

Smart guide

Use deep insights to create breakthrough employee communication

4 ways to understand your audience





Understand your “customer”

You work hard to communicate with employees: posting web content, sending emails and organizing leader town hall meetings. Despite your best efforts, however, communication often fails to capture employees’ attention, so they aren’t fully engaged. As one communicator put it, “We spend a lot of time communicating to our employees so they understand what’s changing. But only a very few actually read the materials.”

To break through the barriers, start by leveraging a core strategy used by leading consumer product companies like PepsiCo, L’Oréal and Nestlé. These marketers spend a great deal of time understanding their target customers. Why? Because the more they gain deep insights about customers’ habits, attitudes and preferences, the more successful they’ll be at developing and marketing products customers will buy.

At Davis & Company, we think of employees as customers of communication. And we believe in listening to our customers, so we understand their needs.

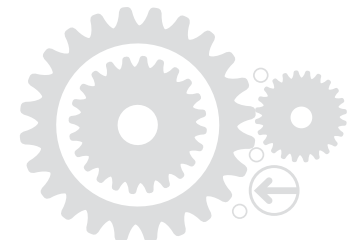
For internal communication, “deep insights” means knowing what employees do, how they think and what they believe. The more you know, the better you can create communication that employees view as meaningful and useful. That’s “employee-centric communication.”

Gathering insights is different than measuring the effectiveness of communication, since it’s focused on building a base of knowledge that you can draw from.

	Gather insights	Measure communication
Goal	Make informed communication decisions and influence stakeholders	Assess the effectiveness and demonstrate the impact of employee communication
How	Gather and sort existing data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct original research: comprehensive and spot surveys, focus groups and interviews • Audit communication channels • Benchmark against leading practices

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Four insights about employees

Having a foundation of great data will help you:

- ✓ Create smart communication plans
- ✓ Balance your objectives (and/or the company's goals) with what's important to employees
- ✓ Shape content: create messages that capture employees' attention
- ✓ Influence stakeholders: move from a colleague with an opinion to a communication expert

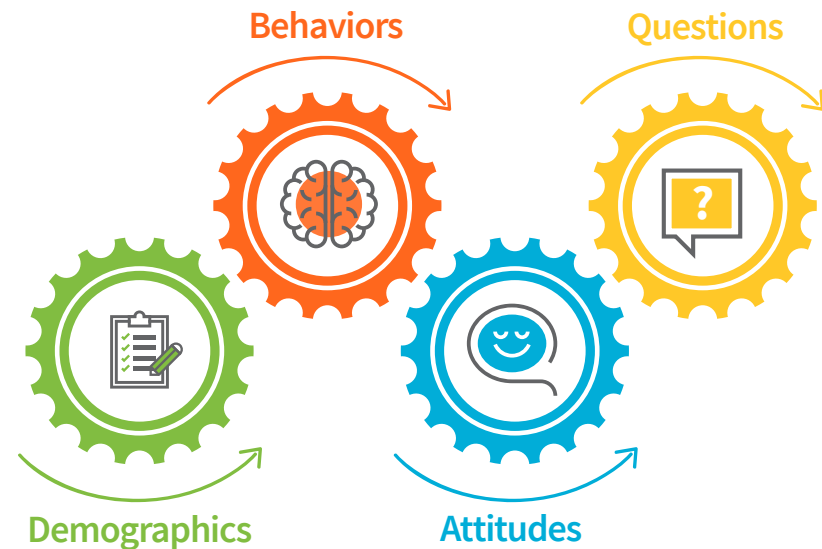
You know what they say about making assumptions...

There are two dangerous assumptions you can make about internal communication:

1. What you prefer about communication will appeal to all employees
2. Just because you've sent a message, employees have received it, understood it, accepted it and acted on it

Don't plan in a vacuum. Gather the data you need to make informed recommendations.

Whether you're ready to take the plunge or you just want to dip your toe in the data pool, **here are four insights** to gather and analyze, so you can make informed decisions about communication:



1

Demographics

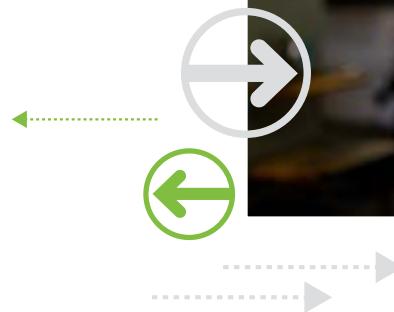


Let's start with demographics, defined as "the characteristics of human populations and population segments, especially when used to identify consumer markets." Demographics are used extensively in advertising, marketing, politics and other fields to understand what people care about and what they might be willing to buy.

Although not a foolproof predictor of behavior, demographics are also valuable for internal communication. Every communicator should have employee details that answer questions like these:

- How many locations?
- What is the average tenure?
- What are our key job categories?
- Do employees have access to communication tools?
- What percentage of employees work in manufacturing, sales and office positions?

Answers to these questions provide insights into almost every aspect of what employees prefer: **how** information is delivered (for example, print vs. digital) and **what** topics are communicated.



1. Demographics (continued)

Three essential demographics

Potential demographic categories are almost limitless, but don't get overwhelmed by the possibilities. Begin by focusing on three essential areas:



Geography

Location, location, location. When it comes to how employees experience communication, geography is an important factor. For example, employees in remote locations often feel more out of the loop than those at headquarters.



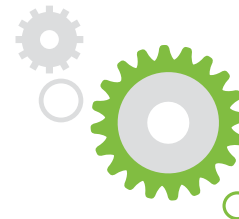
Tenure/length of service

Some organizations have employees who stay at the company for decades. Others—in retail and food service, for instance—have very high attrition, with annual turnover of 80% or higher. Tenure has implications for how much employees understand about the company.



Access to technology

This is a new and important data point in our age of email, social tools and intranets. Do employees have regular access to the communication tools we create—either on desktop computers or mobile devices?



What about age?

You probably noticed that **our three essential demographics don't include age**. While generational cohorts (Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, Millennials, Gen Zers) are often used to categorize the general population, our experience tells us that employees across a company have similar communication needs and preferences—independent of their ages.

For example, in the not-so-distant past, we may have thought of Baby Boomers and Millennials at opposite ends of the technology spectrum. But the world has quickly changed. **Most Boomers are comfortable using web-based and mobile tools in their personal lives**. It's a trap to limit communication based on broad perceptions of age groups.

Of course, there may be times when it's appropriate to segment by age, such as when communicating topics that employees experience differently based on how old they are—like retirement planning.

1. Demographics (continued)

Where to find demographic data

The best source for demographic information is Human Resources. Many HR organizations have an HR information or payroll system that captures essential data about employees. While it may be ideal to obtain data that's as specific as possible, don't obsess over every detail. The idea is to paint a picture of your organization, so you can consider employees' information needs and how best to reach them.

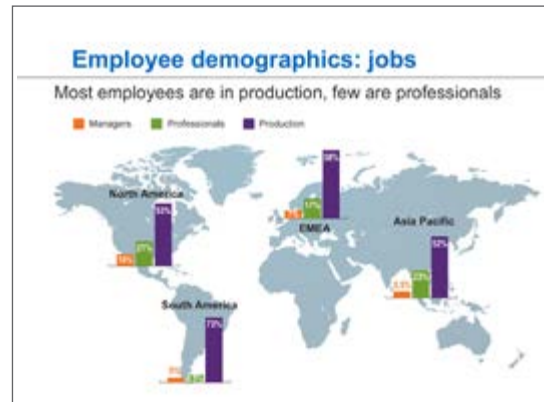
What to do with demographic data

Use demographics to develop tools that will help you influence stakeholders and sell your communication plans.

Create a demographic map

Consider developing a **demographic map or location profile** of your organization by answering these questions:

- What is your organization's geographic scope? Nationwide or global? Pinpoint all locations on a map to see how your organization is distributed.
- How many employees are at headquarters? What divisions and functions are centered at headquarters?
- Besides headquarters, how many large or major locations are in your organization?
- What is the function/focus of location? How many people work in each?
- How many field/remote locations are there? How small are these outposts? What work gets done there?
- Do you have a significant employee population that works at home or at a client location? How many? Where?



Create a demographic map when you want to:

- Influence stakeholders
- Develop a communication plan
- Design content
- Map a message framework
- Select topics and set an editorial calendar
- Create follow-up communication
- Identify communication tactics
- Set measurable objectives
- Identify barriers to change readiness
- Track participation and identify trends

1. Demographics (continued)

Develop profiles

Another of our favorite approaches is creating **profiles**: a collection of demographics and associated facts about key employee subgroups. **Here's an example of a profile template**, which can be customized depending on your organization and situation. Profiles will help you keep employees in mind as you plan communication.

Audience profile

Average age:

Typical location:

Work environment (access to a computer):


Day-to-day priorities:

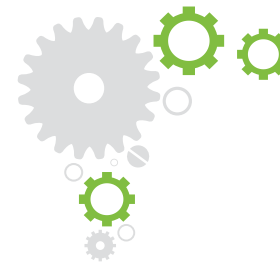
1.

2.

3.

Time available to participate in communication (average/week)





Develop profiles when you want to:

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2 Behaviors

Understanding what employees do is an important strategy to develop communication that encourages new behaviors. There are two sides to the behavior coin:

a) Participation metrics—how employees read/attend/watch your communication channels

b) Actions—what employees do every day or within a program

a) Participation metrics

The premise here is simple: If you understand how employees read/attend/watch your communication channels, you can do a better job of recommending them and adding supporting tactics.

Here's an example: If only 30% regularly visit the intranet home page, it's clear that you'll need additional communication tools to build awareness for a change effort.

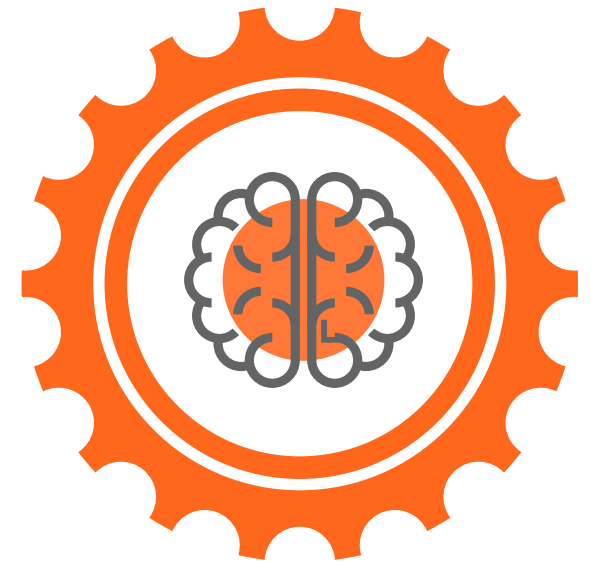
Where to find participation data

Observation. Put on your mystery shopper hat and watch employees: Do they grab the printed newsletter outside the cafeteria? Do they stop to read the poster or digital sign near the elevator?

Attendance. Start counting! How many employees attend key events, such as town halls?

E-metrics. One of the advantages of digital channels is all the data they generate. Work with your IT partner to track key metrics, such as:

- Email opens
- Visits to the intranet home page, article opens and time spent
- Most popular intranet pages
- Downloads of key documents



2. Behaviors (continued)

b) Actions

With actions, we're addressing how employees spend their day and when/how they complete tasks. The actions you track will depend on your focus: corporate communication, or a specific program or initiative.

Where to find action details

Observation. If you're a corporate communicator, for example, it may be useful to know how employees navigate key locations. At a hospitality company, we knew that more than 80% of employees pass through the cafeteria during lunch, so we designed communication tactics for that audience. Site visits are a great way to uncover these details. See page 10: *12 ideas for your next site visit.*

Program metrics. Understand which behaviors apply to your situation and gather details. If you're a communicator focused on HR communication, you'll want to know how many employees enroll during benefits annual enrollment and when. Or if you're communicating about performance management, you'll want to understand how many employees complete their assessments and when.

Does your communication channel need a tune-up?

If you discover that one of your channels has low participation, it's an important clue that employees may not value the tool or the content. Here's what we hear from employees about channels:

"I've heard it before, old news"

"Too long, don't have time"

"It's difficult to understand"

"It's not relevant to me"



Want to learn more about employee preferences?

Check out our Smart guide: [5 ways employees would improve internal communication.](#)

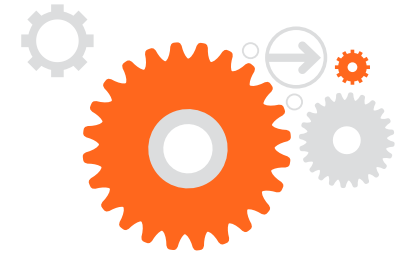
2. Behaviors (continued)

12 ideas for your next site visit

One valuable way to observe employees is to schedule a site visit. The idea is to learn how employees outside headquarters experience communication—and the workplace: What’s the culture? How do employees interact with leadership? What obstacles exist for engaging employees?

Once you’ve packed your bags and booked your flight, consider what you’ll do while you’re there. For example:

- 1. Don’t park in the spots reserved for visitors (tempting as that might be)**—drive to the regular employee lot. Notice how long it takes you to walk to the entrance. What do you see along the way?
- 2. Pay attention to details:** What is the entrance area like? Friendly and welcoming—or cold and imposing? Is there a digital screen or other messaging?
- 3. Observe how employees enter the building.** Do they go through a gate? Show their badge to a guard? Punch a time clock?
- 4. Follow a couple of employees to their destinations.** (You might want to introduce yourself so they’re not creeped out.) Do they go right to work or stop for coffee?
- 5. Drink coffee.** Determine where employees find a hot beverage. Does the site have a cafeteria? Break rooms? Machines? Is the coffee area a place to congregate and chat with co-workers? Or is it grab and go?
- 6. Now that you and your new employee friends are fully caffeinated, accompany them to their workstations.** How is the work environment? Is the area well-lit? Can employees sit or stand comfortably? How is the noise level?
- 7. Ask your host to tour the entire facility.** Notice any differences between groups or functions.
- 8. Visit the area where senior managers (at that facility) work.** Does it seem like a fortress or is the area accessible to all?



2. Behaviors (continued)

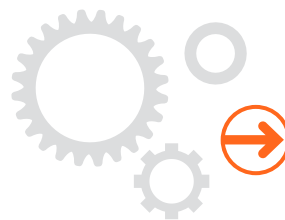
9. **Listen.** Before you arrive, set up sessions with individuals and groups representing a cross-section of employees. Start at the top: Talk to the general manager or plant manager about his/her needs. What are some things this facility does well? What stands in the way of employee engagement, in his/her opinion?
10. **Meet with managers a level or two down, asking similar questions, plus this one:** What do you need to be successful?
11. **Chat with your peers in HR or communication.** What is life like in this facility? What would help them accomplish their goals?
12. **Finally, conduct focus groups with employees from different demographics (job function, tenure, etc.).** Ask about what works for them, what frustrates them and what suggestions they have for improvement.

What to do with behavior data

Create a scorecard that demonstrates the reach of your key communication channels or how employees behave within a program.

Here's an example from a survey we conducted for an industrial manufacturer. In this case, we're tracking participation with four corporate communication vehicles.

Vehicle	Reported participation (% of employees)
All-hands meeting	70%
Bulletin board postings	72%
Local/site newsletter	66%
Round table meeting	46%



Create a scorecard when you want to:

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3 Attitudes



How employees are feeling is an important consideration when designing communication: Do they trust leaders? Do they believe the company is headed in the right direction?

Most organizations have attitudinal data sitting on the shelf. Your challenge is to understand what's available and how it can be used to support your communication efforts.

Where to find attitudinal information

HR should be your first stop. Engagement or satisfaction surveys are usually good sources with data that apply to internal communication.

And you may find teams that have done qualitative research, such as follow-up focus groups to dig into the results of an engagement survey. While a specific topic may have been explored, employees will usually share their attitudes about broader communication issues. For example, in a focus group about performance management, employees may talk about how much they trust leaders.



3. Attitudes (continued)

How to use attitudinal data

Track trends in positive and negative attitudes. For example, has confidence in the future increased or decreased? This will require that you find a baseline and conduct follow-up research, such as a pulse survey, to understand progress.

Consider bucketing this data into key topics that you monitor consistently. Here are examples of questions from engagement surveys that could play a role in the attitudes you track:

Topic	Example of questions from engagement surveys
Strategy/direction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I understand how my role is related to the company's overall goals. • I feel confident about the company's future.
Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I feel a sense of community at the company. • I am proud to work for the company.
Leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have confidence in the leadership team to effectively lead the company. • I trust that senior leaders provide a balanced view of the information they present.
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I feel I receive the right amount of communication to help me understand what's happening across the company. • I feel I receive key updates at the appropriate time.



Monitor attitudes when you want to:

- Influence stakeholders
- Develop a communication plan
- Design content
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4

Questions



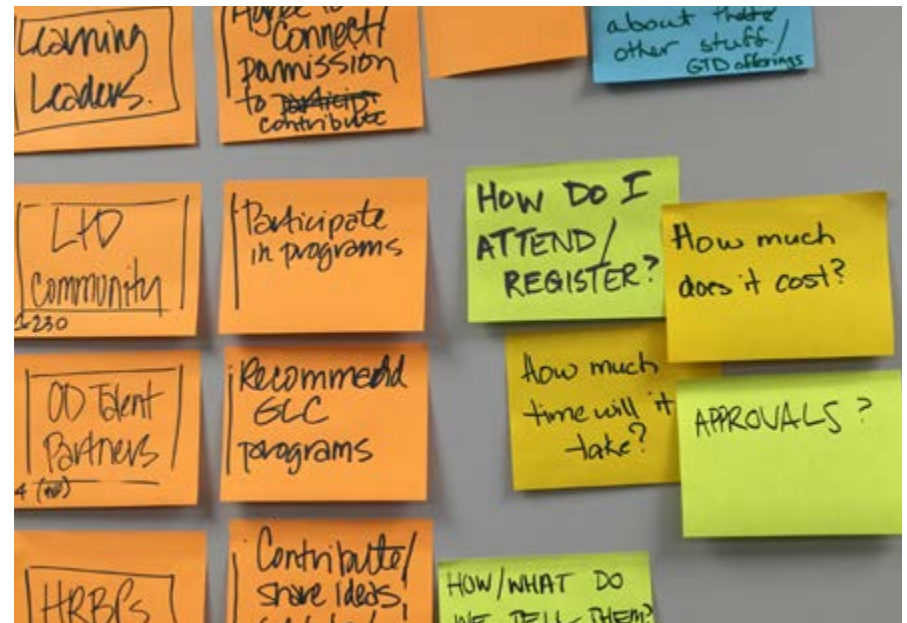
The questions employees ask are important clues about what you need to address in your communication plan. Collecting them is a powerful way to shape the strategies and tactics that will help employees find answers.

Where to find questions

You can gather questions that show up every day in town hall meetings, email submission boxes and intranet pages (including social media).

Or you can focus on a topic and gather/generate questions. Here are two of our favorite methods:

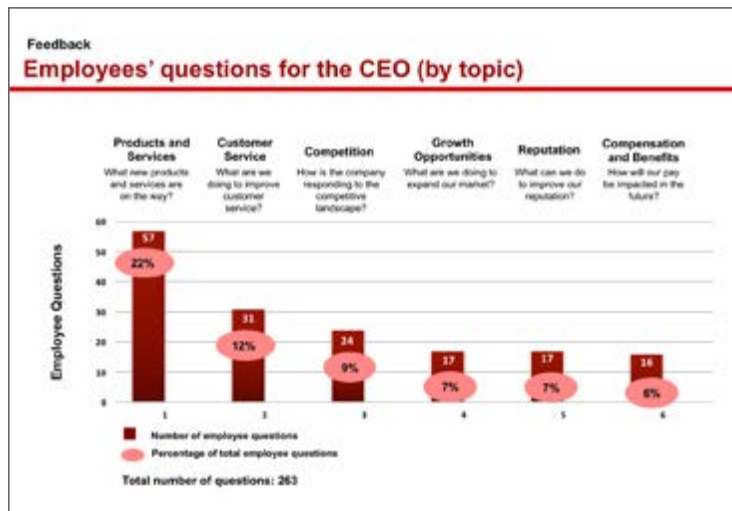
- 1) During communication planning workshops, we often create **three to five profiles of typical employees** and brainstorm questions each will have. For example, we may paint a picture of Allister: a sales rep who has been with the company for one year and visits his office once a month for a team meeting. Then we collaborate on the questions Allister would ask.
- 2) And we often **ask managers to help** us with questions. After reviewing a communication rollout with managers, we ask, "What questions will your employees have after we launch this communication?"



4. Questions (continued)

How to use questions

The valuable part of monitoring questions is analyzing and categorizing them, so you can address the themes that emerge. Create a summary with sample questions (quotes from employees) to bring the themes to life. Now you're ready to address these information gaps as you develop communication plans and create materials.



Here's a page from a report where we sorted questions that employees asked during a roadshow by the new CEO of a financial services company. In this case, questions about "business strategy" were asked more often than other topics.



And here's a similar example from a pharmaceutical company. In this case, we tracked all questions submitted during an online live chat and categorized them. Most questions were about "products and services."





Use questions when you want to:

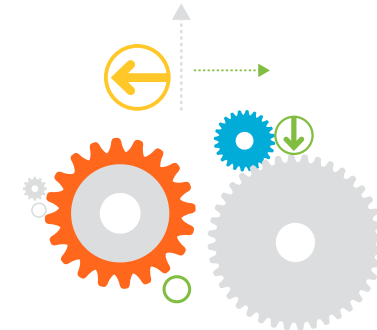
- Influence stakeholders
- Develop a communication plan
- Design content
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Insight data at a glance

Put all our insights together and you'll have the data you need to consider communication from the employee perspective—positioning you as an expert communicator.

Insight	Where to find it	What to do with it
 <p>Demographics</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HR 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a demographic map or location profile • Develop employee profiles
 <p>Behaviors</p> <p>a) Participation: how employees use channels b) Actions: what employees do</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Web and email metrics • Attendance • Program metrics, such as benefits enrollment or training completed • Observation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a scorecard • Develop an action snapshot for a program
 <p>Attitudes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement or satisfaction surveys • Focus groups conducted by initiative owners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Track trends in positive and negative attitudes
 <p>Questions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Town halls • Small group forums • Social media platforms • HR call center • Group brainstorm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyze questions to identify themes





What's next?

What's stopping you? What's getting between you and gathering insights?

A little bit of data collection goes a long way. Just as other groups in your organization use data as part of their decision making, you should too. With data in hand, you can be the counselor who explains employees' communication needs and preferences. Don't let some of the typical barriers get in your way:

"I don't do numbers." Most communicators didn't study math or science, so it feels awkward to dive deep into the numbers. Start small (perhaps a few e-metrics on intranet usage) and you'll build your confidence in no time.

"I don't have time or budget." You can gather these four areas of insight without spending much money. But they do require time. Try enlisting a few colleagues: an intern to review questions or an HR contact who can help with demographics.

Making time to gather the facts will help you select and build communication tactics that break through.

Measure the impact of internal communication

Now that you've gathered data that will help you design great communication plans and be the best advisor, it's time for the next step: measuring the impact of your communication. Check out: [How to measure employee communication](#) for easy-to-use advice about demonstrating the impact of your work.



The leaders in internal communication

We're Davis & Company, the employee communication experts. Since 1984, leading organizations have depended on us to reach, engage and motivate their employees. Our strategic mindset, creative spirit and practical know-how can solve your toughest communication challenges. Give us a call. We'd love to help.

To schedule a consultation, contact [Vaishali Benner](#) or call 1-877-399-5100.

Take research and measurement to the next level

We can help you to:

- Complete an audit of your employee communication program
- Assess the effectiveness of a communication channel
- Gather employee feedback and input to create better communication plans
- Demonstrate the impact of employee communication
- Review the results of your research and determine next steps

5 things to know about us



Global. We've created communication programs that reach employees across the world, in nearly every continent (but not, we admit, Antarctica).



Experienced. We have decades of experience in communicating change, initiatives, HR programs and policies, and many other topics.



Collaborative. Our favorite way of working is to meet with our clients and put our heads together.



Client-focused. Our mission is to help you solve your problems. To set you up for success. To make sure you get the recognition you deserve. (We think you get the picture.)



Acclaimed. We've won hundreds of awards and routinely earn the praise of clients and colleagues.