

# Communicating with a Global Employee Audience

By Alison Davis



If your company operates globally—or is exploring the possibility of expanding into new markets—you need to know how to communicate with employees around the world. Yes, you can leverage current communication channels and content, but there are certain factors you need to consider to truly engage employees from different cultures and countries.

Here are seven communication strategies for communicating with a global employee audience:

## 1. Know your audience

This is one of the tenets of effective communication: The more you understand whom you're communicating with, the better you can appeal to them. And one of the best ways to begin is to learn employees' **demographics**. Demographics are defined as "the characteristics of human populations and population segments, especially when used to identify consumer markets."

Comprised of specific attributes—such as age, gender, family status and size, education, employment, income, nationality and home ownership—demographics are

used extensively in marketing and politics to understand what people care about and what they might be willing to buy. Demographics provide insights into almost every aspect of communication, especially **how** (for example, print vs. electronic) and **what** (message development) we communicate.

The best source for employee demographics information is your payroll or employment records. Three helpful categories to focus on are geography (including language spoken), length of service and age ranges. While it's ideal to obtain data that's as complete as possible, don't obsess over every detail. The point is to begin to get to know your employees better so you can think about how best to reach them.

## 2. Understand how employees access communication

At a global organization, it's critical to evaluate how employees receive communication throughout the world. Don't assume that employees have easy access to certain communication channels, such as e-mail, intranet, meet-

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ings, etc. Instead, take the time to evaluate the level of access.

I was recently reminded of the importance of access while conducting a series of focus groups for a global healthcare company with manufacturing plants in 14 countries. One objective was to learn why an HR newsletter got low scores on a communication survey. As it turned out, the reason for the poor rating was distribution. Employees at several plants had never even seen the newsletter. It turned out that no one was accountable for putting the publication in employees' hands at each site, so the mailroom put boxes into storage and the newsletter never saw the light of day.

### 3. Use the right tool for the right job

Every communication channel—print, electronic, face-to-face,

etc.—has its place in communication. Problems arise when we rely too heavily on one vehicle or try to use a vehicle for a job it wasn't designed to do. See the chart below to understand how to leverage the appropriate communication tool for different needs.

### 4. Develop a consistent approach to translation

Even if you have experience translating in the U.S., be prepared for a higher degree of difficulty when developing a translation approach on a global scale. The first factor to consider is how well your global employees speak English. At most companies, managers speak fairly well, but individual contributors have less fluency and are much more comfortable in their native language.

That's why you need to develop a strategy for translation that specifies:

**Which materials will be translated?** Will you translate all HR communication, or just core content that every employee needs to read?

**Who will be responsible for translation?** Some companies make translation the responsibility of local management or HR representatives; others prefer the tighter control of managing translations centrally.

### 5. Keep communication simple

Especially when translating content into different languages, it's essential to make your communication as clear and simple as possible:

Boil your communication down to **one simple message**, focused on what is changing for employees.

Write the headline to **deliver** the one message of the communication. **Use plain language.**

## The Right Communication Tool for the Right Job

Communication Need	Tool	Examples
"I want to take information home from work, lay it out on my kitchen table and discuss my options with family members."	Print	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open enrollment documents</li> <li>• Overview of compensation, including bonus plans, stock purchase, etc.</li> </ul>
"I need to calculate my 401(k) retirement benefits and locate information regarding a critical event in my life."	Electronic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Retirement benefit estimators</li> <li>• Links to employer-sponsored savings, stock purchase and investment plans</li> <li>• Access to company policies and procedures</li> </ul>
"I have ask questions and concerns about a specific issue."	Face-to-face	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All-hands meetings to discuss yearly changes to HR programs</li> <li>• Team meetings to help identify employee questions and concerns</li> <li>• One-on-one conversations between managers and employees</li> </ul>

Avoid jargon and buzzwords like “sustainability,” “competencies,” and “interface.” Spell out acronyms that don’t translate well.

**Get to the point quickly.** Employees spend *three seconds* on a message before moving on.

State clearly how employees need to **take action**, or **do** something differently.

**Sum up first, and then give details.** You may be required to provide detailed information, but you don’t have to do so all at once. Use descriptive headlines, summary paragraphs, subheads, and sidebars to give employees the chance to get the point. Then employees can decide if they want to dive further into the details you provide later.

## 6. Leverage visuals

Want to get a concept across quickly? Look for ways to communicate using photos, illustrations, charts and info graphics. A well-designed visual will mean the same everywhere, offering a rich potential for communicating across language barriers. Whether you’re describing an intricate process change or presenting complicated data, visuals simplify your ideas and make it easy for employees to understand complex information. For example, a chart comparing the various medical plans or a graph showing projected 401(k) earnings over 20 years help employees quickly grasp complicated concepts.

## 7. Support managers so they’re prepared to “interpret” communication

When it comes to HR communication, employees are inclined to look

for answers when they need to take action or make a decision.

Managers can be a key way to get useful, just-in-time information to employees. The trick is to prepare them to answer employees’ questions. Here are three ways to help managers play this communication role:

**Brief managers before the rest of the organization.** For example, when you’re rolling out a new program, train managers first. They’ll have the inside scoop and feel knowledgeable enough to answer questions. Hint: Our favorite (efficient) way to do this is interactive, web-based briefings.

**Provide FAQs.** As mundane as Frequently Answered Questions are, managers find them very helpful. Don’t forget to include the tough questions.

**Don’t ask managers to hold a special meeting.** Managers are swamped with getting the job done; they don’t need more to do. Focus on helping them respond to queries as they’re raised and talking about key issues in regular team meetings.

These strategies will go a long way to ensure that your communication is reaching the far corners of your global organization.

*Alison Davis is CEO of Davis & Company, a firm that helps its clients—which include The Bank of New York Mellon, Johnson & Johnson, MasterCard,*



*PepsiCo and World Bank—reach, engage and motivate its employees. Alison can be reached at alison.davis@davisandco.com or (201) 445-5100.*

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