’ with lots of fun and prizes.”

Weber described the companies communication as “very transparent ... we are a company that believes that you can never communicate too much.” Webber also said that Southwest sees a direct connection between communication and employee satisfaction and productivity.

“We survey our employees every two years and we ask quite a bit about the employee's satisfaction with communication,” wrote Weber. “It is a measure of their overall engagement.”

An equally fun, creative and engaged company is Zappos.com. I’ve researched the company throughout my graduate studies in human resources management and learned that

Zappos implements a number of methods to attract, hire and retain employees that fit their 24/7 culture and a working environment that is open, loud, chaotic and focused on team work (Delaney, November 16, 2011). Zappos CEO Tony Hsieh decided to “chase the vision, not the money,” and says that “there’s a huge difference between motivation and inspiration” (Hsieh, 2011). After conducting research on happiness (there was limited available), Hsieh chose happiness as a business model explaining that if you ask people what their goal is in life the answer may be to make money, or travel, or to have a family. “Keep asking ‘why?’ and the ultimate answer is happiness.” Scientific data seems to support Hsieh’s hypothesis. According to “The Happy-Productive Worker Thesis Revisited,” “happier employees are sensitive to opportunities, more helpful to co-workers, and more confident” (Zelenski, J. M., Murphy, S. A., & Jenkins, D. A., 2008). In general, the research findings of Zelenski, Murphy and Jenkins were “consistent at both the trait level of analysis (happy people are productive people) and the state level of analysis (people are more productive when in happy moods).”

A recent series of articles in the *Harvard Business Review* examined the “happiness factor.” In the article “Positive Intelligence,” the hands-on communication efforts of John Replegle, then CEO of Burt’s Bees, were recounted. Replegle and his administration team would communicate extensively with employees on their potential global rollout, which fostered “positive leadership” and “kept his managers engaged and cohesive as they successfully made the transition to a global company” (Achor, S., 2012). According to the author of the article Shawn Achor, who is also CEO of Good Think and the author of the book *The Happiness Advantage*, “happy employees mean better bottom-line results. Employees who score low in ‘life satisfaction,’ a rigorously tested and widely accepted metric, stay home an average of 1.25 more days a month, a 2008 study by Gallup Healthways shows. That translates into a decrease in productivity of 15 days a year” (Achor, S., 2012).

For Grates, he gauges best practices communications in terms of alignment. “For all intents and purposes, I always look at and follow those companies whose communications and business is in alignment,” he said. “I think McDonald’s has done a very good job of aligning its communications, its rhetoric, its policies and platforms around its core business strategy of clean facilities, hot food and fast service.”

And at Ford, according to Grates, everything emanates from the leadership team. The leadership team meets regularly and every element in the business—including communications—proceeds from core strategic direction. “So every week, the business is kind of recalibrating around what the priorities are,” said Grates. “Every platform, every message, every technique, every tool, every outcome is basically aligned with where the business sees itself at that point, which is phenomenal.”

Much like Zappos, Best Buy has educated and empowered its employees. Unfortunately, the margins in retail have been steadily shrinking as a result of growing online competition and Best Buy has suffered.

“But Best Buy has understood for years that if you can get people inside your company to become not just ambassadors but advocates, they can not only teach but learn from the various people that they work with and talk to,” said Grates. “That’s a huge differentiator in the marketplace.”

Legal Compliance in Communications

While communicating with employees about benefits makes business sense and enhances employee awareness of the value of their employment package, there are few legal requirements.

“In terms of insurance, health care and other benefits, communication is just good practice,” said Charlotte McDonald, an HR practitioner with more than 20 years of experience and a board member with the Central Florida Human Resources Association.

“Employees have an expectation of a benefit plan and, unfortunately, so many of them don’t realize that benefits are not required,” she said. “The only thing companies really have to do is pay them ... everything else is icing on the cake.”

In today’s down economy, practitioners agree that sharing comprehensive benefits information to demonstrate EVP has become more prevalent (Zajchowski, D., April 26, 2012).

“For private employers, in general, there’s not a ‘legal requirement to do certain things, but it’s best practices to communicate,” said Mary Ruth Houston, esquire. “It’s important to have and communicate policies and procedures about complaints, attendance and sexual harassment.”

Most companies handle the annual distribution of the HIPPA privacy rule (health insurance privacy) as a part of open enrollment. Companies (with over 50 employees) are legally required to communicate the Family Medical Leave Act and may be governed by Affirmative Action policy. In higher education, institutions must comply with Title IX and the Clery Act (reporting crime statistics) (Zajchowski, D., April 26, 2012).

“The way we handle information would be considered ‘open book,’” said David Zajchowski, human resources manager for Rollins College. “There are certain things that we do have to e-mail out legally so that we are able to demonstrate that we’ve communicated that information, but we put everything on our HR website.”

In addition to notifications from Human Resources, which includes annual e-mails as plan administrator for retirement plans, other departments may also issue HR-related annual notices such as a fiduciary notice of how to report abuse or misuse of organizational funds (Zajchowski, D., April 26, 2012).

Companies with over 100 employees are also subject to the Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification Act, which requires 60 days advance notification if a certain percentage

of workforce is going to be laid off (Houston, M.R., April 20, 2012). Under Title 7, Age Discrimination and Employment Act and other Civil Rights statutes (federal level) there are poster requirements (EEOC, 2012) and there are also state posting requirements that concern worker's compensation rights.

The Employers Association Forum, Inc. (EAF) was a great resource and listed the following:

State Posters

- Florida Law Prohibits Discrimination
- Unemployment
- Workers' Compensation Notice
- Child Labor law
- Florida Minimum Wage

Federal Posters

- Employee Polygraph Notice
- Federal Minimum Wage
- Equal Opportunity is the Law
- Federal Family & Medical Leave Act (FMLA)
- GINA 2009
- OSHA Safety & Health
- USERRA

(EAF, 2012)

“Overall how much information a company chooses to share with its employees is a case by case basis,” said Houston. “There are so many issues—privacy issues, intellectual property issues. My personal view is that you keep communication in the area in which it belongs.”

McDonald agrees because “employees generally want to know everything about everything” and some information is confidential.

“It is a good practice, however, to be open with your employees about what's changing,” said McDonald. “People don't usually like surprises unless it's their birthday.”

Summary

More than 20 years ago, *Innovative Employee Communication: New Approaches to Improving Trust, Teamwork & Performance*, offered communication professionals “Six Commandments of Effective Communication:

1. Employee communication is a fundamental component of the organizational management system.
 2. A clear statement of commitment by top management, as well as its participation and support, is essential.
 3. Communication must be a planned process—there must be a strategy—involving both communication professionals and key management people.
 4. Managers are the key conduits and catalysts for effective communication.
 5. Priority business issues should be the core content of the employee communication program and should be discussed in an understandable and open manner through various channels of communication.
 6. The communication system should undergo regular evaluation to prove its worth.
- (Smith, A.L., 1991).

The tools may have changed, but the primary concepts have remained constant for decades. Since many companies that participate in communication or change management surveys do so under the condition of anonymity, a lot of actual current case study literature wasn't readily available. After reviewing nearly 100 resources—articles, books, online sources and interviews with some of the top communication experts in today's marketplace—the best practices that emerged are simply *Clarity, Community, Context, Convergence and Customization*. Clarity in messaging, demonstrated in action by employees at all levels of the organization and in reduction of the “clutter” on the system. Knowing which communications vehicles are working best can be gauged through ongoing measurement and evaluation, which is critical to creating clarity. Community building by involving employees in decision-making and initiatives, creating camaraderie and engagement within the organization and facilitating better connections to the varied external communities the company serves. Another key consideration is better inclusion of the

families of the employees. Before the days of electronic funds transfer, companies had the opportunity to communicate with spouses through staffers in paychecks (Finney, March 22, 2012). Context refers to the organization's core business, industry trends, current economic impact, the employee value proposition, and more. Convergence in the form of eliminating the "turf wars" and silos so that key departments—the C-suite, marketing, public relations, human resources and information technology—work together. All levels of the organization need to participate in the effort and communications must be an organizational priority not a department function. Collaboration also engages multiple perspectives and points of view. And finally, customization—recognizing that one size doesn't fit all and tailoring the communication system to your organization's needs and culture.

As communication professionals we must not only create clear and consistent messages, we must limit "the noise" and use the best channels to deliver messages. We must also use a mix of communication vehicles, including more interactive and creative ways to engage and educate employees. External reputation starts on the inside and communication is critical to an engaged workforce.

The IABC study in 2005 found there are no "magic bullets" for addressing the issues facing communicators. Rather, they cited "best practice organizations employ a combination of tried and true methods in a way that is creative and customized to the unique needs of their situation and culture." (Gay, C, Mahony, M & Graves, J., 2005). This has been a constant and remains valid today. Knowing your organization, knowing your communities (inside and out), knowing what tools work best for your organization; these are the keys to success.

Constant listening, evaluation and measurement can keep the communication flowing up, down and throughout the organization. And, when communication is implemented effectively, employees will be more engaged, satisfied and productive.

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