

People@Work. Why do we treat internal communications with disdain?

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File, forget or delete – need not be the fate of internal communications

By S Giridhar

Drowning in communication: For today's young professionals, the unending email traffic of office memos seem like a never-ending avalanche

“To speak to my employees, I go on Instagram or LinkedIn.” This was no hand-wringing lament from just any CEO. It was, in fact, a lets-change-with-the-times announcement by the CEO of an IT giant at the recent World Economic Forum in Davos.

The fact is that for the young professional today, not only are other social media avenues a more engaging way of communicating but the unending email traffic of announcements and memos seem like an avalanche. So, the options are: (a) Mark as read without opening the mail (b) skim and delete or (c) move it to the folder called LBW (let the bore wait).

Communicating internally - individually or with groups or in company-wide announcements - is so critical to any organisation. It is meant to be the simplest way to share and keep abreast, to be aware, to celebrate; it can be a warning of difficult times for business, an inspiring call to gird one's loins and so on. And yet why do we treat internal communication with disdain? Why do the humble office memos and internal messages always get the '*ghar ki murgi dal barabar*' treatment while all the attention is lavished only on external communication.

Down 'memo' lane

I ran a memory reel over my 45 years of professional life. Was internal communication always a problem? Were employees really absorbing the periodic announcements and organisation updates? Or have things changed only with the advent of a bewildering range of social media?

In those days, when the click of typewriters was the symbol of an efficient office — the photocopier had not yet arrived and the desktop computer was a special facility for the 14th floor — the memos, documents and mails would go out in multi coloured carbon copies, each colour denoting who the recipient was. Usually consolidated to go out with the Friday dak! Obviously, there was a limit to human output from typewriters, so one never sent or received a cascade of information or mails. There was time to read, absorb,

share, pin up on notice boards or even have standing five-minute meetings. Though things were changing by the early 1990s with the combination of computers and photocopiers, it still was within reasonable bounds.

Everything changed with the arrival of laptops, email, internet, and the tsunami of social media. Even if you are an employee of a reasonable-sized outfit — forget a tech giant like Wipro or FMCG behemoth like Hindustan Unilever — you will still receive a volume of mails and communication announcing a variety of things. A new colleague has joined, his photo and profile; an event has been organised; a link to photos from last week's events; organisational changes in various units and of course, a stream from the HR Function on various schedules to be completed. Although my days of sending out office and company-wide communications are behind me, I can understand why employees feel overwhelmed by the deluge of communication.

A deluge of messages

My own organisation is no different, because I see the same internal communications coming in a never-ending stream. Over the past few months — since I relinquished my role as COO — I have used the time to meet a cross section of colleagues. During our informal discussions, I would try and test my nagging worry that we are drowning people with internal memos and bringing them to the point where their 'LBW' folder is getting thicker. I received poignant confirmation of this when I realised that an announcement sent by the Chairman of our organisation, giving the warmest of farewells to his longest serving colleague had been missed by quite a few people. That communication was one of the special mails of the year as it signalled the end of an era for the organisation. It came from the big boss but the troops had not connected. Would a message on LinkedIn or Instagram have helped? I do not know.

Decades ago, during my time as the national head of sales, I used to run a monthly bulletin that provided a scorecard of the business, calling out the stars of the month, listing the key challenges ahead and deliverables for the subsequent month. I personally sent this out to every salesperson. I know it was a hit. The reason the members looked forward to this was due to the visual freshness that would accompany every bulletin. I was fortunate that I had a creative colleague — sadly, KNS passed away in 2013 — who, even in those days when infographics was not in our lexicon, would painstakingly customise each bulletin, with pictures, logos, and humorous cartoons. What we both did was to treat internal communication with the utmost respect it deserved.

Creative communication

If this example is dismissed as a typical 'during those days' story from an old fogey, I must present a brilliant example of office communication, from a week ago. Arjun Jayadev, Director of our School of Arts and Sciences, decided to give the announcement of organisational changes a completely new avatar. Thus, landed on my desk, a YouTube link, announcing a set of organisational changes through a jaunty combination of five

Queen songs! Nothing of import was missed out, the names, the pictures, the new roles but all told in the most funky and enjoyable manner. I corralled Arjun, who had created this adorable communication and told him our next set of announcements must be set to famous Hindustani and Carnatic songs. The redoubtable economist, grinning broadly, has promised to do that.

We ignore the importance of good internal communication at our own peril. Do not inundate people with memos because a well calibrated stream is more effective than a torrent. And with the decreasing attention span of people for written communication, we must make them as relevant and interesting as possible.

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