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Melcrum is a provider of strategic business information. We gather best practices from expert practitioners to help you make better business decisions.

Establishing an internal network is a great way to strengthen your communication community and build a more coordinated and cohesive team. But potential pitfalls do exist, such as an organizational structure that doesn't lend itself to integration. Here, Bill Quirke examines what makes different networks flourish, and provides suggestions on how to avoid some of the common stumbling blocks when setting one up.

Building an internal communication network

Using networks to coordinate activities and share best practice

By Bill Quirke

As more organizations wake up to the importance of communication and invest in more internal communication professionals, they are having to look at how best to connect those communicators in a professional network.

The communication audit has been a familiar tool for years. A more recent development is the audit of internal communicators – where a search is launched for all those involved in internal communication, with the aim of mapping exactly who is doing it, for whom and to what standard.

Organizations often discover that they've got global communicators, divisional communicators, national communicators, site communicators, functional communicators and initiative communicators. Left to their own devices, internal communicators can duplicate effort, create unnecessary cost and end up competing with each other for air time.

Other business functions are under the microscope to see whether they're adding value to

the business, justifying their costs and demonstrating professionalism. Internal communicators are no exception.

The benefits of working together

Establishing a companywide network is a sensible way of ensuring that internal communication is being run as a team sport rather than a solo pursuit, with the same roles, rules and goals. At a time when internal communicators are attempting to establish themselves as a credible profession and educate senior management about the true value of their role, it makes sense for networks of communicators to work more closely together to acquire skills, press for change and raise standards.

Naturally there are different kinds of networks, created for different reasons and at different stages of development. What they all tend to have in common is a belief that by working together they can improve internal communication within their organization.

Example 1: Vodafone

Vodafone operates a global internal communication network connecting members from each of its country operating companies, as well as a network in the UK for communicators based in its UK operating units.

As Vodafone has evolved from a portfolio of acquired mobile phone companies, each often with its own individual brand, to a global, integrated organization under one brand, so the nature of the network has shifted. Internal communicators meet at the global level quarterly for planning and developing best practice.

Rather than simply swapping good ideas, network members identify the key areas of internal communication they need to develop, such as face-to-face communication, communication skills for managers and measurement. They agree which operating company will develop a solution, which will then be piloted in one market before being transferred to the others. This means that the global center's role is to foster collaboration, rather than be the source of all wisdom.

Example 2: Diageo

Diageo, a leading drinks company, is another organization that invests in its network of communication. It regularly pulls together both its internal and external communication communities, underlining a commitment to an integrated approach to communicating with all stakeholders.

Diageo's internal communicators see their network as more than a body for information exchange and coordination. They see part of their job as spreading good communication practice beyond their own function, to leaders of the business and leaders of change initiatives. Working closely together, members of the network have developed a "Diageo way of communicating," which includes innovative leadership communication training, manager guides to improving their communication and training in communication planning.

Example 3: BP

A network is a useful way of rapidly spreading the greater experience in one part of an organization to another. BP's global Exploration and Production division operates in far-flung corners of the world and needs good internal communication to connect its operations. Its communicators' network is specifically designed to help integrate communication, adopt common processes and allow experience in one market to be rapidly transferred to another.

The development stages of networks

Networks are established for different reasons; some get together to share information and trade best practice, others are created to reduce internal

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competition and confusion. Once created, they tend to go through different, but clear, stages. These are described in more detail below.

1. Information exchange. Members tell each other what they're doing but without any commitment to change what they're doing in the face of any objection. At this stage, network members tend to be wary of each other and are committing simply to exchanging information rather than renegotiating their communication plans.

This stage is typical of a decentralized organization in which business units have done things in their own distinctive way and see little value in anyone else getting involved. The nature of a network and the relationships between its members inevitably reflect the relationship between the center and the businesses, or between the global headquarters and the countries.

2. Coordination. As relationships are established and the fear of power grabs recede, members of the network start to coordinate their efforts, synchronize their communication plans and give each other early warning of upcoming initiatives. They look for synergies between their activities and for opportunities to piggyback on conferences, training courses and publications.

This stage is particularly important when the network of communicators is being used as a distribution chain – where the center relies on divisions to localize, translate and pass on central communication.

3. Collaboration. Members of the network start swapping examples of good practice, sharing ideas with each other, trading communication materials, co-funding the development of training and contacting each other for coaching, ▶



KEY POINTS:

- Communication networks are a good way to raise standards through better coordination and sharing of best practice.
- Once created, networks typically go through four stages: sharing information, coordination, collaboration and integration.
- Issues likely to hinder a network's success include different reporting lines and different levels of skills and focus among practitioners.
- Clear rules, a common process, regular communication and acknowledgement of best practice, all help networks flourish.

- ◀ help and advice. They explore new developments, report back on conferences and workshops and contribute to colleagues' professional development.

4. *Integration.* At this stage, the network sees itself not simply as a federation of internal communicators, each with their own patch of turf, but as a team of people with different skills who consult and coach each other. Individual members are recognized as subject-matter experts and take the lead on particular specialisms such as face-to-face communication or measurement.

Problems with building networks

Trying to pull together a network of communicators is not always easy. Added to the simple logistical difficulties of getting all people in one place and investing the time it takes to build relationships, other issues can arise. For example:

- *Different reporting lines* – often internal communicators can be reporting to different functions; corporate communication, marketing, HR, change. These will have different bosses, with different priorities and there will be some degree of internal politics to deal with.
- *Different focuses* – some see their role as an extension of marketing communication, others may believe that they are there to effect culture change. Different interpretations of the job will cause frustration.
- *Different levels of skill* – networks tend to be of variable quality. People have often found themselves in the internal communicator's role as an accident of history. They may have very different levels of skills, little opportunity for professional development and very different expectations from their line bosses and internal clients.
- *Different amounts of time* – where a centrally based communicator may spend 100 percent of their time on internal communication, they may be working with a local internal communicator who's only part time and expected to cover external and marcoms too.

Although these issues can hinder the success of networks, many organizations have discovered what makes their network flourish. Some examples are provided below.

1. Clear rules of engagement

Networks are an important way of creating coordination, consistency and accountability. But it helps for networks to recognize the balance

between the center and the business units. If an organization is trying to unify its different businesses into a coherent whole, internal communicators should help, not hinder, the move. Internal communicators in the businesses should not be insisting on independent approaches, or rebranding communication for their people.

Equally, where an organization is decentralizing and allowing its individual brands more independence, the center has to relax its role and support rather than direct. Often networks are established when the structure of an organization changes. Previously independent and autonomous units find themselves having to work more closely with communicators at the global center or at regional level.

Internal communicators who previously have simply had to focus on their own business unit – often with its own brand, heritage and culture, suddenly discover that they have to collaborate as members of a family of businesses. This is often the case where organizations are built up by serial mergers and acquisitions and where individual independent brands suddenly find themselves as part of a broader portfolio.

Here, communication networks are a useful means of creating coordination, agreeing common approaches and striking a positive balance between the needs of the corporate center with its corporate brand, and those of the individually branded business units.

Whitbread is a prime example of this kind of network. Internal communicators from such brands as Costa, Marriott hotels, Premier Travel Inn and David Lloyd have worked to ensure that there's a common "one Whitbread" approach to internal communication, while ensuring that each brand pursues its own internal communication in a way that fits its distinctive style and culture.

2. A common planning process

Most communication networks discover that they can make life easier for each other (and stop annoying each other) by developing communication plans and sharing them. That way the number of unexpected surprises is reduced, the chance for synchronization increases and those out in the operations get a better opportunity for early consultation and input, which improves the final result.

Where networks adopt the same planning process, they get plans and a common format which are easily comparable and can be combined to give a unified view of what's going on at global and local levels. Banking organization Lloyds TSB, for example, has

developed an online forward-planning and communication “air traffic control” process, for use both by business and central communicators and by initiative and program communicators.

3. Collaboration outside of meetings

Getting everyone together in one location is a good way of building relationships, but can be expensive in terms of time and travel costs. If the network does not move on to doing useful work together, the take up of invitations tends to decline, or the events quickly get dropped when budgets are reduced.

Networks that work together *between* meetings tend to hang on to their good intentions and keep the agreements they made. Networks can also use collaborative software and video-conferences to make progress.

4. Acknowledgement of best practice

Members of networks often fear that they’re going to have a one-size-fits-all approach to internal communication imposed on them. Often, individual members of the network have pioneered new and innovative approaches in their own areas, which are superior to those at the center. These have to be held up and recognized as good practice, which can then be agreed as common practice for the network as a whole.

Rolls-Royce is a good example of a network which has been built up by the functional leader at the center, by providing regular forums to showcase good work in its business units, and by providing collegiate support rather than imposing central solutions.

5. Professional development

Internal communicators are often lonely beings, trying to work with colleagues and internal clients who don’t quite “get it” and whom they feel they have to educate. Members of communication networks can offer each other sympathy and advice. More importantly, they can provide a forum for professional development and acquiring skills, which will help members build their careers, raise their status and earn greater recognition.

The telecommunications company, Ericsson, is a good example of a network looking ahead to the future and projecting what business value internal communication should be adding and what skills internal communicators will need.

Ericsson has involved internal communicators from the global center, its R&D units, its business units and its market units in a systematic program of development. As a network they’re



CASE STUDY: ASTRAZENECA

AstraZeneca is a leading pharmaceutical company with over 64,000 employees worldwide. With communicators occupying roles in different functional and local groups, there’s a need to balance the diverse needs of local and business-unit audiences with corporate priorities and consistent messages. “Any organization operating globally has to deal with issues surrounding the way communication responsibilities are devolved,” says Katharina Auer, director of global internal communications at AstraZeneca. “To best meet AstraZeneca’s needs, we have the Global Internal Communications Leadership Team (ICLT) and our global network. The ICLT has a worldwide internal communication focus, and global, local and functional constituents.”

The ICLT comprises representatives from all business areas, including the corporate core team, the USA, the international sales and marketing organization, operations, R&D, support functions (e.g., HR) and the main hubs in Sweden and the UK, etc. The team meets every quarter and by teleconference in between meetings. Once a year, in alignment with the business strategy and strategic priorities, it develops the global internal communication strategy, which is presented to and approved by the senior executive team. In addition to global, corporate delivery, this strategy provides the framework for functional and local communication strategies, allowing for a robust and consistent message to be delivered worldwide, with built-in flexibility to deliver functional or local context.

At its meetings, the team reviews progress, analyzes feedback, works on new projects, proactively plans for potential issues coming up in the future, and shares ideas and best practices – all with a view to delivering fully joined-up thinking and communication throughout the organization. “In this way, the ICLT serves as an example of global and cross-functional cooperation in a decentralized environment,” says Auer.

The IC Core Team and ICLT are also constantly looking at ways to provide support and tools to front-line communicators across the company (the IC network), to aid them strategically and tactically, working to agreed processes, and to gather their feedback and suggestions. They develop training tools for practitioners, and manage the internal communications intranet with best practices, tools, strategy and the global IC performance scorecard.

Further reading: “Delivering effective global employee communication at AstraZeneca,” *The Business Communicator*, January 2003 (www.melcrum.com/link/tbarchive.html)

working to establish a common view of the value internal communication should provide, identify the priorities on which they should focus, map the skills they currently have and develop the skills they’ll need to fulfill future roles.

What organizations like this have realized is that they need to marshal their communication forces if they are to have the impact their business needs from them. For a profession that preaches the importance of employee focus, alignment and engagement, it’s good that we start with ourselves. scm

Further reading: “Introducing centralization in HP’s global IC function,” *SCM*, December/January 2005 (Volume 9, Issue 1).

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