



How internal communication generates true value

... and how internal communicators can use that value to bridge to the boardroom

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The Ignite Alliance is a strategic collaboration between Gatehouse and Open, two leading internal communication agencies based in London and Copenhagen respectively, working in partnership to push the boundaries of internal communication. Together, we set out to better understand how the field can be propelled into the next stage of its evolution and maturity.

The goal of the Ignite Alliance is to generate new insight and tools on what drives successful internal communication, leading to genuine employee engagement.

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“

In this new world order,
we need to start thinking
about how to position
ourselves as key players,
influencers and business
enablers, propelling
internal communication
into its golden age.

”

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| About this publication

Though internal communicators have undoubtedly made great strides in effectively advising and guiding senior leaders, there remains a disconnect. The gap between internal communicators and top leaders of organisations is at risk of widening due to external forces. The shift in how people are working, what they care about and what motivates them, demands a fresh approach to internal communication.

Against this backdrop, we wanted to discover how internal communicators could

get even closer to senior leaders, bridge to the boardroom and become not only strategic partners and trusted advisors, but a vital ingredient of organisational success.

Through a series of round table discussions in the UK and Denmark, influential internal communicators from large international organisations have offered their ideas and considerations on the value and role of internal communication to international businesses today.

We asked them three core questions:

1. What are the personal traits and qualities of those we see operating successfully at this level?
2. How do you manage your relationships with senior stakeholders?
3. What practical things should internal communicators do to build more respect with the top team?

Our discussions soon revealed that part of the problem stems from not being able to fully and clearly articulate our own value. Although the status of internal communication has risen over the past decade, the clear value proposition – the simple answer to what it actually does for a business and why – is all too often missing.

This booklet is inspired by the thoughts and ideas we heard at our round table discussions. The views, opinions and beliefs expressed in it do not necessarily reflect the views, opinions and beliefs of the contributors. Furthermore, to respect participants' confidentiality, all quotes have been anonymised.

The booklet should be considered a conversation starter rather than an academic study. We hope it can help spark more conversations about the true value of internal communication and how we can unlock it.

If we are not able to define the contribution effective internal communication makes to business, how can we expect others to?

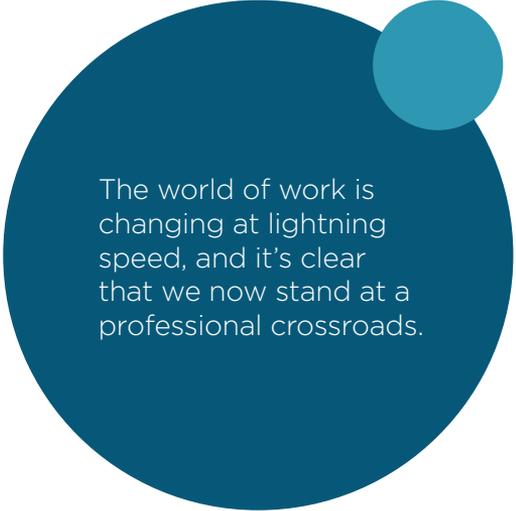


| Introduction

Internal communication has come a long way as a profession, from simply distributing the news to supporting businesses in meeting their strategic objectives. It's maturing past its adolescent years, from controlled top-down communications to open multi-way and multi-channel communications determined by audiences.

Today, the importance of having effective internal communication is widely recognised by most leaders, thanks to its clear impact on employee engagement and in turn, customer satisfaction and business performance. Organisations have now realised that communication is not something you do *to* employees but *with* them.

Though the profile of this once perceived 'fluffy' function has been significantly raised in recent years, internal communication is still far from mature. Although many of us are successfully advising senior leaders on the communication of strategy, change and transformation, culture and other important topics, there's still a long way to go before we unlock our true value.



The world of work is changing at lightning speed, and it's clear that we now stand at a professional crossroads.

the 4-3-5 Model

Taking internal communication to the next level



What is becoming increasingly clear, is that there are a multitude of factors which influence the role, position and value of the internal communicator. Through this programme of work, we have attempted to translate these influences into a 4-3-5 Model.

This model provides a compass to help practitioners navigate within a changing business environment and be seen as an invaluable resource underpinning organisational strategy.

4 Macro Influencers



The world is changing and four macro trends are transforming the environment that internal communicators operate in:

- 1. Continuous change**
Organisations are continuously changing; reacting to external forces and anticipating trends.
- 2. Growing organisations**
Businesses are growing, spanning vast geographies and industries.
- 3. The quest for talent**
Employee expectations and demands of their organisations are rising.
- 4. Inescapable transparency**
The world is becoming more transparent, due to disruptive technology, social media and the free flow of information.

3 Value Generators



The internal communicator is ideally positioned to help guide organisations through this new world order by:

- 1. Communicating purpose**
Clearly and meaningfully communicating an organisation's purpose, connecting employees to a strong narrative.
- 2. Uniting organisations**
Breaking down barriers between teams and functions, improving collaboration.
- 3. Empowering employees**
Giving employees a voice and providing them with the business insight and sense of direction required to make the right choices in their everyday work.

5 Enablers



Communicators can unlock true value in five ways:

- 1. Get closer**
Getting closer to all parts of the organisation.
- 2. Sharpen core skills**
Getting back to basics – developing and sharpening core skills.
- 3. Build Influence**
Acting with confidence to gain the right influence and a strong reputation.
- 4. Demonstrate value**
Talking numbers – learning the language of ROI and demonstrating the value of internal communication through evidence.
- 5. Think business**
Knowing the business – its markets, clients and financials.

| Four Macro Influencers



Continuous
change



Growing
organisations



The quest
for talent



Inescapable
transparency

Our discussions identified four macro challenges organisations are currently facing due to a changing business landscape. Organisations are in a state of continuous flux, people are working differently

and have increasingly demanding expectations of employers; compelling internal communicators to rethink how companies need to engage employees.



1. Continuous change

Change has become a permanent factor in large organisations. In an age of disruption, being able to deal with the increasing complexity that constant change brings is a massive challenge. A wealth of research shows that so many change programmes fail due to the lack of employee engagement – underlining the critical role of the internal communicator.

Most organisations will have certain fundamentals – strategic direction, values and purpose – that act as a vital compass, guiding employees during times of intense and sustained transformation. But without this anchor, change can be chaotic.

As the experts in communicating change, internal communicators have the power to mobilise employees, bring them along on the journey and directly drive a shift in attitudes, understanding and behaviour.

In times of accelerating complexity and constant change, businesses are painfully in need of internal communication expertise to make change stick.

2. Growing organisations

Organisations are getting larger, spanning vast geographies, industries and cultures. Continuous mergers and acquisitions mean accelerated growth in global markets where giants are now competing.

However, being able to fully benefit from scale remains a challenge. Entire sectors are proving ripe for disruption by smaller, more nimble, technology-enabled disrupter brands.

Unhealthy internal competition, poor integration of new acquisitions, lack of knowledge sharing and collaboration across the organisation all get in the way.

Being able to communicate efficiently up, down and across a complex, globally dispersed organisation is essential for large companies to run smoothly.

In order to thrive, the titans of the future need internal communication to facilitate dialogue, multi-way communications and break down silos.

3. The quest for talent

A changing workforce has created a different set of challenges for organisations. A growing need for specialist skills and know-how in almost all industries means that large companies are in head-on competition to find and keep the right talent.

Compared to previous generations, millennials have higher expectations and demand more of their employers. They want to work for companies that can provide them with a sense of meaning and purpose, a clear strategy, a strong culture, and a career pathway that fits with their aspirations.

Having grown up in a constantly communicating technology-enabled world, they also expect continuous interaction and feedback. Once a month e-bulletins and a yearly performance review with their manager are no longer enough.

From a one-size-fits-all approach to employee-driven communications; employees want to influence how they are communicated with.

In order to win the war on talent, building a distinctive and compelling employee value proposition is more important than ever.

4. Inescapable transparency

The definition of internal communication is evolving, and it's not just limited to the internal workings of a company.

Social media, peer-to-peer influence, and a world that communicates a lot more than it used to means increased transparency is the new reality. Information flows more rapidly and freely, and the idea that what goes on inside can be kept inside is simply naive. External stakeholders demand more coherence between what companies *say* they do – and what they *actually* do.

Combined with a new age of influence, where traditional advertising is losing ground to word-of-mouth and content marketing, we are in a situation where employees suddenly play a key role as brand ambassadors and company spokespeople. Front-running companies are focused on creating dynamic internal brand experiences that match their external brand promises.

We are entering a new era of internal communication, where we need to stop seeing ourselves as communicators that deliver instructions, but as storytellers and drivers of authentic and impactful brand advocacy.

This demands much greater alignment and collaboration between internal and external communication, and attention to how every 'internal' message will be perceived externally. Above all, it demands inspiring and relevant communication that employees want to engage with, support and share.

| Three Value Generators



**Communicating
purpose**



**Uniting
organisations**



**Empowering
employees**

In a few decades, internal communication has gone from being about publishing the employee magazine to a complex mix of strategic and tactical tasks, from advising top management on strategy to facilitating team talks on the shop floor.

The playing field is changing, and there is a need for a fresh look at where and how internal communication adds value today. Our discussions have identified three specific value drivers – the keys to unlocking influence, support and impact. Internal communication generates true value by...



You need to be able to articulate the company's narrative at every point in time. Your ability to write that down is the outcome of you having joined the dots.



1. Communicating purpose

We ensure high employee engagement and performance by translating business vision, values, goals and objectives into a meaningful and coherent narrative that everyone in the organisation can relate to.

Why now?

In times of increasing growth and complexity, constant change and a spotlight on the employee value proposition, businesses need to provide employees with a clear and compelling purpose. Connecting them to a strong and explicit strategic narrative is the key to this.

Why is it important?

Employees are increasingly driven by meaning and purpose - they need an anchor in order to perform optimally and proactively support the organisation.

What is the unique contribution of internal communicators?

- We cut through complexity and simplify messages
- We capture and share stories that help employees make sense of the world of work
- We equip leaders and managers with the ability to engage employees and connect them to the big picture
- We know what's going on across an organisation, how stories are landing and, crucially, whether they are making a difference



2. Uniting organisations

We enable organisations to function as a single joined-up entity by breaking down silos and hierarchies and providing the glue that holds it together.

Why now?

Organisations are growing, in number of employees, span of business and geographic reach. This poses a real challenge to leaders in connecting increasingly diverse and dispersed teams, driving collaboration and optimising performance.

Why is it important?

Organisations only benefit from their size if they are able to facilitate real collaboration – across teams, geographies and cultures.

What is the unique contribution of internal communicators?

- We are the go-to experts on employees – we know who they are, where they are, and what they are thinking, feeling and doing
- We stimulate dialogue and encourage meaningful conversations across the business
- We manage the communication infrastructure that drives collaboration and breaks down boundaries

“ Our internal communication team sit alongside the media team and we report to the same person. Our stakeholders don’t expect to brief the two teams separately; they want us to work together. ”

3. Empowering employees

We boost local decision power by providing employees with the business insight and sense of direction required to make the right choices in their everyday work. We enable them to contribute to organisational success by giving them a voice.

Why now?

As businesses become increasingly dependent on constant innovation, knowledge expansion and change readiness, they become reliant on employees who act autonomously, rather than waiting for orders.

Why is it important?

The link between employees feeling well informed and having a voice and employee engagement is clearly established. Employees who make choices in line with business targets, purpose and strategy, propel the business forward at maximum speed.

What is the unique contribution of internal communicators?

- We translate corporate speak into clear, compelling and actionable messages

- We train and equip managers to communicate effectively with their teams
- We ensure the communication flow of the organisation – up, down and sideways
- We listen, capture feedback and share this insight with senior leaders, helping to guide strategy execution



| Five Enablers



**Get
closer**



**Sharpen
core skills**



**Build
influence**



**Demonstrate
value**



**Think
business**

Armed with the knowledge of how internal communication can add true value to organisations impacted by external macro trends, how can these insights be put into action?

What are the key skills, factors and methods needed to generate true value?

Here are the 5 most important approaches that have worked for our contributors.



When I joined, I spent the first six weeks going out and listening. I played that back to the board – what the mood was, how employees were feeling and what they understood. Their reaction was excellent. This wasn't the internal communication they were used to!



1. Get closer – to employees, your CEO and to the business

True value is created when internal communicators get close to all parts of the organisation – employees, managers, leaders.

A common denominator of the success stories shared at our round table sessions was the unique ability of internal communicators to advise top management based on real insight into what goes on with the people in the business.

However, too many internal communicators are still hiding away in headquarters, slowly

getting more and more dissociated with the of everyday life of the business.

So get your wellies on and your notebook ready and go out there and find out what's really going on! Listen to what people say, ask stupid questions, get a feel for the mood, understand what makes the business tick, and what keeps your CEO awake at night. Listening and questioning skills are key to building relationships and becoming trusted advisors.

The same applies to your management team. Spend time with managers at all levels of the business – from the very top to your first line managers.

Measurement is part of this, too – whether it's surveys or qualitative techniques like interviews and focus groups. It's about capturing intelligence from employees and then using this to guide decision-making.



You need to identify opportunities to improve internal communication and be creative about it. Every time we are innovative, it gives us more credibility.



2. Sharpen core skills - expertise, professionalism and good writing are always at the core

In the quest to be taken seriously as strategic advisors, internal communicators risk losing sight of the core skills of our discipline. Communication.

Good writing, creativity, knowing your channels, and developing a strong communication strategy never go out of fashion; it is still our craft. A craft that no one else in the organisation masters as well as us.

From our round table sessions, it was clear that a key element in building trust with your senior management – and eventually bridging to the boardroom – really comes down to delivering every time. It often starts with writing that great speech.

So go back to basics as often as you can. Make sure you are continuously learning and sharpening your writing, building your channel knowledge and keeping up to speed on the latest thinking.

The field of communication moves quickly, and being on top of technological advances as well as the latest trends is essential.

Leaving digital to IT is not the answer. Internal communicators must be tech savvy and grab the opportunities that are out there. Without our guidance and input, new communication tools and technologies will fail to have impact and will create confusion and complexity.



You know what employees feel and think. You have to seize that opportunity and bring it into a C-suite context.



We ask the right questions that can make management see things from new angles. For instance, that there must be other aspects of a strategy storyline than merely growth.



3. Build influence - be at eye level with leadership, act with confidence

Suffering from an inferiority complex is a common issue for internal communicators! We're an emerging profession, sometimes sounding softer than soft, struggling to find our position in the organisation. But an attitude like this is not going to get us anywhere.

Our contributors shared experiences of acting with confidence and stamina as a key to building influence in the organisation.

If leaders don't exactly know how internal communication contributes - tell them, show them, and tell them again. Remember to

persevere - Rome wasn't built in a day, and building a strong reputation takes time. Take pride in the 'softness' of the discipline, this is exactly what sets us apart - our knowledge of employee engagement, emotion, motivation, how to boil something very complex down to a compelling storyline, and then back it up with facts and numbers.

4. Demonstrate value using hard evidence - show progress, talk in numbers

Do not expect others to see the value of internal communication by themselves. You have to make a conscious effort to demonstrate the value by measuring impact and showing progress.

There is a tendency in internal communication to focus on output rather than outcome. How many pieces of information have been distributed? How many employees read the magazine? This says little about what has been achieved. Shift your focus to measuring outcome rather than output.

This is not easily done, but it is necessary. Build your own measurement framework and use it to continuously demonstrate how you are supporting and enabling the organisation's strategy. Align what you do to the goals and priorities of the business and show how and where you're contributing. Respect that organisations – and senior management in particular – prefer numbers. If you are not a numbers person, become one or ally yourself with someone who is. Make it your business to speak the language of business.

Then apply your killer communication skills. No one wants to just look at numbers. Become an accomplished storyteller and use narrative and visual techniques like infographics to help them understand what the numbers show and what your recommendation is.



Internal communication has always been very metrics-based – most of the time, we're not measuring the impact. What matters is not how many people read it, but how they changed their behaviour as a result of this.





You can show leaders data – but it's only when you tell them 'this data tells you X, Y, Z' that they become interested. I remember a senior leader telling me after a presentation: 'I don't know what spooky magic you're doing, but I reckon that's what we need to do'. It's not the data – it's the interpretation of the data that will get them on board.



In our business, internal communication is probably more important than external communication. You need strong business acumen. You need to know what happens in the market to be able to use that internally.



5. Think business! Always link back to the strategy and know the marketplace

It's not for nothing that internal communication is sometimes perceived as the 'decorations' department. While taking pride in the softer side of our discipline is essential, so is being business savvy. Becoming an expert on the business, its markets, its clients, and its financials is just as important to your role as your communication skills. It's the combination of the two that creates the magic.

Internal communicators must take a long hard look in the mirror. If your heart is not in it, it shows – and if your knowledge of the business is not spot on, you are not going to be able to generate any real value.

Our contributors all pointed out that being able to really engage with your top management on key business issues is paramount to being a trusted strategic advisor.

This means always keeping up to date and educating yourself when you need it. There is no shame in not being an expert on EBITA, but there is in not thinking that it matters.



Repositioning and redefining internal communication

As the playing field and value proposition for internal communication change – so does the role that internal communicators can and should play in the organisation.

Our role is impacted by the external influences that push organisations to change and adapt. A more modern and discerning employee, expanding and more complex organisational structures and the blurred lines between internal and external communication is demanding we take a fresh look at how we can continue to add value.

Positioning ourselves and our function in the right way is essential to gaining impact, delivering full value and making internal communication progress further along its maturity continuum.

Unfortunately, internal communication sometimes feel less established than its peer functions. We are the nerdy cousin of PR (not as cool and more serious) and the superficial sister of HR (not as theoretical and more arty).

Yet, internal communication has real strength by being right in the middle of the mix.

Positioned correctly, we possess the power and insight to be the preferred strategic partner not only to top management, but also to our sister functions.



Our positioning is unique - having the ear of senior leaders on one hand and being tuned into the needs of employees on the other. Effective internal communication creates a strong sense of identity, meaning and purpose for employees. It unites the organisation behind a set of common values and goals, and engages employees in order to get things done. Executed well, it directly drives employee and organisational performance.

In this new world order, we need to start thinking about how to position ourselves as key players, influencers and business enablers, propelling internal communication into its golden age.

Every organisation is unique

This core recipe for internal communication success needs to be adapted and customised to fit. That's why we recommend you take what you find useful and meaningful from this booklet, and from there, develop your own clearly articulated value proposition.

“ “
Get your wellies on
and your notebook
ready and go out
there and find out
what's really going on.
” ”



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