

The Webcast Advantage

How webcasting can be an integral tool for effective internal communication in organizations

Every organization—whether it is a multinational corporation or a not-for-profit institution—is only as strong as its workforce. Many workers today are suffering from low morale, low productivity, and little or no trust in organizational leadership. These are all symptoms of an organization that needs an intervention—and without exception, the prescription that can cure these workplace ills is effective internal communication.

Effective communication can also act as an elixir to help boost a company's bottom line. According to the Communication ROI Study conducted by management consulting firm Watson Wyatt, when organizational leaders implement a regular communication process—where employees are informed about the organization's business strategies, and given the opportunity to provide their feedback and ideas—this open internal communication benefits the organization financially.

In particular, the study found that:

- Organizations that used internal communication effectively returned 57 percent more to their shareholders than those that did not have effective internal communication programs in place;
- Organizations with effective internal communication programs yielded a 91 percent total return to shareholders, while organizations that communicated less effectively achieved a 58 percent total return to shareholders;
- Organizations that communicated effectively with workers enjoyed a 20 percent increase in market value; and
- Organizations that communicated effectively with employees were 20 percent more likely to have a low employee turnover rate—thus saving money on the recruitment and training of new employees.

There is no placebo effect when it comes to effective communication: It is truly the panacea that will transform a sick workforce into one that is healthy and thriving.

Diagnosis #1: Lack of information

The Symptoms: Some organizations adopt a communication style known as mushroom management, meaning that its leadership leaves workers completely in the dark most of the time and then occasionally dumps waste on them. There are some short-term and somewhat shortsighted benefits to this communication style—namely that an organization's leaders can focus their time and attention elsewhere, rather than exerting the effort to keep workers informed. In addition, this communication avoidance protects managers from the line of fire—particularly during periods of upheaval, such as when an organization lays off employees or enacts policies that will be unpopular among workers. When leaders don't supply information during these times, they also don't experience the pressure of fielding difficult questions from employees.

As a long-term communication strategy, however, keeping employees in the dark is ineffective. Managers who adopt this communication style must remember that just because they are not formally disseminating information doesn't mean that information—and misinformation—is not circulating around the organization. Workers who do not receive information through official channels will seek it out elsewhere—gossip around the water cooler, Internet rumors, media reports—to fill the void. This can be problematic because the information derived from unofficial channels is often inaccurate.

The Prescription: Giving workers important information can offset the effects of the employee grapevine and allow leaders to present an organization's issues in the way they want to—instead of allowing informal networks to set the communication agenda and shape workers' perceptions.

Diagnosis #2: Distrust in leadership

The Symptoms: When an organization's leaders do not communicate effectively with the workforce, an environment of distrust is created. In this kind of work environment, employees feel like management does not care about their concerns and is not visible enough to even know what issues affect them. In extreme cases, the lack of communication may cause workers to even believe that management is lying to them.

The Prescription: Trust takes a long time to build, but can be shattered in an instant. In an organization where workers distrust their leaders, open and regular communication is needed to repair the eroded trust.

That's not to say that employees are unrealistic: They generally understand that their leaders have busy schedules. However, to build trust, management should make an effort to find out what workers are concerned about and address their issues in a transparent fashion.

Diagnosis #3: Lack of morale and productivity

The Symptoms: When workers do not have the information that they need to do their jobs, or do not have trust in their leaders, their attitudes and productivity can plummet. This can lead to problems like excessive absenteeism; hours of wasted time; and increased stress that can affect workers' health and raise an organization's medical insurance expenditures.

The Prescription: Happy workers are productive workers, so leaders should make an effort to build trust and create a well-informed workforce. Using communication to really connect with workers can go a long way toward increasing morale and productivity—and boost an organization's bottom line.

Types of Internal Communication

The most common channels of communication used in the workplace include face-to-face meetings, e-mails, and conference calls—each of which has unique advantages and disadvantages.

Face-to-face meetings. Of all of the communication channels used in the workplace, the most effective way to deliver messages to employees is through face-to-face communication—whether it is during one-on-one or group meetings. The benefits of this communication medium include:

- immediacy—all of the parties involved in the meeting can send messages to each other instantly;
- nonverbal cues—the gestures that people make can add meaning to a conversation and help colleagues connect with each other; and
- bonding—getting face time with colleagues is how employees can get to know each other and build interpersonal relationships.

In a perfect workplace, an organization’s leaders would be able to regularly pull up a chair and tell workers what they need to know face-to-face. However, the reality of organizations is that time constraints—and in some cases, geographic constraints—preclude managers from being able to frequently engage in face-to-face communication with workers.

E-mails. E-mail, like other forms of written communication, gives workers the opportunity to carefully consider their messages before they send them and review the messages they receive multiple times. In addition, e-mail allows colleagues to communicate with each other in a somewhat immediate fashion, with some conversations almost taking place in real time.

The disadvantages of e-mail communication include:

- the lack of nonverbal communication, which can make it easy to misinterpret a message;
- the inability to be sure that the recipient of an e-mail has read it; and
- the possible delay in receiving feedback to a message, which can hold up making important workplace decisions.

Conference calls. During live and recorded conference calls, employees can listen to important messages and benefit from how a message is delivered—the tone of voice, as well as the words—which can add meaning to what is being communicated. However, this type of communication can be less interactive than other forms of communication.

The Benefits of Webcasting

Webcasting, where messages can be broadcast via the Internet, is a medium that incorporates some of the best elements of other communication techniques. When communicating through a webcasting platform, users can:

- send messages and receive feedback in real time;
- connect with an audience through nonverbal communication; and
- prepare a message thoroughly before transmitting it.

In addition, webcasting is an easy-to-navigate medium that does not require users to install new software programs.

When used in the workplace, webcasting platforms can help an organization's leaders connect with their employees on a regular basis, while avoiding some of the challenges caused by other communication mediums.

Saving money. When organizations plan face-to-face events, such as town hall meetings or employee training sessions, they can expect 90 percent of the costs associated with these events to be connected to logistics—such as travel expenses, equipment shipping, meeting room rental, and catering. Webcasting platforms eliminate these costs because they allow organizations to reach employees at different locations simultaneously.

Saving time. In addition to saving money, webcasts can help people in organizations make the most of their time.

- Instead of spending time traveling to and planning an event, leaders can put more effort into creating great content for employees.
- When several senior leaders of an organization are creating content for an event, webcasts allow them to record their messages beforehand, whereas a face-to-face event would require that all leaders are available at the same time.
- Webcasting platforms allow for time shifting—meaning that users can access content at different times if they are unavailable during the live broadcast. This way, employees do not have to choose between attending an event and performing the daily duties of their jobs.

Extending the life of an event. Webcasting platforms allow users to save events so that users who want to refer to the material later can still have access to it weeks after the live

broadcast. This does not diminish the impact of the content because features—such as slides, polls, and surveys—are still fully accessible.

Creating a knowledgeable workforce. The more knowledgeable workers are—about their job duties, new developments in their industries, and issues that are unique to their organizations—the more productive they will be. Webcasting platforms make it easy to train employees as needed—whether that means creating ad hoc content to train sales people on a new product or developing an entire curriculum about sexual harassment.

Meeting compliance goals. In some cases, organizations must prove to a third party that their workers have completed specific types of training—such as sexual harassment training. Usually, this means that the organization will bring in an instructor every year or two to teach the latest curriculum. The problem is, employees meet in a conference room and sign a log to prove that they showed up, but this does not guarantee that they actually retained what they heard during the training—or even listened to the instructor at all.

Webcasting can help ease these concerns. By adding feedback tools into a webcast, such as surveys and polls, an organization can monitor whether or not workers have actually paid attention to the content—and provide necessary proof to third parties that the organization has met its compliance requirements.

Meeting green business goals. Many organizations have adopted green business goals in an attempt to reduce their carbon footprint. This can also give organizations a marketing advantage because many consumers want to do business with companies that have green business practices in place. In addition, being environmentally conscious can improve an organization's recruiting efforts—particularly among younger workers. Thanks to numerous corporate scandals, many prospective employees are disillusioned by examples of corporate greed and wish to work for employers that are giving back to the community.

By cutting back on travel, and other expenses related to face-to-face events, organizations can meet their green business goals, while demonstrating to prospective customers and employees that they care about the environment.

Receiving feedback. Effective internal communication is not a one-way street: In order to get the most out of this communication, an organization's leaders must be open to feedback from their employees. Webcasting makes it easy to elicit feedback from employees through polls, surveys, and question/answer sessions. By taking advantage of these tools, an organization can get a real look into what employees are concerned about.

In addition, the use of question/answer tools during a webcast can help to change the way employees behave during face-to-face meetings. Oftentimes, workers feel too intimidated to ask questions of management—especially if they want to discuss uncomfortable topics and ask tough questions. Webcasts give employees an opportunity to ask questions in a more comfortable environment that doesn't have a spotlight shining on them. As they see

that they can ask questions without being embarrassed or reprimanded, they will incorporate this behavior into their face-to-face meetings.

Another advantage of using Q&A tools is that it can help build trust in an organization. When employees see that their leaders are willing to answer the tough questions, they feel more of a connection to management and to the organization.

Improving morale. Webcasting helps open the lines of communication between management and employees. And when employees know that their organization's leaders care about their concerns, and will respond to them in a transparent manner, they become more satisfied with their jobs—which in turn improves their productivity and performance.

Webcasting Best Practices

In order for organizations to reap the numerous benefits webcasting, they should consider the best ways to work with the medium. As with other forms of communication, there are unique ways to handle content, attendance, and feedback during webcasts.

Content

As with other communication mediums, the key to successful webcasting is the creation and delivery of robust, memorable, and informative content.

Creating content. Employees, like any other audience, need to receive content in a webcast that is meaningful to them. Does the content in the webcast give them information that they need to do their jobs? Does it explain important changes in the organization? Does it address industry-wide changes that they need to know? The most important thing that employees will want to know about the webcast boils down to one question: “What’s in it for me?”. The content of the event must answer this question.

Also, when creating webcast content, take advantage of nonverbal communication—which is important for building a rapport with the audience. Your gestures and your paralanguage (i.e., the tone, pitch, and volume of your voice) should be used to accentuate what you are saying—and it must be congruent with your words. For example, if you are announcing that there will be layoffs in your company, smiling and sounding upbeat will not convey that you appreciate how this impacts your workforce.

Access to content. For live events, webcasting platforms allow users to watch an event online or call in to hear the audio if they do not have access to a computer. Webcast users can also memorialize their content and make it available to employees for weeks after the live event. However, this may be a double-edged sword: Although you may want to make it convenient for employees to access content, you don’t want to create an organizational culture where employees believe that they never actually have to attend a live event. In

order to prevent this, you may want to limit the number of webcasts that you make available to those who can't attend them live.

Language barriers. Many organizations have offices in foreign countries where English is not the primary language of workers—although they may speak English fluently enough to communicate with you. In these cases, it's still best to avoid regional slang and jargon and make a message that is universal enough for all attendees to understand.

Attendance

Some considerations about webcasting attendance include invitations, monitoring attendees, and presenting content in multiple time zones.

Invitations. Webcasting platforms can send event invitations, as well as reminders, to an organization's employees via e-mail. Despite the convenience, this can create challenges for users. For one, aggressive SPAM filters may catch the e-mails, so that employees never receive their invitations. In addition, many employees are reluctant to open e-mails that come from senders that they do not recognize. To ensure that employees receive information about upcoming webcasts, organizations themselves can send invitations and reminders to employees from a recognizable internal mailbox.

Monitoring attendance. Webcasting programs give users vital attendance data—including how many employees registered to an event, how many attended, and when attendees left. One important use for this information is content creation: When you find that many employees are leaving a 60-minute event after 45 minutes, you can tweak the content of the webcast to ensure that all attendees get the information that they need. When keeping track of which employees came to an event, keep in mind that the webcast data may not yield the exact number of attendees. For example, members of teams within an organization may decide to attend webcasts together, which is an effective way for a team to collectively discuss the material in the webcast and how it affects their work. In this case, every individual member of the team would not be logged into the platform.

Multiple time zones. For some organizations, such as multinational corporations, events need to be broadcast several times in order to accommodate workers in different time zones. This can easily be accomplished by planning multiple sessions and broadcasting them sequentially from the earliest time zone to the latest.

Feedback

In order to determine if a message has been well-received, organizations should get feedback from their employees. Webcasting platforms give users easy tools that allow them to receive feedback from audience members—which can be used to create future content.

Polls. Polls are a way for an organization to check the temperature of its employees during a webcast. Two effective ways to use polls are:

- At the beginning of an event, a poll can buy a little bit of time so that audience members can log on and settle into the webcast—while preventing early arrivals from thinking that the event has been delayed.

Polls that are administered at the beginning of an event can also give presenters a snapshot of the audience members' thoughts about the topic of the webcast.

- At the end of an event, a poll measures how much the audience understood the content of the webcast. This will give you valuable feedback about the way you presented the material and let you know what topics need follow up.

Question/Answer Sessions

The Q&A tools of webcasting platforms are another important way to take the pulse of employees and find out what is important to them. The following tips can help you get the most out of these tools.

- ***To phone or not to phone?*** Since webcasts give users the option of dialing into an event, it's possible that these attendees may ask questions via phone. However, organizations may want to limit this option because the telephone and Internet feeds are not in synch with each other, which can cause confusion for listeners.
- ***Content creation.*** The amount of questions that you receive during an event can give you a good idea of how much content you need and when you should open the floor for questions. For example, if you find that you are getting far more questions than you can answer, you can consider reducing the presentation and adding more time in the Q&A session. Also, employees' questions can let you know if your audience understood the content you presented.
- ***Follow up.*** The questions that are raised during webcasts create an opportunity to follow up on the issues discussed during the event. These issues can be addressed in other communication mediums such as face-to-face meetings, blog posts, and newsletters—as well as future webcast events.
- ***Question selection.*** If you are hosting a large webcast, you probably won't have enough time to answer all of employees' questions. To be sure that you are addressing the hottest topics, select questions that are representative of common themes that have come up in the questions. Also, in order to be transparent, select some hard questions on sensitive topics, so that the audience doesn't think you are dodging the tough questions.

Other Webcasting Considerations

Some other considerations related to webcasting include:

Legal issues. Because we have such a litigious society, organizations must keep in mind that there are legal implications associated with webcasting. In the event of a lawsuit, all of an organization's communication—both external and internal—are discoverable and must be produced to attorneys. This puts organizations in a precarious situation because the content of messages can easily be taken out of context—particularly if the lawsuit occurs years after the webcast took place. Therefore, organizations must be careful when constructing the messages in a webcast—any vague or unclear comment made today can have serious legal ramifications tomorrow.

Technology issues. When create webcasts, keep the following technology issues in mind:

- **Bandwidth.** Webcasting platforms give users the option of broadcasting streaming video or audio events. If you are transmitting content to a large population of employees, it may be necessary to send audio webcasts because of bandwidth constraints. However, you can still benefit the visual advantages of webcasting by using slides—which can include text or a picture of the speaker.
- **Security.** In order to protect your organization's network, work with your IT department to ensure that only your employees can log into the webcast. For the best results, check the network before each webcast for any security breaches—and be sure to also check that the servers work and the platform is functioning properly.

Conclusion

In *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, professor and philosopher Marshall McLuhan described the relationship between content and media, and how one influences the other, in five words: “The medium is the message.” Webcasting is a medium that exemplifies this idea—the messages created in webcasts are influenced by the medium and can influence the way the medium is used.

For effective internal communication, webcasts are a great solution because it incorporates many of the beneficial qualities of other mediums, while giving users options that other mediums lack. When used in concert with other forms of communication, webcasts can contribute to a workforce that is well-informed, productive, and high in morale.