



The
changing
face of
internal
communications

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Introduction

The nature of how organisations communicate with their employees and customers is changing. Businesses are responding to the increasingly globalised nature of how people work, growing customer demands and the desire for digital and social media. It appears that command and control autocratic leadership is in decline along with 'jobs for life'. Employees are increasingly choosing their employer of choice, those whose purpose and values align with theirs. This gives rise to the importance of internal communications in helping to create a unified culture that enables people to do their best work and contribute to the success of the organisation.

“Demand is increasing among employees for openness and it will be a factor in competitive markets for retaining good employees and having a motivated workforce.”

Market research consultancy ComRes and the communications and advocacy headhunter Ellwood Atfield conducted an online survey of 97 senior internal communications professionals between 20th September and 9th November 2016 to explore where internal communications is heading in 2017 and beyond, and what might be affecting industry changes. The findings show that while there is a clear desire among internal communications professionals to align firmly with the strategic goals of organisations, there are a number of cultural and practical barriers to achieving this in the reality of the day-to-day role. The research goes on to look at shifts in the ways organisations communicate with employees, and the role of internal social media in workplace communications.

This report also offers thoughts on the effectiveness of internal communications and how research can help uncover what can be done to overcome some of the challenges identified.

“Engagement between leaders, managers and employees, particularly using social media in the workplace, will become more prevalent. Internal communications teams will need to be enable this activity, becoming community facilitators as opposed to creating content.”



At ComRes we've been bridging the worlds of research and communications for more than a decade. We take the latest developments in opinion research and tailor them to provide organisations with evidence and insights, helping to inform strategies, change behaviour and define debates.

ComRes is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules (www.britishpollingcouncil.org). This commits us to the highest standards of transparency. Full data tables are available at www.comresglobal.com

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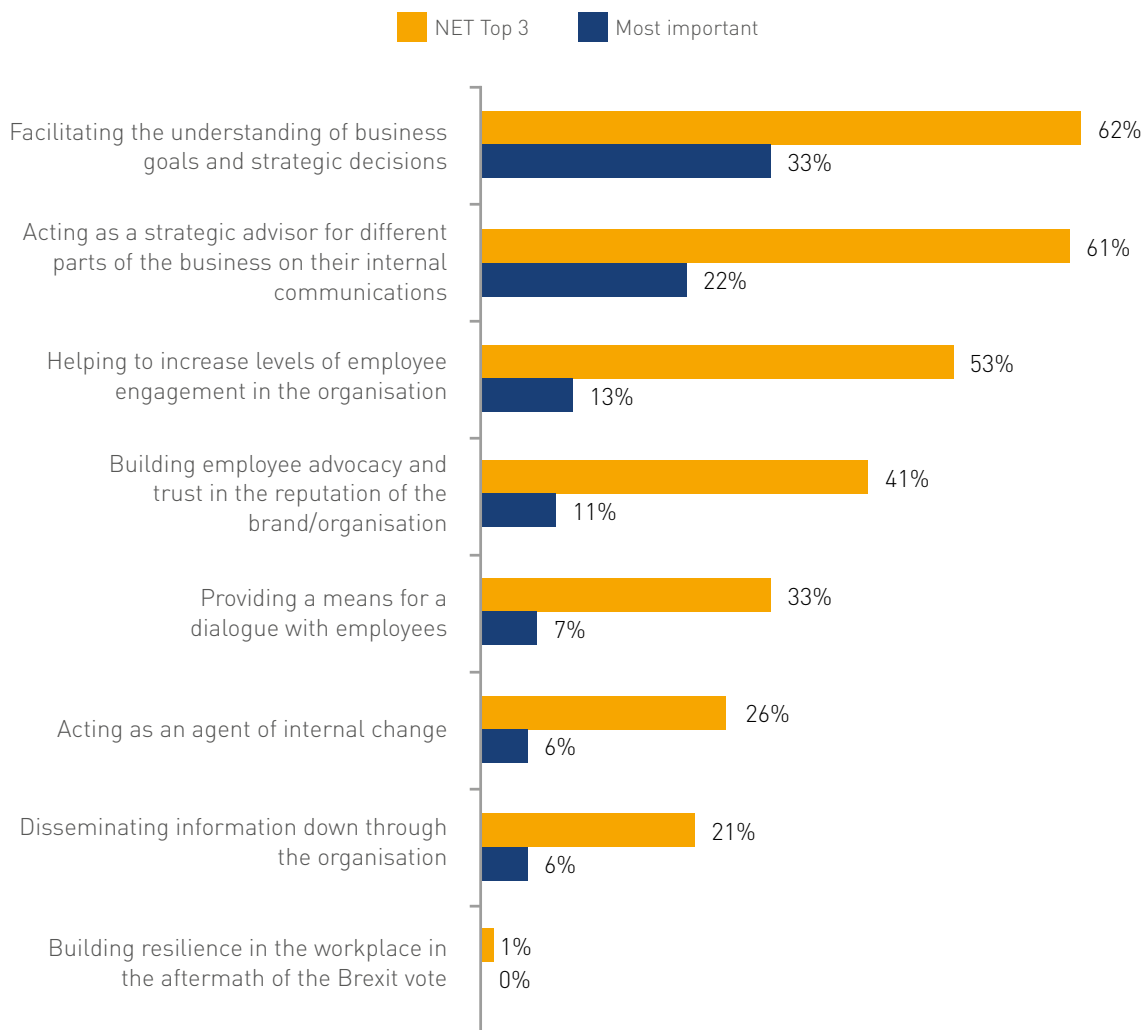
Internal communications and strategic priorities

Over the past few years, the role of internal communications within businesses has moved away from principally functional and transactional responsibilities, such as disseminating information downwards from senior decision makers. The pace of change in the corporate environment both internally and externally has been exponential. Leaders across organisations have emphasised the importance of a strategic approach to communicating and engaging with employees. This is reflected in the results of our research.

Our survey finds that a majority of internal communications professionals say that the key aims for the function in their organisations are focused on strategic priorities – facilitating the understanding of business goals and acting as an internal communications advisor. Conversely just 21% cite disseminating information down through the organisation as one of the top three key aims.

Key aims for internal communications

Showing % who say each is among the top 3 key aims in their organisation



Q4

Which of the following are the key aims for the internal communications function in your organisation? Base: All respondents (n=97)

Top three key aims for internal communications professionals in their organisation

(% placing each in their top three aims)

62% | Facilitating the understanding of business goals and strategic decisions

61% | Acting as a strategic advisor for different parts of the business on internal communications

53% | Helping to increase levels of employee engagement

These results highlight a shift towards operating in a more advisory role that facilitates the understanding of organisational vision and values, away from the more transactional role.

“Delivering more strategic advice and counsel rather than focusing on the tactics.”



In addition to strategy, 41% of internal communication professionals say that building employee advocacy and trust in the reputation of the organisation is in their top three aims. The survey also shows that 45% of respondents strongly agree that internal communications has the primary focus of aligning people with the organisation's purpose and strategy, while 86% agree in total. This set of findings is perhaps not surprising given that it is common that, alongside wellbeing, career development and trust in leadership, one of the key drivers of levels of employee engagement in an organisation is whether employees are able to see a clear link between their individual role and the strategy and direction of the organisation.

However, just 18% say that internal communications is currently very effective for helping to create brand advocates; a further 48% say it is fairly effective. More worryingly, 30% say that internal communications is not currently effective for helping to create brand advocates. All of this suggests that while a strategic focus is becoming more important, internal communications is often falling short of delivering this in practice.

This finding presents a challenge for the internal communications profession.

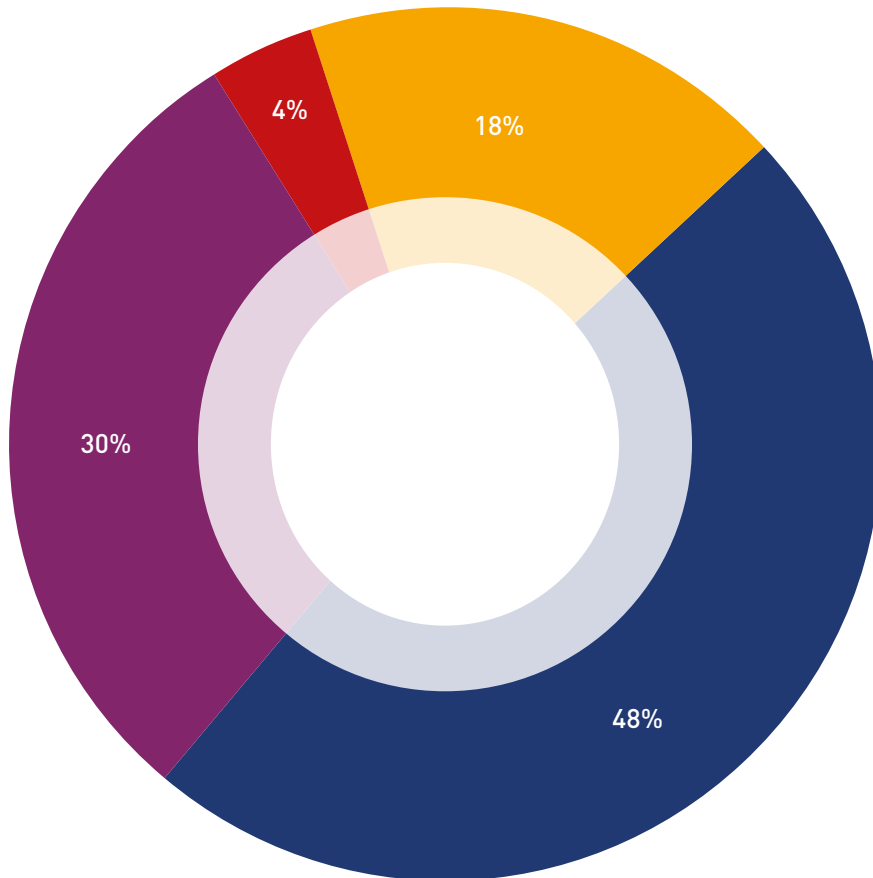
“Brand advocacy, change management and two-way communications with sentiment analysis are also likely to feature more over the coming years.”



Effectiveness of internal communications for helping to create brand advocates

Showing % who say that internal communications is effective at creating brand advocates within their organisation

Very effective Fairly effective Not very effective Not at all effective Don't know



Q9

How effective, if at all, do you feel internal communications is in helping to create brand advocates in your organisation? Base: All respondents (n=97)

Internal to external

One of the dilemmas faced by many organisations is where internal communications sits - whether it's part of the communications department, HR or marketing.

Our research suggests that internal communications is increasingly recognised as needing to align with external communications and the marketing function. There is increasing evidence of the value of aligning employee and customer experiences, so that the employer brand truly reflects the customer brand. Internal communications can play a vital role in facilitating this.

There is agreement from respondents that in their organisations, the content of internal communications fully aligns with external communications (66%).

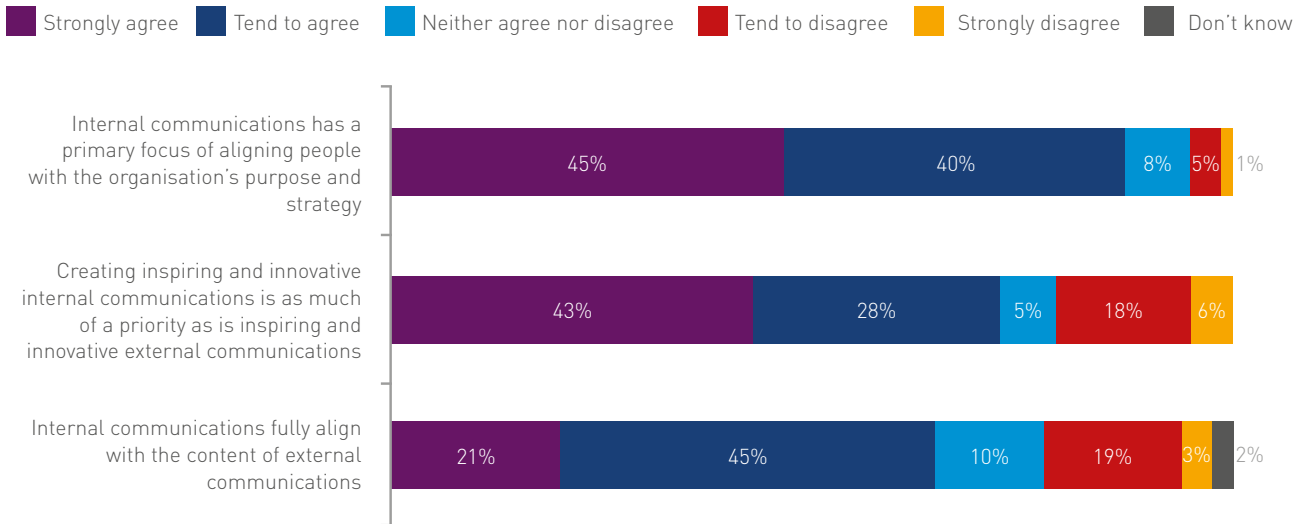
A majority (71%) of internal communications professionals also agree with the relatively newer principle that creating innovative and inspiring internal communications is as much of a priority as inspiring and innovative external communications. This may reflect internal communications and employee engagement becoming increasingly valued by senior leaders. Indeed, internal communications is now often a board room discussion, where it hasn't always been in the past.

A clear majority (78%) of internal communication professionals agree that their work is valued by business leaders, while 69% feel empowered by business leaders to be innovative in their profession. This could suggest that internal communications is increasingly important to companies. Over time, this could help in removing some of the cultural barriers to internal communications becoming more strategic and having access to the top. This might include having access to the Board, or to regular board meetings.

So, while there is an overwhelming recognition by internal communications professionals of the importance of playing a strategic role and a clear desire to do so, there are doubts that internal communications is effective in achieving an ultimate aim of creating brand advocates. Promoting a culture which allows employees to live and breathe the corporate brand requires a greater focus on creating brand advocates.

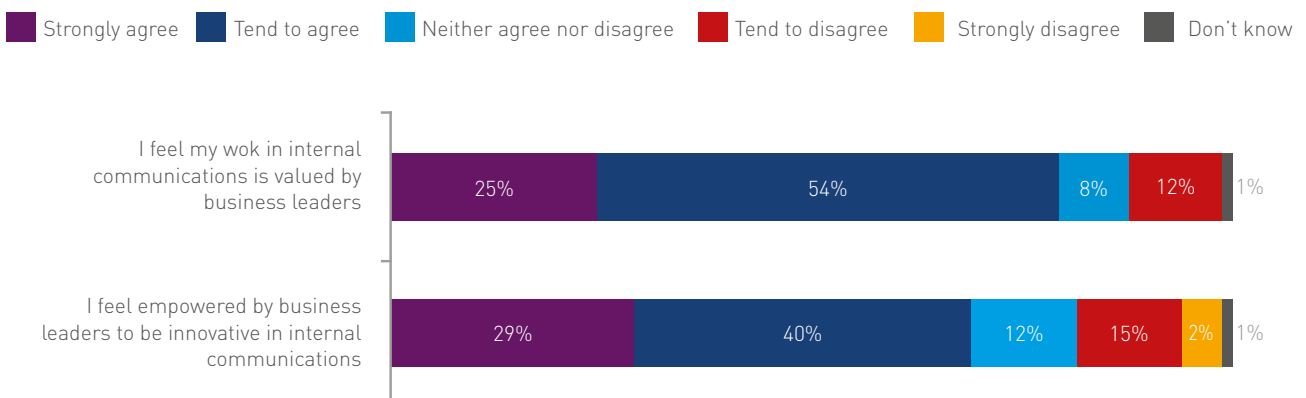
“The demarcation between Marketing and Comms on one side, and HR and Comms on the other, will become increasingly blurred. I see this as IC practitioners focusing on products/services advocacy within employee groups and becoming more customer-centric.”

Showing % who say they agree or disagree with each statement in relation to current internal communications within their organisation



Q8 | To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about internal communications in your organisation currently? Base: All respondents (n=97)

Showing % who say they agree or disagree with each statement in relation to their role in internal communications



Q11 | Thinking about your role in internal communications, to what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? Base: All respondents (n=97)

Overcoming barriers

“One of the challenges is demonstrating value and getting a seat at the [top] table.”

“No training budget for existing members to expand their skill set.”



President Barack Obama meets British Prime Minister Theresa May, Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy, Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, French President Francois Hollande, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel. At the German Chancellery in Berlin, Friday, Nov. 18, 2016.

Photo: Pablo Martinez Monsivais

Despite the recognised importance of playing a strategic role, there is evidence that in practice playing such a role is not necessarily easy to achieve. 64% of internal communication professionals say that barriers such as organisational hierarchies and bureaucracy strongly affect the effectiveness of internal communications.

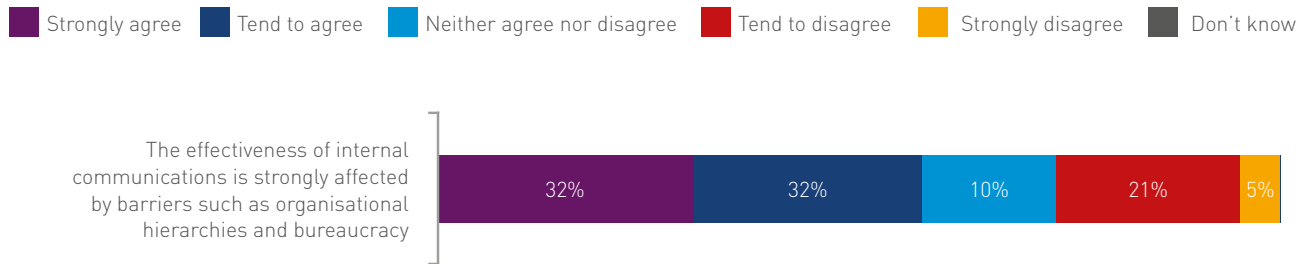
There are also some more specific barriers to a truly effective and strategically aligned internal communications function. Just 49% agree that they have access to the tools and resources they need to develop high-quality internal communications and just 54% say that they have access to the necessary training to be effective in their role. Notably, only 35% say that they have access to the budget needed to develop and implement an effective internal communications strategy.

It is also possible that there is a recruitment issue here, with a number of internal communication professionals mentioning talent as a challenge in our open-ended questions.

Overcoming these barriers is an essential step for internal communications departments, so that they can become as effective as they can in helping organisations deliver on strategic objectives. Even though internal communication professionals feel their work is valued by senior leaders (78% say that it is) they need to be allowed a seat at the top table in order to truly operate strategically and have influence in overcoming these barriers. Crucially, research can also help reduce the impact of these barriers by identifying where priorities lie so that investment in internal communications can be targeted where it is needed. Research can also give you the information to speak a board's language, by providing statistics and evidence to demonstrate how internal communications can help the business achieve its objectives.

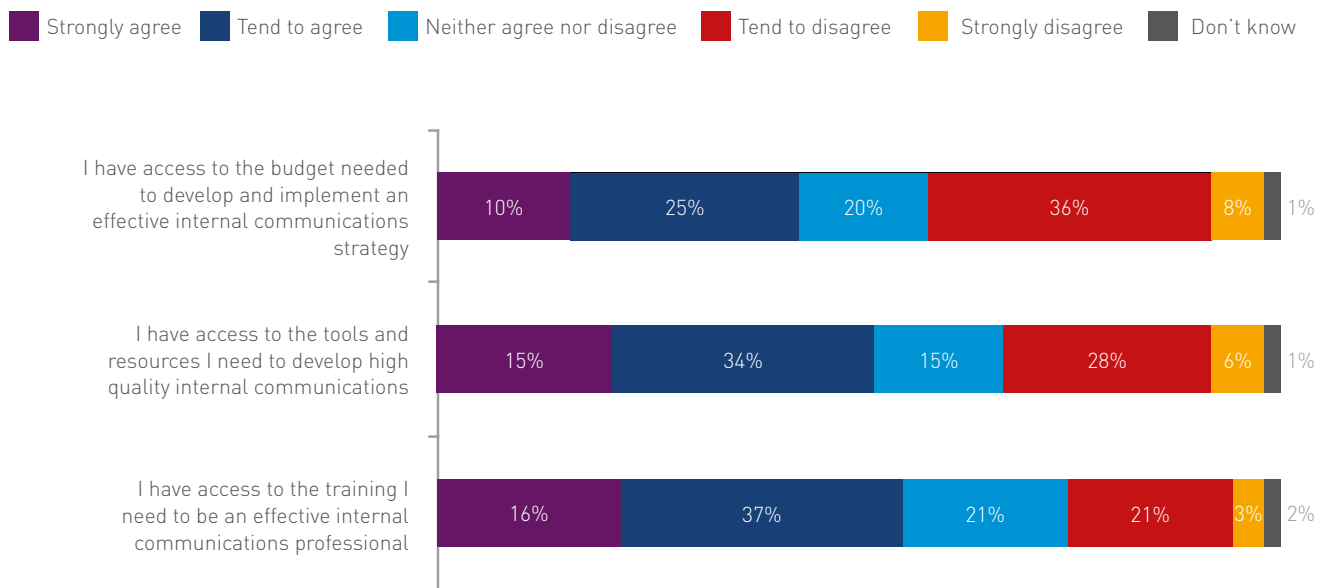
| “Talent is a challenge.”

Showing % who say they agree or disagree with each statement in relation to current internal communications within their organisation



Q8 | To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about internal communications in your organisation currently? Base: All respondents (n=97)

Showing % who say they agree or disagree with each statement in relation to their role in internal communications



Q11 | Thinking about your role in internal communications, to what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? Base: All respondents (n=97)

Only 54% of internal communications professionals say that their functions in their organisation strike the right balance between frequency of communications and quality of messages.

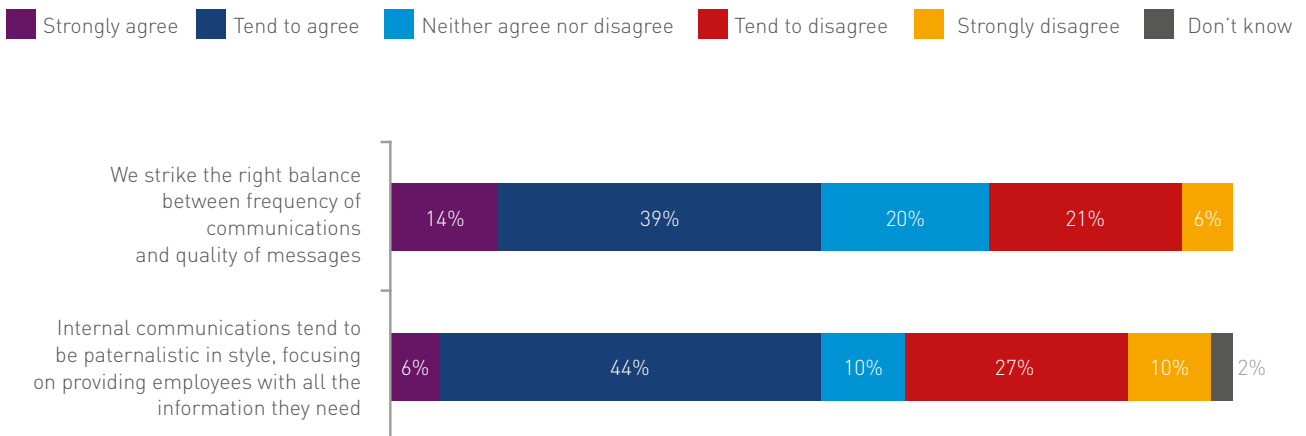
A similar proportion (51%) agree that internal communications in their organisation still tend to be paternalistic in style, focusing on providing employees with information and thus not generating a true two-way dialogue with senior leaders and employees.

This seems to reflect a move towards more of a marketing role for internal communications: segmenting audiences correctly and personalising messages. Facilitating a two-way dialogue between senior leaders and employees should help increase employee engagement in the organisation and employees' understanding of how their role helps the organisation to achieve its objectives.

“More focus on personalised content, delivered via the channels of choice.”

“Facilitating two way conversations with staff instead of top down.”

Showing % who say they agree or disagree with each statement in relation to current internal communications within their organisation



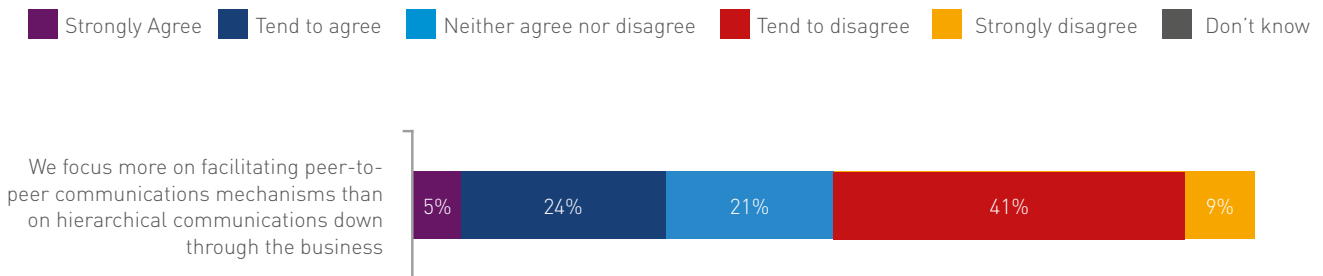
Q8 | To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about internal communications in your organisation currently? Base: All respondents (n=97)

Horizontal approaches to internal communications that make use of peer-to-peer dialogue and support, as well as new technologies, such as internal social media, have been much lauded in recent years. While these approaches are clearly an important part of the development of internal communications, our research finds that they are far from changing the rules of the game at present.

The research shows that internal communications professionals appear unsure of exactly what to do when it comes to new technology and social media.

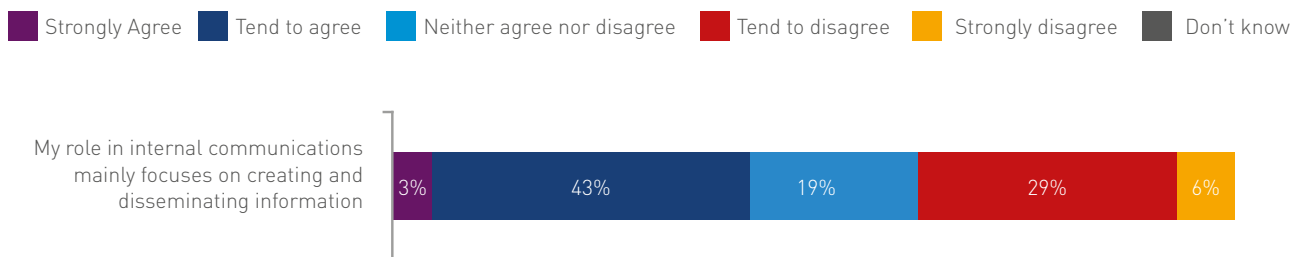
While the trend seems to be a role in facilitating content, rather than creating it, just 29% agree that they focus more on facilitating peer-to-peer communications mechanisms than on hierarchical communications down through the business, with 51% disagreeing with this statement. Both are clearly important in any organisation, although it seems that the majority of internal communication professionals still focus the majority of their deliverables on communicating top down. While just 1 in 5 say that disseminating information is in the top-3 aims for internal communications, 46% say their role mainly focuses on creating and disseminating information.

Showing % who say they agree or disagree with each statement in relation to current internal communications within their organisation



Q8 | To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about internal communications in your organisation currently? Base: All respondents (n=97)

Showing % who say they agree or disagree with each statement in relation to their role in internal communications



Q11 | Thinking about your role in internal communications, to what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? Base: All respondents (n=97)

It appears that the role of internal communications is increasingly varied between organisations. However, on the whole professionals are looking to move towards increasing their organisation's use of two-way forms of communication, their focus on strategic aims, and employees living the brand values.

There is, however, a real danger that these desired goals will not be realised, at least not as quickly as they are needed, due to prominent barriers such as not having access to tools and resources, including budget and people.

Communication channels

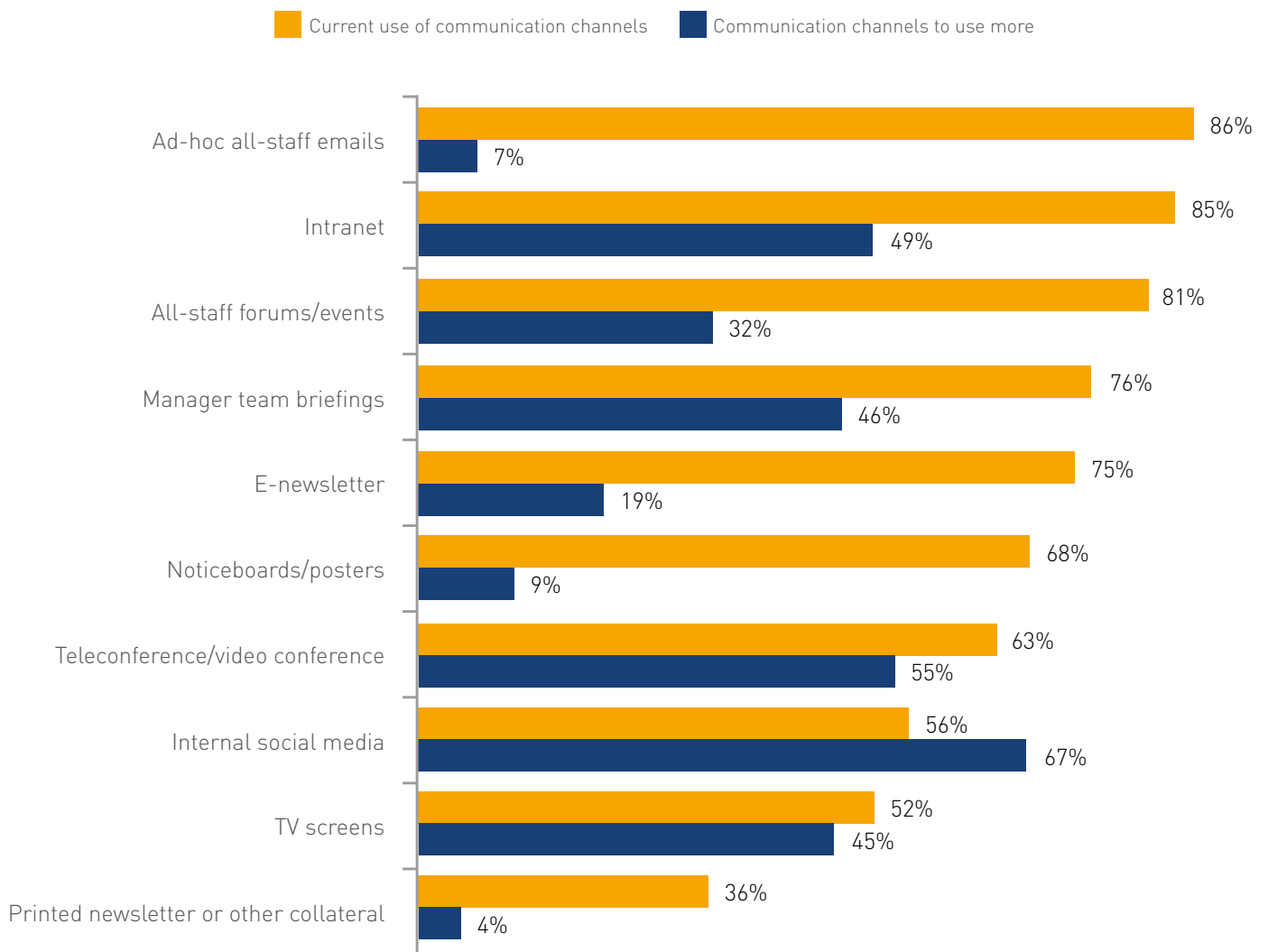
In a fast-paced corporate environment undergoing rapid and almost constant change, is an increased emphasis on new forms of communication, including social media, required? Our research finds that while new tools are increasingly used, internal communication professionals continue to make use of tried and tested channels, such as all-staff emails and the intranet, for delivering on their strategic objectives rather than a widespread shift to new tools such as social media.

MUNICH JANUARY 15, 2017.

David Kirkpatrick (Techonomy) in conversation with Brad Smith (Microsoft, President) during DLD17 (Digital-Life-Design), Europe's big conference of innovation, digitisation, science and culture, which connects business, creative and social leaders, and opinion formers.



Current means of communicating vs. expected increase in means
Showing % who say their organisation uses each channel AND % who say their organisation will use each channel more in the future



Q5 | Which of the following channels does your organisation currently use for communicating with its employees? Base: All respondents (n=97)

Q6 | Thinking about these channels, which do you think your organisation will use more in the future, which will be used less, and which will be used the same amount? Base: All respondents (n=97)

Top three channels internal communications professionals say their organisation currently uses

86% | Ad-hoc all-staff emails

85% | Intranet

81% | All-staff forums/events

The top three channels internal communication professionals say their organisations currently use are closely followed by: manager team briefings (76%) and e-newsletters (75%). Indeed, a majority of respondents use each of the channels tested, with the exception of printed newsletters or other collateral (36%).

Future channels

Internal communication professionals paint an interesting picture when asked which of these channels will be used more in the future.

While all-staff emails seem to have reached saturation point (just 7% think they will be used more) internal communicators feel that digital forms of communications will be used more often: internal social media (67%), teleconference/videoconference (55%), the intranet (49%) and TV screens (45%).

Among this variety of digital and mass-audience communication, there is also a belief (and possibly preference) that manager team briefings are also used more in the future (46%), recognising the need for more local, face to face and personalised communication which helps create the sought-after two-way dialogue in an organisation to facilitate personal engagement in the strategy.

“Increasingly we use face to face manager or staff 2-way briefings. However, in parallel, these briefings are increasingly supported by new technology e.g. Skype for business, TV screens, online debates, video, internal social media, etc.”

Social media

One tool that has been fronted as promoting richer employee engagement and as disrupting traditional downward methods of communications is social media. Indeed, our research finds that internal communicators believe that the use of internal social media will increase in the future (67% say this).

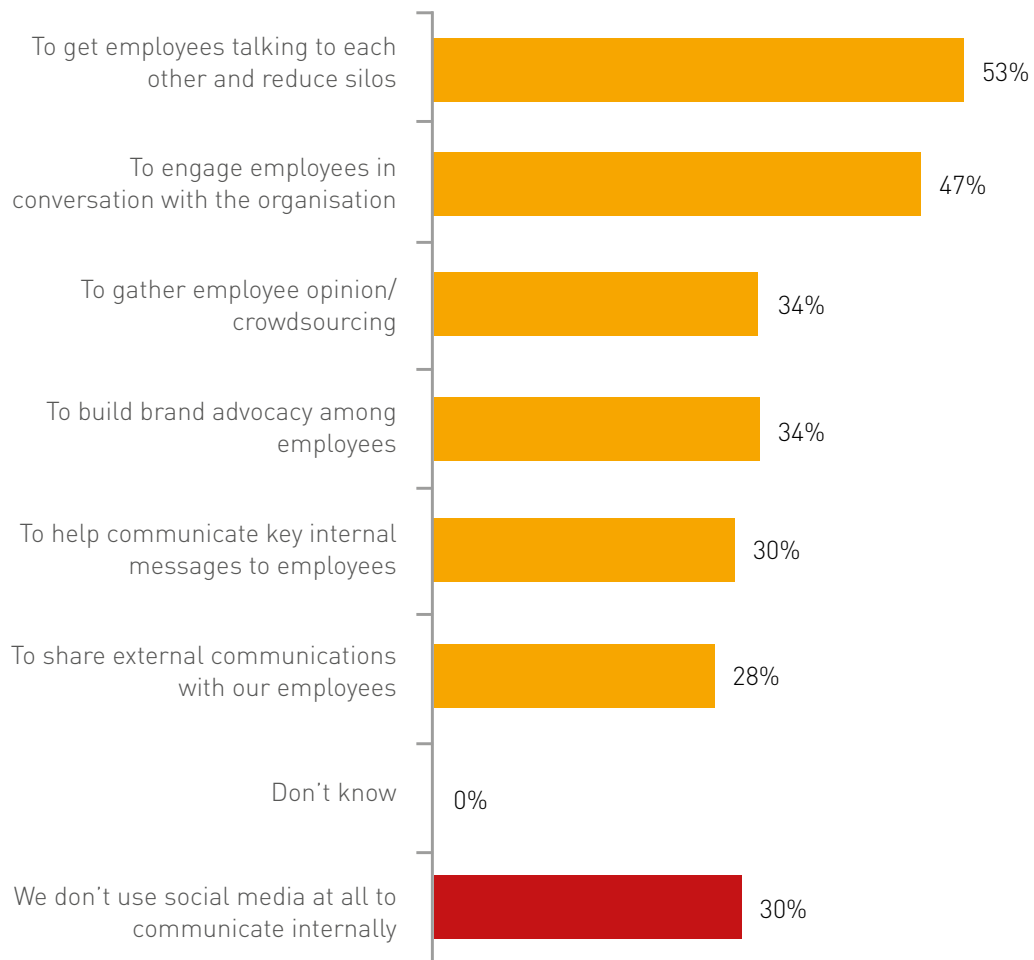
In the space of external communications, social media has undoubtedly driven profound changes to the ways in which people interact and how they consume content. However, in the workplace change appears to be slower and the desire to use these new technologies is perhaps less pronounced than first expected. At work, there is a recognition that a balance has to be struck between using the latest technologies effectively and not overloading employees with information. Not to mention using channels and technologies that help meet the aims of internal communication professionals and what an organisation's own employee research has indicated.

It does seem that there is a strong desire to use technology and data so that content can be more personalised, something marketing departments have been doing for decades.

“Use technology and data to make internal communications more relevant and personal to the recipient, and use even more channels such as digital signage and smartphone apps to engage with the workforce.”

Use of social media as a means of internal communications

Showing % who say their organisation uses social media for each



Q7

In which of the following ways does your organisation use social media as a channel for internal communications? Base: All respondents (n=97)

Despite the hype around new digital platforms our survey indicates that there is a challenge around how organisations can effectively use communications generated from social media for strategic purposes, with just 34% saying their organisation uses social media for building brand advocates.

The sheer quantity of communications generated from social media, and the broad array of competing viewpoints that emerge, are often difficult for internal communications teams to sift through and categorise, let alone act upon. Some internal communications professionals are doubtful of the benefits of new technologies, citing the often incoherent and de-prioritised quality of social media communications.

Rather, we find that as organisations move away from printed material and ad hoc staff emails (58% and 49% say they will use these less respectively), organisations are largely using social media for peer-to-peer communications, sharing best-practice and collaboration. 53% say that social media is used to get employees talking to each other and to reduce silos. A similar proportion (47%) say that social media is used to engage employees in conversation with the organisation. The question here is whether this peer-to-peer communication is facilitated and moderated in a way that helps the organisation meet its strategic aims.

Given that the primary objectives of internal communications for organisations is to align with and support strategic goals, this presents a challenge for those in the profession who would like to make use of new tools but who may be fighting against a slower pace of corporate-cultural change.

“There will always be a need for effective dissemination of information, but social media will play a greater role as the proportion of employees happy to use technology increases.”

Future role of internal communications

We asked internal communication professionals to openly share with us how they see the role of an internal communication professional changing over the next five years. There is general agreement that corporate culture is changing and therefore there is a need to change the approach and possibly the channels of internal communications.

However, they are divided on the solutions to these changes. On the one hand some professionals say there is a shift in corporate culture, with companies increasingly open to new technologies. On the other, a more utilitarian perspective asks whether these new 'shiny bauble' approaches overlook the fundamental principles of internal communications and to some degree ignore the basic need for timely communications with engaging content.

“I think the move towards shiny baubles will eventually explode and people will return to realising that the recipients of all communication are human and humans have specific needs, which do not change as quickly as technology.”

We suggest that these two views stem from the differing pace of change inside and outside organisations and the increasing need for changes in consumer technology and information consumption to be reflected internally.

Those who are open to new technologies may be looking to outpace changes in corporate culture, driving behaviour through technological innovation; those more focused on the fundamental principles may be looking at the realities around them, and asking whether these technologies solve a problem that currently exists, or are simply a new fad.

“We need to work smarter to get communications sharper, shorter and more visual in line with the social media sites the future workers have grown up with.”

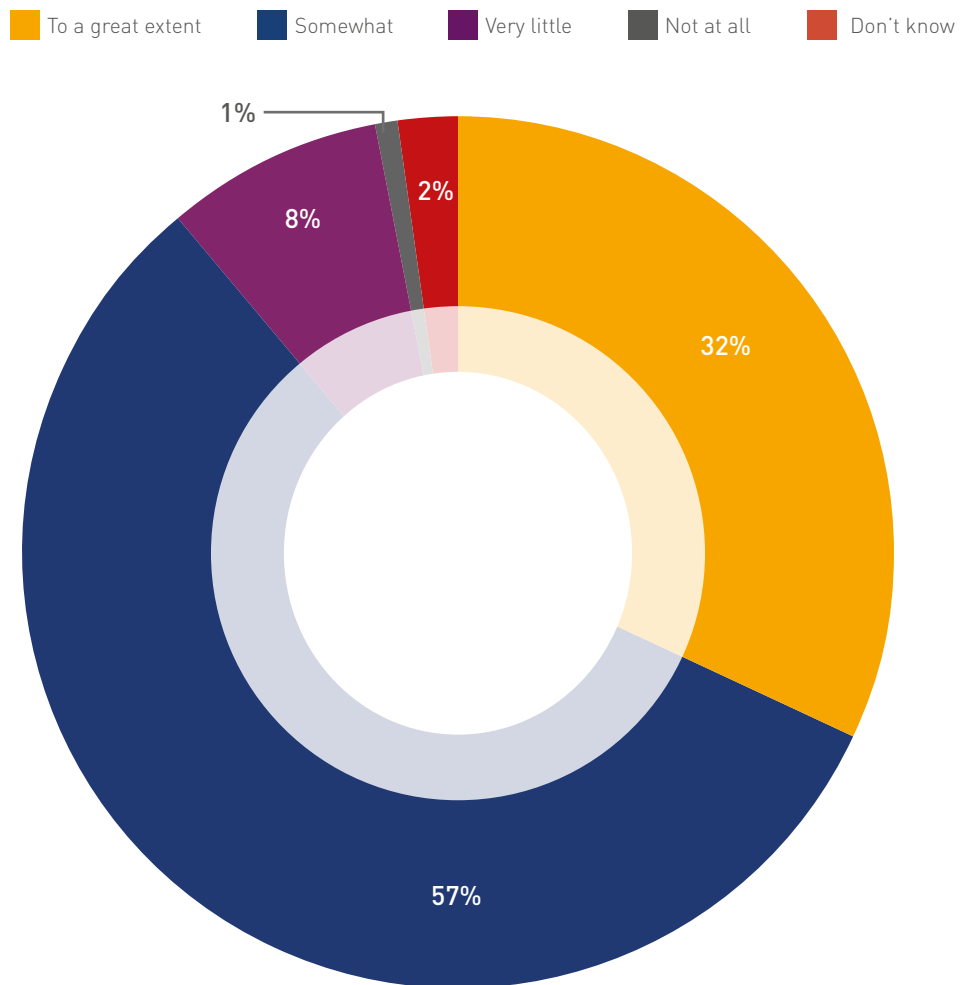
Regardless of the channels which are used, the focus for internal communications needs to be on the quality, timeliness and tone of what is being communicated. The survey shows that only 54% of internal communication professionals feel that the right balance is struck between frequency of communication and quality of messages. This supports the old adage that content is king.

For employees to be fully engaged in the vision and strategy of an organisation the general belief is that employees need to trust the communications they receive from the top. The internal communication function has a role to play here in coaching leaders to ensure that they are trusted.

Only 32% of internal communication professionals believe that employees in their organisation trust communications from the Board, to a great extent. While there is a perceived absence of distrust (only 9% feel employees have no or little trust), the majority say employees only have some trust in communications from the top (57%).

Employee trust in communications from the Board

Showing % who feel employees trust communications that come from the Board in their organisation



Q10 | In your opinion, to what extent, if at all, do you feel that employees trust communications that come from the Board in your organisation? Base: All respondents (n=97)

While these findings reflect the challenge of connecting employees with senior figures in an organisation, they also highlight why coaching senior leaders and developing an internal communications strategy that addresses this issue is important.

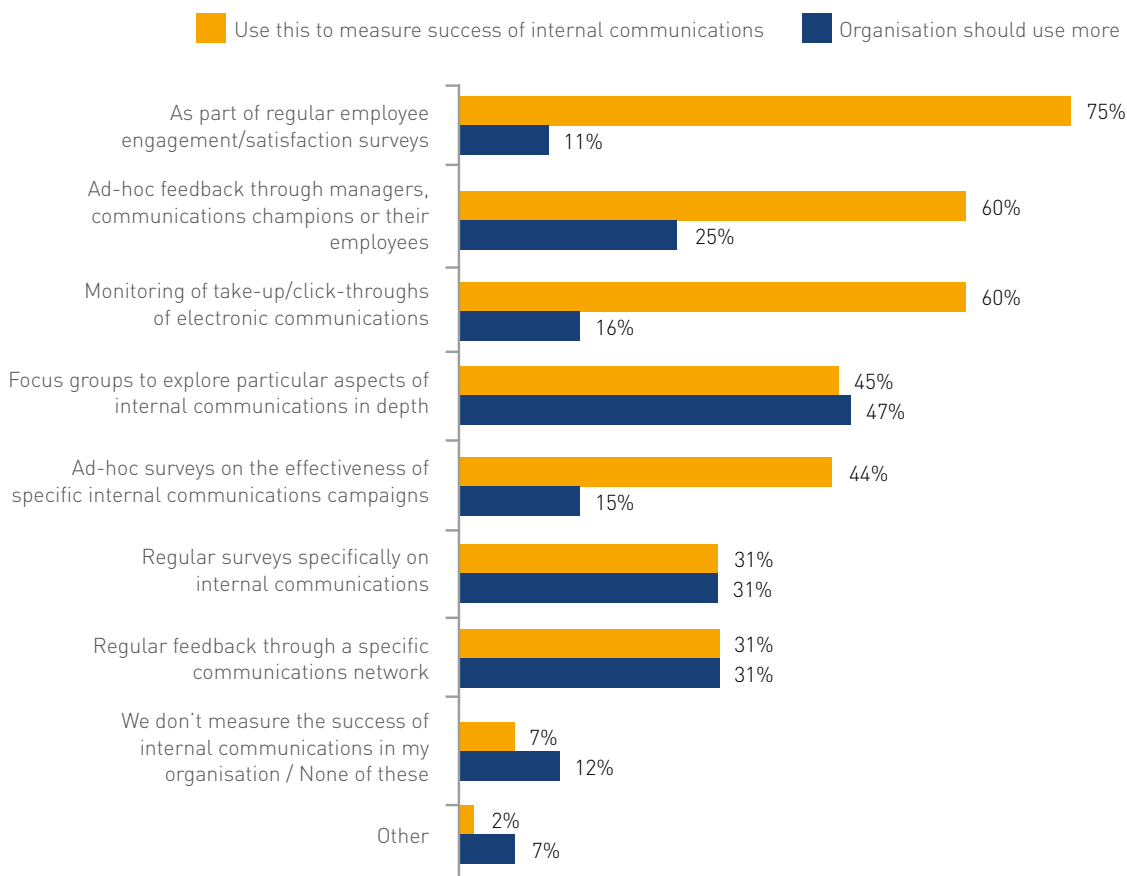
“Internal communicators need to continue to coach leaders to become better communicators.”

Using research to prioritise your internal communications

This research has uncovered a series of struggles for internal communication professionals. There appears to be a range of practical and cultural barriers to overcome, as well as uncertainty over how to embrace new technology and digital channels in the context of limited budgets for internal communications.

Internal research can help overcome some of these barriers. It can help to assess the effectiveness of internal communications; inform internal communication strategies and give the evidence needed to secure buy-in and budget from boards and executive teams.

Showing % who say their organisation uses each method to measure the success of internal communications vs. % who say their organisation should use each method more



Q14 | How, if at all, does your organisation measure the success of internal communications? Base: All respondents (n=97)

Q15 | And which if any of these, do you feel your organisation should do more of in order to get the most value from measuring the success of internal communications? Base: All respondents (n=97)

The vast majority of professionals say that their organisation measures the success of internal communications in some way, with only 7% saying that they don't measure it at all.

75% of internal communications professionals currently use regular employee engagement surveys, while 60% use ad-hoc feedback through managers, communications champions or other employees and monitoring of take-up/click-throughs of electronic communication.

The findings suggest that there is more appetite for research focused specifically on internal communications, alongside internal communications networks. While just 11% would like to see the regular employee engagement survey used more, 31% would like more use of regular surveys specifically on internal communications, the same proportion who would like more use of regular feedback through specific communications networks.

47% of senior internal communication professionals say that their organisation should use focus groups more to explore particular aspects of internal communications, while 45% say their organisation is currently using this method. The fact that internal communication professionals are most likely to say their organisation should use focus groups more points to a need for more in-depth exploration to help evaluate and inform communications alongside data gathering from surveys.

If budgets and resources need to be prioritised to achieve maximum impact, research among employees can help identify clear evidence of where these priorities lie, allowing the function to make informed recommendations to boards and executive teams on the changes that are needed.

Three key take-aways

1 | INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS IS A STRATEGIC DISCIPLINE

As the role of internal communications continues to evolve, there is an increasing need for organisations to employ internal communication professionals who can act as a strategic internal partner. Internal communications needs to help facilitate brand advocates from the inside out and support employees' understanding of the organisation's strategy, brand values and vision, and most importantly how they can play a part. Internal communication professionals need to play a primary role in facilitating this, and organisations need to use approaches to internal communications that place employee engagement at the centre of their corporate strategy.

2 | CONTENT IS KING

There will always be new technology and channels to communicate with employees. Technology can help in personalising content so that it's more relevant and engaging to employees and more timely. Social media has its place, largely in creating dialogue and facilitating sharing, which are two ways of helping employees feel valued and more involved in the organisation. However, it needs to be used alongside a mix of channels appropriate to the desired outcome. Indeed, the primary consideration is creating a content strategy that is effective in aligning internal communications to the strategic goals of the organisation.

3 | USE RESEARCH TO PRIORITISE YOUR APPROACH

This research has revealed that budgets and resources available to internal communications professionals are restricted and often prevent them from being as effective as they could be. It is therefore vital to know where to prioritise investment and effort to gain maximum value. Research can remove the guesswork and provide the evidence needed to secure buy-in and budget from boards and executive teams. Gaining feedback from employees can help inform and evaluate internal communications strategies more effectively.

For more information don't hesitate to contact Lottie Gunn at Ellwood Atfield or Olly Wright at ComRes.





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ComRes helps organisations communicate effectively internally and externally. Our team's experience across employee research and communications means we understand how to evaluate the effectiveness of communications and engagement strategies and inform their future development. We work with clients to ensure our research supports their strategic objectives, delivering research that provides the insight needed.

ComRes provides expertise and research in employee communications and engagement in the following:

- 1 | Internal communications development and evaluation
- 2 | Maximising employee engagement
- 3 | Understanding employees as a core stakeholder audience
- 4 | Optimising employer brand
- 5 | Employment sector research

The changing face of internal communications



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