

Smart guide

Create a communicators' network

7 steps to build a network that increases the effectiveness of employee communication





The challenge

If your organization has a single department responsible for all employee communication, consider yourself lucky. Most organizations today—especially global, complex ones—have different groups responsible for communication, from Internal Communication to Human Resources, from corporate to divisions, from headquarters to regions.

A decentralized approach can result in a number of challenges, including:

- **Information overload** caused by communication coming from many sources
- **Poor message alignment**, so employees don't know how their unit's objectives and performance fit in with the big picture
- **Duplication of efforts**, as communicators continually reinvent content, channels and processes
- **Isolated internal best practices** that aren't shared across the company
- **Lack of a career path** for communicators, so people have to leave the organization to advance

If this sounds familiar, don't fret. You can tackle your challenges by establishing a **communicators' network**. We'll show you how.

What is a communicators' network?

A way to bring together people from different parts of the organization who have responsibility for communicating with employees. Networks provide a way to address issues, share best practices, develop skills and collaborate to improve communication. Members can include communicators from headquarters, business units, regions and functions (such as Human Resources or Information Technology).

Follow these 7 steps:

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Meet Sophia

As the new Director of Internal Communications at Acme Telecom, Sophia knows she'll need to make significant changes to improve the function.

During her first few weeks, she met with employees from various levels and functions to understand their internal communication needs and preferences. She's not surprised to hear that employees have suggestions for how to improve internal communications at Acme.

Sophia appreciates that Acme values communication, but as a professional, understands that a decentralized approach to employee communication leads to problems. So she's resolved to find a way to bring company communicators together, despite the fact that many of them don't report to her. She decides to establish the company's first-ever employee communicators' network.

What Sophia learns

Even though her new department is responsible for communicating to employees, several dozen other individuals are sending out their own communications to the company. For example:

- In Human Resources, a compensation and benefits manager is in charge of HR communication.
- Several divisions have hired communication managers, responsible for both internal and external communication, who report to the presidents of those divisions.
- The company operates in seven regions, each of which has a communication professional who does a bit of marketing, community relations and employee communication.



7

steps to build a communication network

1 Set objectives

Be clear about what you want to accomplish before starting down the path of developing a network. Answer these questions: What problem are you trying to solve? How will the network benefit the company and its members?

Here are a few **sample objectives**:

- Increase effectiveness of internal communication to support the company's objectives
- Help manage information overload by decreasing the quantity and increasing the quality of communication
- Be more efficient by sharing resources and eliminating duplication
- Provide a pipeline for career development
- Build members' skills

Sophia sets objectives

One factor that guides Sophia's objectives is an employee survey that reveals that "information overload" is employees' number one communication complaint.

Sophia uses this knowledge to establish two objectives:

1. Make communication more **efficient** by eliminating duplicate efforts
2. **Increase effectiveness** by managing the quantity and quality of information



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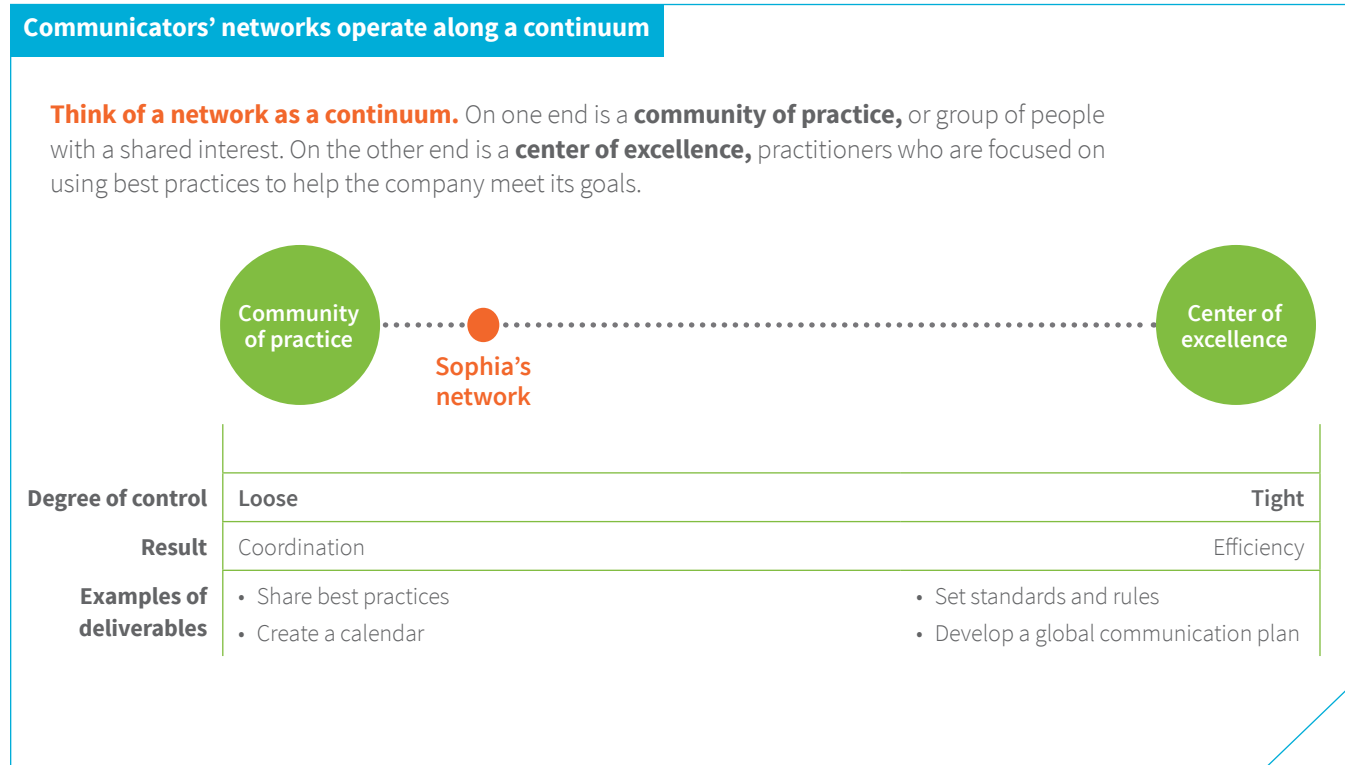
2 Determine your approach

Describing the type of network you plan to set up will help members and key stakeholders understand how the network will function and how they're expected to contribute.

The network should fit the culture of the organization. We suggest beginning with less control, in the middle of the spectrum, and adding more guidelines as you figure out what works well.

Sophia's approach

Sophia adopts a hybrid approach that leans more towards a community of practice, with a long-term goal of driving efficiency.

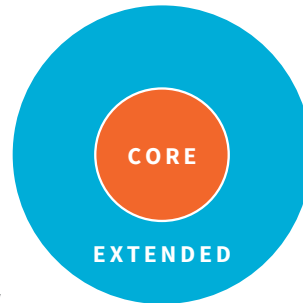


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3 Decide on structure

The structure of a communicators' network can be very simple: a core team of communicators representing major business units and functions.

But you may decide to make your network structure a bit more complex to take into account the intricacies of your organization. For example, you can create an extended team to include such key stakeholders as Information Technology and site management, as well as colleagues who spend a portion of their time on communication.



Sophia's structure

Sophia decides on a classic structure of a core team augmented with an extended team. Her core team includes senior communicators from each business unit, as well as HR, IT and Sales. Her extended team includes direct reports of the core team and a few “non-communicators” who influence communication but do not have a formal role. Here are the roles she articulates:

Core team

- Set overall plan/strategy, including priorities and a company-wide communication calendar
- Identify best practices and learning opportunities
- Implement communication projects
- Increase the quality of internal communications
- Develop standards and policies
- Maintain a system, including coordinated messaging, and share best practices

Extended team

- Participate in learning and development
- Implement projects
- Provide input and feedback

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4 Kick off the new network

Members need a chance to bond, understand the purpose of the network and participate in defining how it will accomplish its objectives. And they're more likely to commit their time when they shape the network's focus. Get your network started on the right foot:

- **Invest in getting everyone together in person**, at least for the first session. Many networks choose a location that's easiest for all members to travel to.
- **Consider meeting anywhere but headquarters.** You may be surprised to find that many communicators in your organization have never been to a manufacturing plant, distribution center, sales office or an affiliate. Use the kick-off session as an opportunity to broaden members' horizons by including a facility tour in the agenda.
- **Enlist a senior sponsor** and ask that person to deliver opening remarks. Since the network will make decisions that impact the entire organization, it's important to bring a sponsor on board to allocate resources and gain senior support. Invite your sponsor to be part of the kick-off session to say a few words expressing his/her endorsement.
- **Set clear expectations.** Networks are more successful when they have a clearly defined set of deliverables that provide focus, like a charter.
- **Foster a team-building experience.** Give people an opportunity to get to know one another on a personal level.
- **Create an agenda** to ensure you have enough time to accomplish your session objectives.



Sophia's kick-off meeting agenda

Meeting objectives	Order of events
Start the process of team formation	8:30 a.m. – Welcome and introductions <i>Review purpose of the meeting, set expectations for the session and introduce members</i>
Set the network's responsibilities and identify a priority for the rest of the year	9:15 a.m. – Meet the members <i>Conduct a quick warm-up exercise, set personal expectations and understand "communication" responsibilities of members</i>
Create a company-wide communication calendar for the remainder of the year	10:30 a.m. – Break 10:45 a.m. – Employee experience <i>Use demographics to create employee personas; highlight existing employee communication survey data; hold a mock focus group with six typical employees; brainstorm opportunities/solutions and identify our first initiative</i>
	12:00 p.m. – Team lunch
	1:15 p.m. – Communication calendar <i>Develop a view of communication events across Acme Telecom for the rest of the year</i>
	2:00 p.m. – Define how we'll work together <i>Brainstorm how we'll collaborate: objective, process, tools required and top priorities</i>
	5:30 p.m. – Dinner

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5 Make meetings meaningful

We've seen it happen again and again. A network starts with a fanfare, but degrades to nothing more than boring status meetings. Since networks often lack formal reporting relationships, special care and feeding is required to make interaction meaningful for participants.

Here are three ways to keep the momentum going:

- 1. Share best practices.** Communicators in the far reaches of your organization often feel like they need to create everything from scratch, so they're hungry for techniques they can leverage to make their work easier. Identify members who are doing great things and ask them to present their approach and methodology. Share templates and tools, too, so network members can immediately apply what they've learned.
- 2. Create learning.** Today's busy communicators rarely have time to attend a conference or even log in to a web workshop. Bring learning to the network by sponsoring a guest speaker or workshop leader. This learning can take place face-to-face or virtually, and can be a one-shot deal, a series or even a training course with assignments.
- 3. Collaborate to solve problems.** Now that your network is established, why not put it to work? Give members a chance to brainstorm challenges during your meetings or create subteams to develop solutions they can recommend to the network.

Sophia's strategy for involvement

After talking to members at the kick-off session, Sophia finds that two common challenges are how to make town halls more dynamic and e-newsletters more compelling. So Sophia invites a consultant who specializes in town halls to present at the next meeting.



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6 Maintain communication

Meetings are key to a network's success, but they're not the only way to keep in touch and share your stuff. Consider all available methods and resolve to practice what you preach about using the right communication tool for the right job:

- Web meetings for virtual learning sessions and get-togethers
- Instant messaging group for bouncing ideas off each other
- Microblog for sharing what members are working on
- Resource portal with templates and guidelines

Sophia's social

Sophia's company intranet has already established a robust social networking tool that's a cross between LinkedIn and Facebook. Since many of her network members already use this feature, Sophia decides to set up a group, similar to a LinkedIn group, but inside the intranet's firewall. Since the group only allows members to access content, even sensitive material can be shared without security issues.

Sophia quickly learns that setting up the group is not enough: It requires ongoing management and members need to be encouraged to visit. So she creates a "group manager" role. Every month, a new manager takes on the responsibility of promoting the group site to members so they will engage in dialogue, get help with challenges and share best practices.



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7 Develop metrics

As with any communication, measuring your efforts will gauge success and inform decisions. Measurement helps demonstrate the value of your network, while creating clarity about what's working or can be improved.

Sophia was lucky because her company already had a bi-annual communication survey in place. She uses the results as a diagnostic tool to:

- Measure the impact of changes made by the network
- Make informed decisions

Given a systemic problem with information overload, the network decides to further explore recent survey results by conducting five focus groups. This is a perfect way to uncover the why behind the data.

Network members create a discussion guide that includes such questions as:

- What types of information are you overloaded by? Are there topics you would like to receive more information about?
- Which communication channels are contributing to information overload? Are there channels that are streamlining or reducing overload?
- Do you have suggestions on how we can improve overload? What would make your work life easier?

The team decides that it will also develop metrics for specific initiatives to determine if objectives have been achieved. For example, when network members make improvements to town halls across the company, the team develops a consistent survey that members can use to measure employee feedback about changes.

Sophia measures progress

Sophia uses the company's bi-annual communication survey to understand if changes she and the network have made are having an impact. She keeps questions consistent, so she can track progress.



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- Strengthen the team's skills
- Design and manage an internal communication network

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