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# They're Just Not That Into You: Can Social Media Revitalize Employee Communication?

BY ALISON DAVIS

These challenging times have put even more pressure than usual on corporate communication to keep employees focused and engaged. And communicators are certainly feeling that pressure. In an informal survey that my firm conducted in February, 58 out of 77 communicators (75 percent) reported that their workload has intensified since last year, mostly because the volume of communication has increased.

But look beyond this burst of activity, and you'll see that more communication doesn't lead to better engagement. In fact, at most companies, employees are receiving more communication, but they're using it less. Although few communicators publicly report their internal communication metrics, they will privately reveal that open rates for e-mails and intranet metrics (such as unique visits, page views and time spent) are declining.

Furthermore, employees are feeling increasingly overloaded with information, which negatively affects their satisfaction with communication. Although employees report feeling informed about key business issues, they're not sure how these issues relate to the work that they do every day.

This leads to employees who feel disconnected from their organizations. There's growing evidence that employees are tuning out. At one company, communicators discovered that enterprising employees had used their spam filters to block e-mails from corporate and human resources. At another organization, when a communicator asked employees why they didn't participate in the CEO town hall meeting, the answer was clear: "I don't find the information to be relevant." And at a third company, although employees said that they were interested in information about the business, fewer than 5 percent of those visiting the intranet site read most articles on the topic.

## Getting the message?

Communication, in its current form, is not working for employees. There are two intersecting reasons for this problem:



### 1. Employees feel less connected to their organizations than ever before.

The employment contract that once bound companies and employees is now dead. And every new round of layoffs, pay cuts and benefit reductions drives another nail into the coffin. For example, 44 percent of U.S. workers lack confidence in the future of their current employer, according to December 2008 research by staffing firm Spherion — and 28 percent believe that they could lose their jobs within the next year. Employees are aware that there is no such thing as job security and that the relationship they have with their employer is probably temporary.

## 2. The old communication model isn't working.

When I started working in employee communication in the mid-1980s, corporate communicators were mostly former journalists who believed that success was defined as getting out the news and keeping employees informed.

Twenty-five years later, everything about communication is different. Information is no longer a valuable resource,



rather an easily available commodity in whatever form (television, online, radio, etc.) you choose.

Despite this information revolution, the internal communication model hasn't fundamentally changed since the journalists were in charge (and they've long since retired). Although communicators now have different channels, we're still operating under the assumption that employees are a captive audience waiting for news from corporate. We post press releases on the intranet (often after they've been publicly released) and pretend that they actually contain news. Communication is mostly distributed in one direction, only sometimes allowing a question, which is then answered with a sanitized, prepackaged response.

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Part of the problem is that communication, in its current form, is not designed to meet the needs of its employee audience. Instead, it's shaped to appeal to our internal clients — senior executives — and the lawyers who protect them. This means that communication to employees closely resembles communication to the board of directors: strategic big-picture pronouncements supported by a lot of data.

To see if this is the case at your company, run a quick reading-level test of your communication. If most content is at

the 12th-grade level — with complex sentences, long words and many complicated terms — then there is the chance some employees may not understand your communication.

**Employees don't want to reject communication — they just resent how it is now prepared.**

Employees don't want to reject communication — they just resent how it is now prepared. Employees want information, but only if it's fresh, candid and personally relevant. They want to learn about the company, but they want that information presented in context, relating to what's going on in the world, to what customers tell them and to the work they do every day. Most of all, employees want to control their communication experience by asking questions, adding comments, learning other employees' perspectives and even creating their own news.

If those desires sound familiar, it's because we've been talking about a new way of communicating for the past several years — social media — that gives employees what they want. But at most companies, social media is still just an idea. A September 2008 study by Avanade, a global IT consulting firm, found that more than half of the 500 top executives surveyed resist the adoption of social media out of fear that it will sap worker productivity. In addition:

Sixty percent of respondents say that social media is not on their agenda, with only 18 percent reporting that they have a strategy for offering social media to employees.

More than 75 percent of respondents admit that social media use, if not actively deterred, will be used covertly within the company. And 90 percent believe that new employees will bring social media with them when they arrive on the job.

Key barriers to adoption are concerns about security (76 percent), senior management apathy (57 percent) and fear of using unproven technologies (58 percent).

**Social media can flourish, despite the obstacles**

Despite this reluctance, smart organizations are using

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social media to engage employees in ways that the news cannot. The key to this engagement is not to tack social media tools onto the existing employee communication program. Instead, success requires reshaping communication so that social media becomes a core strategy that changes the role of employees from spectators to active participants.

Here are three ways to do so:

- **Solve a business problem.**

With pharmaceutical giant Pfizer, 2.0 technology manager Simon Revell admits that “we had to change the culture” for his generally conservative company to accept social media internally. It helped that Pfizer was exploring social media as a way to connect with its external constituents, but the company still needed to take baby steps — starting with pilot projects that targeted narrow groups of employees.

Pfizer’s social media effort definitely took off when it developed a way to solve a serious business problem: give employees access to critical information. The solution was a wiki — an online user-generated encyclopedia — called Pfizerpedia that today holds more than 10,000 articles, videos and other content that employees need. As the effort continued, Pfizerpedia added more features and now allows employees to post blogs and collaborate with their counterparts around the world, among other things.

- **Meet an employee need.**

For the U.S.-based consulting and accounting firm Deloitte, social media took hold because it responded to a compelling employee need: making connections with other employees. In a firm of 46,000 employees, many of whom spend a considerable amount of time at client locations, it’s not practical to hang around the water cooler to network. In fact, 25 percent of employees who were leaving the company cited the sense of isolation as a primary reason for their departure.

The solution to the problem was a social networking site called D Street, created with the objective of promoting employee-to-employee interactions. Every employee automatically gets a listing, which is populated by basic data — name, title, location, phone number — from human resources. After that, participation is strictly voluntary. D Street has found an audience: More than 40 percent of employees have personalized their profiles, and 80 percent of employees use the site, sometimes to find information about their colleagues, but also to participate in groups, share experiences and build a sense of community.

- **Embrace the fact that social media is a moving target.**

So much of the paralysis surrounding social media is based on the fact that communicators feel they not only have to choose the right application but also have to make it work right away (no glitches, high usage, etc.). After all, part of the reason that the employee communication programs have become stagnant is because there’s an expectation for them to be perfect: no errors and no angst.

But social media requires a different mindset. It’s evolutionary. It starts small and gradually builds an audience. It morphs, often in unexpected directions.

One company that has embraced the changing nature of social media is technology leader IBM. Granted, information technology is the company’s business — and the firm has a group in Cambridge, Mass., dedicated to studying “the collaborative user experience” — but IBM is still a great role model for the “let’s try it and see what happens” approach to social media.

This sense of experimentation was evident when IBM set up a wiki inviting employees to develop guidelines for building blogs and wikis. And today, IBM is willing to try nearly any social media tool, from tagging to microblogging. Its latest experiment is a Facebook-like social networking site called Beehive that is designed to build teamwork and strengthen ties among employees who may never meet face to face.

### Getting started

The good news is that social media can go a long way to revitalize even the most stagnant employee communication program. And now is the best time to get started. Social media is not expensive (many of the tools are either free or built into existing platforms). It doesn’t require a full-scale launch — you can start small. And, most important, social media has the potential to engage employees like never before, transforming their role from passive, indifferent spectators to active participants. ■



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