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WANT TO START COMMUNICATING YOUR COMPENSATION AND BENEFITS PLANS MORE EFFECTIVELY?

Start by Getting to Know Your Employees

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It's a long-standing tenet of effective communication: To reach people—and motivate them to take action—you must first understand who they are and what they need.

This may sound fundamental, but assessing employees is a step that's often skipped in human resources (HR) communication. We plunge into creating communication without thinking about the people we're creating it for. We also make an assumption that employees are just like us.

By doing so, we fall prey to communication mistakes like these:

- Using terms such as “competencies” and “salary structure” that make perfect sense to HR experts but that mean nothing to employees.
- Telling the entire history of how a program was developed instead of focusing on what's changed and what they need to do about it.
- Failing to make connections or put topics in context. You know that “compensation” consists of different elements such as base pay, bonuses, and stock options, but employees may not understand that the individual pieces add up to something called “compensation.”

To avoid these missteps, take the time to get to know your employee audience. A good place to start is by analyzing employee demographics.

What you can learn from demographics

Demographics offer a way to distinguish and describe characteristics of a population to determine what sets that segment apart. Although not a foolproof predictor, demographics are so valuable that it's surprising that HR professionals don't always have employee information at their fingertips. You know how many employees work at your company, but you may not know other important facts such as:

- **Where** are your employees located?
- What is the average length of **employee service**?
- How are your employees divided in terms of **age**? **Male/female ratio**? **Ethnic mix**? **Educational level**?
- What are the **salary** ranges for different job families, businesses, and locations?
- How many employees fall into each **pay/job grade** or **job/functional category**?
- How many employees support **dependents**? On average, how many dependents do they have?
- Can employees take time at work to **attend meetings about HR programs**, services, and products? Do meetings need to be held before or after work or at lunchtime?

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Your employee demographics will give you valuable insights into almost every aspect of communication, especially:

- **What** to communicate (content) and what examples will resonate with your audience.
- **How** to communicate (for example, print, electronic, or face-to-face).
- **When** and **where** to communicate.

For example, your company's medical plan enrollments will show you what percentage of your population has children. This is important to know when you're communicating about many topics, such as medical benefits, life insurance, savings, time off, and flexible work arrangements. Understanding how many employees have families also helps you know when to communicate. For instance, meetings before or after work may be difficult for some employees to attend.

Mining and leveraging demographics

How do you gather demographic data? The more sophisticated your HR Information System, the more complex the demographic data you can access. But even the simplest payroll records contain valuable information about such demographics as age, job grade, length of service, and geography.

To put demographics to work for you, keep demographic data close at hand when planning when, how, and what to communicate:

1. Profile your target employee "customers". If you can imagine the people you're trying to reach as living, breathing people—with desires, preferences, and quirks—you can do a much better job of giving them what they need.

2. Assess what employees do and don't understand. A wise client once told me, "Never underestimate employees' intelligence or overestimate their knowledge." You may be an expert on health benefits or performance objectives. But, chances are, even your smartest employees have only superficial knowledge of these topics. *Find out.* One good way to do so: *focus groups.*

3. Build communication around employee preferences. Marketers invest heavily to learn which communication channels their customers prefer, and which messages resonate with them. You should, too. By systematically integrating employee input and feedback, you can learn what they like and don't like; what questions they have; what they know and don't know—and what they believe that isn't true.

4. Make it easy for employees to do the right thing. Most companies make it as easy as they can for customers to use their products. They package products in convenient forms, ensure that instructions are easy to understand, and provide support (via a website or call center) if the customer has questions. In HR, we need to put that same thought, logic, and presentation into helping employees make smart choices—or *do the right thing*—to take action such as enrolling in benefits by a certain deadline.

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For situations where employees need to take action, make it unbelievably easy for them to do so. Think through where and when they need to act and what prompts they will need. Give them “just in time” prompts to call, log on, or write to get the coverage they should have.

When you start applying “Make it easy for people to do the right thing” to your HR communication challenges, really think outside the cubicle. Sometimes the best solution might start with changing plan design first and following that up with good communications.

*Alison Davis, is founder and CEO of Davis & Company, a firm that helps companies reach, engage, and motivate employees. She is co-author of the books *Your Attention, Please!* and *The Definitive Guide to Communication: Engaging Employees in Benefits, Pay, and Performance*, from which this article is adapted. Alison is also a former on-line columnist for *The New York Times* and has written numerous articles and reports on employee communication. Ms. Davis can be reached at alison.davis@davisandco.com.*

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