

Developing Internal Communication Practice That Supports Employee Engagement

## **Developing Internal Communication Practice That Supports Employee Engagement**

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### **Introduction**

This paper examines the current state of internal communication practice in the UK, how it supports employee engagement and how practitioners would like to change it in the future. The UK government commissioned report “Engaging for Success” (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009) suggests that good quality internal communication enhances engagement in public, private and voluntary sector organisations. It cites poor communication as a barrier to engagement and a cause of disengagement. Hargie and Tourish (2009, pp. 235-6) argue that recurring themes in the communication literature include; adequate information flow concerning key change issues, supervisory communication as a preferred communication source, communication as a foundation of teamwork and positive employee attitudes, face-to-face communication as a primary method of information transmission, and the benefits obtained from conceptualising dissent as a source of useful feedback. However, they conclude that there is a disabling gap between theory and practice.

The paper focuses on internal communication practitioners in the UK. It sets out to examine current practice to understand what proportion of time is spent on activities that support the four enablers of engagement highlighted by MacLeod and Clarke (2009), how much time they would ideally spend on these activities and, from their perspective, the different levels of understanding of internal communication within organisations. It includes an assessment of some of the barriers that prevent the development of internal communication as a professional function that underpins employee engagement.

## Internal Communication

### Theory and practice

Welch and Jackson's (2007) stakeholder approach to internal communication builds on Freeman's (1984, 1999) emphasis on the identification of internal stakeholders and suggests that team peer, project peer and line manager relationships are standard stakeholder categories. These dimensions suggest a static stakeholder group membership defined by role and work rather than by issue or interest, highlighting the importance of thinking about internal communication from the receiver's point of view.

According to Chen et al., (2006, p. 242) the linkages between internal corporate communication and team, peer, and project team communication and employee engagement remain under-explored. It is the three-way association between a) team, project, and peer internal communication, b) internal corporate communication and c) employee engagement that offers the potential of greater levels of employee engagement in all organisations. Though Welch and Jackson (2007, p. 188) state that internal corporate communication, among other goals, can promote a sense of belonging and contribute to organisational commitment, there is also a concern, as Welch and Jackson acknowledge, that a predominantly one-way approach to internal corporate communication leads to information overload. However, it is possible that internal corporate communication can be one-way *and* two-way; more symmetrical, as in the excellence model of public relations (Grunig, 1975; Grunig and Hunt, 1984; Grunig, 1992 ), and more relational as Ledingham (2006) suggests in a relationship management approach to public relations. The logistics of senior managers discussing strategy with all employees, especially in large organisations, are considerable though not insurmountable.

Marques (2010, p. 49) points to concerns raised by Chen et al., (2006) that research has tended to ignore member satisfaction with organizational communication practices and seeks to address this through the identification of criteria for successful communication. Zaremba (2006, p. 114) suggests that "foundational" criteria are; timely, clear, accurate, pertinent and credible. In academic research, Marques (2010, p. 52) found that responsibility (content and context), conciseness, professionalism (business-like) and sincerity (genuineness) are also important.

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Kalla (2005, p. 302) highlights the lack of application of theory to practice, "...a paradox exists because, although increasing awareness concerning the importance of communication to organisations exists, that knowledge appears to have rarely translated to practice". In terms of managing internal communication, Kalla (2005) argues that an *integrated approach* is important. Four domains are suggested: 1) Business (the practicalities), 2) Management (knowledge sharing), 3) Corporate (that done by professional internal communication teams) and, 4) Organisational (with a focus on meaning).

### **Interpersonal internal communication**

Bambacas and Patrickson (2008, p. 53) suggest that "It would appear that the literature on communication has investigated general aspects of interpersonal communication rather than communication skills" and that "Few articles have considered specific interpersonal communication variables". It is therefore appropriate to briefly explore effective internal interpersonal communication before turning to employee engagement in the next section.

According to Larkin and Larkin (1994, p xi) there are three ways to communicate with employees: 1) Communicate directly to supervisors, 2) Use face-to-face communication, and 3) Communicate relative performance of the local work area. It is clear that communicating is what managers spend a lot of the day doing. As Tourish and Hargie (2009, p. 9) report, "...supervisors spend between one-third and two-thirds of their time interacting with what are still sometimes termed "subordinates". Tourish and Hargie (2009, p. 15) state that agreement in the literature suggests that number one in best communication practices by leading companies is "Communications training...*especially* for senior leaders". Murray (2012, p. 179) observes that communication is a top three skill of leadership that is sadly neglected. However, what should training be about, if it is to lead to commitment and engagement? According to academic research conducted through in-depth interviews with 32 senior HR managers, "the skill of maintaining clarity and consistency of messages was rated as having the utmost importance" Bambacas and Patrickson (2008, pp. 65-6). This research also indicates that there are "problems in trying to link organisational expectations, the organisational vision to those of the individual...this coincided with the two-way communication problem that was continuously voiced by respondents". This highlights the significant challenges in integrating internal corporate communication with communication at the team/project peer and line manager level in a consistent way. Failing to do this, according to Bambacas and Patrickson (2008, p. 64) means that commitment will not be secured.

## Employee Engagement

### Definitions and drivers

Academic definitions of engagement are summarised by Welch (2011, p. 7) as, “cognitive, emotional and physical role performance characterised by absorption, dedication and vigour and dependent upon the psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety and availability”. A job demands-resources model of engagement (Bakker and Demerouti, 2008, p. 223) typifies human resources approaches to employee engagement and is based on work pressures and individual job resources such as autonomy and personal traits such as optimism. Internal communication is not considered as a contributory factor. Macey and Schneider (2008) suggest that engagement is a set of constructs that integrates *state* engagement (passion, energy, enthusiasm, and activation), *behavioural* engagement (adaptive behaviour) and *trait* engagement (personality attributes). Their conceptualisation extends to the inclusion of organizational conditions that serve to facilitate and encourage state and behavioural engagement. Macey and Schenider (2008, p. 29) note that organizations must promote a sense of trust that employees will benefit from the psychological and behavioural relationships with which they enter with the organisation. Saks (2006, p. 612) found that there is a meaningful distinction between job and organization engagement and that organization engagement was a much stronger predictor of all the outcomes than job engagement. This is an important clarification of the term “engagement” with significant implications for internal communication theory. Engagement is, according to Saks, “contingent on the economic and socioemotional resources received from the organization”. This should therefore be the basis of much corporate internal communication content that is congruent with how the organisation operates. Research conducted for the CIPD by Truss et al., (2006, p. 45) identified the three main factors that influence employee engagement as; 1) having opportunities to feed your views upwards, 2) feeling well informed about what is happening in the organization, and 3) thinking that your manager is committed to your organization. In their review of employee engagement in the UK, MacLeod and Clarke (2009, p. 8) came across 50 definitions. They conclude (2009, p. 9) that engagement is much broader than individual job resources:

We believe it is most helpful to see employee engagement as a workplace approach designed to ensure that employees are *committed* to their organisation’s goals and values, *motivated* to contribute to organisational success, and are able at the same time to enhance their own sense of well-being (italics added).

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Alfes et al., (2010, p. 5), in a CIPD research report, define engagement as “being positively present during the performance of work by willingly contributing intellectual effort, experiencing positive emotions and meaningful connections to others”. Although this definition does not include an explicit connection to the organisation, they identified a broad set of drivers: meaningfulness of work, voice - being able to feed your views upwards, senior management communication and vision, supportive work environment, person–job fit, line management style. Of these, meaningfulness and voice were highlighted as the two most important factors. The authors suggest (2010, p. 24) that meaningfulness is created “through regular communication about the organisation’s vision and future objectives. Creating a common framework helps employees to see a bigger picture in their daily work”.

Scherbaum et al., (2010, p. 191-2) revealed that an organisation’s vision, employee development, internal communication and top leadership rank highest as drivers across a range of different analytical approaches. However, internal communication is not analysed in depth in this study and so specific aspects of communication that are important for employee engagement are not examined. More recently, Gourlay et al., (2012) distinguish between different levels of engagement, described as “transactional” and “emotional”. The distinction between the two terms is set out as follows:

Transactional engagement is shaped by employees’ concern to earn a living, to meet minimal expectations of the employer and their co-workers, and so on. Emotional engagement is driven by a desire on the part of employees to do more for (and to receive more – a greater psychological contract – from) the organisation than is normally expected.

Correlations between drivers and emotional engagement show that person-organisation fit and organisational identification are the two most correlated factors and that they are more highly correlated than the quality of line management (0.67, 0.62 and 0.37 respectively) (Gourlay et al., p. 24). Finally, in making the case for communication, Tourish and Hargie, (2009, p. 10) report that in the UK’s 100 best companies to work for as identified by the Sunday Times, 63 per cent of those listed had employees who are strongly engaged and “unsurprisingly, communication emerges as a recurrent theme”. However, general levels of engagement are, according to Truss et al., (2006, p. xi) low - only three in ten of UK employees were actively engaged with their work. Alfes et al., (2010, p. 6) report that 8 per cent of employees are ‘strongly engaged’. A further 70 per cent can be described as ‘moderately’ or ‘somewhat’ engaged and just 1 per cent as very weakly engaged, with the remaining 21 per cent neither engaged nor disengaged.

**Employee engagement and performance**

Bakker and Demerouti (2008, p. 216) suggest that academic studies in the Netherlands, Spain and Greece indicate a positive link between engagement and job performance. Key factors are; positive emotions, better health, ability to mobilise resources and transfer of engagement to others. A broad conclusion is made by MacLeod and Clarke, (2009, p. 34) that employee engagement generates better financial performance in the private sector and better outcomes in the public sector. This is backed up with extensive practitioner based data and an array of case study material. However, given the lack of consensus on what is meant by employee engagement and the broad definitions that exist (Gebauer and Lowman, 2008, p. 2, Cook, 2008, p. 3, MacLeod and Brady, 2008, p. 11, and Axelrod, 2002) direct correlations to performance outcomes are very difficult to ascertain. Indeed, Macey and Schneider (2008, p. 21) assert that “Most of the engagement measures we have seen failed to get the conceptualization correct...”. Furthermore, Gebauer and Lowman (2008, p. 9) argue that no studies answer the question about which comes first, performance or engagement. They suggest that this is missing the point anyway and “what matters most is that engagement and performance feed each other in a continuous virtual circle.” In countering this point, Buckingham (cited in MacLeod and Clarke, 2009, p. 13) is adamant that “it is engagement that leads to performance, and this is a four times stronger relationship than performance leading to engagement”. MacLeod and Clarke (2009, p. 11) argue strongly that “there is evidence that *improving* engagement correlates with *improving* performance”.

Most of the research conducted on engagement and performance is carried out by large consultancies, such as the often quoted global study carried out by Towers Perrin-ISR in 2006. It found that in companies with high levels of employee engagement, operating income improved by 19.2 per cent over 12 months. This finding is based on data from surveys of 664,000 employees from 50 companies, of all sizes, around the world, representing a range of different industries. Separate research conducted by Towers Perrin in 2004 suggests that “a 15 per cent increase in engagement correlates with a 2.2 per cent increase in operating margin” (cited in Macleod and Brady, 2009, p. 46). According to Gallup (2006), in addition to profitability, other benefits of employee engagement include higher customer advocacy and higher productivity. Cook (2008, p. 21) highlights research that suggests that “highly engaged employees are 33 per cent less likely to leave their organization within the next year”. Another benefit of employee engagement is employee well-being. According to Gallup (2006) eighty-six per cent of engaged employees say they very often feel happy at work, as against 11 per cent

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of the disengaged. Forty-five per cent of the engaged say they get a great deal of their life happiness from work, against eight per cent of the disengaged.

### **Employee voice**

The importance of voice has already been highlighted by Alfes et al., (2010) as one of the two most important factors for engagement, so this section examines voice in more detail. The term “employee voice” has a relatively long history, dating back to the 1970s when Hirschman (1970) used it in relation to employees' efforts to change dissatisfying work situations. According to Wilkinson et al., (2004) the word ‘voice’ was popularised by Freeman and Medoff (1984) who argued that it made good sense for both company and workforce to have a ‘voice’ mechanism. Spencer (1986) developed this theme and concluded that giving employees opportunities to voice their dissatisfaction increased the likelihood that they would stay with the organisation. However, Spencer (1986: 500) also noted that “...On the organizational level of analysis, future research should consider not only formal voice mechanisms and their quality, but also informal organizational cultures that create and sustain those mechanisms”. This has led to wider thinking about employee voice and according to Van Dyne et al., (2003, p. 1369) the management literature contains two major conceptualizations. The first approach describes speaking up behaviour such as when employees proactively make suggestions for change. The second uses the term to describe procedures that enhance justice judgments and facilitate employee participation in decision making.

Summarising the literature, Van Dyne et al., (2003, p. 1370) conclude that the term voice is used to “represent the intentional expression of work-related ideas, information, and opinions”. Budd et al., (2010, p. 305) argue that there is now a renaissance in interest in participation, based on economic (generation of higher levels of performance in the post mass production era), moral/ethic, and pragmatic grounds.

### **Constructs**

According to Van Dyne et al., (2003, p. 1370) it is incorrect to think of employee voice as a single construct and they propose three specific types of voice; ProSocial Voice, Defensive Voice, and Acquiescent Voice. This approach is based on three specific employee motives within the existing management literature on silence and voice: disengaged behaviour based on resignation, self-protective behaviour based on fear, and other oriented behaviour based on cooperation. It is a useful extension of the concept that illustrates some of the underlying

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reasons that drive the way that employees express their voice. In an alternative approach, Dundon et al., (2004, p. 1152) suggest four categories of employee voice; individual dissatisfaction, collective organisation (as a counter to the power of management), management decision-making, and mutuality (a partnership for long term sustainability). This extends the concept to include the idea that employees work in partnership with senior managers for the benefit of the organisation. Liu et al., (2009, p. 191) point out that there are three alternative characteristics of voice; discretionary (it's not actually required), challenge oriented, and potentially risky (it may be viewed negatively or damage relationships). The risks involved may explain why employees are "usually reluctant to voice their thoughts" (Liu et al., 2010, p. 189). These perspectives on voice highlight the complexity of the concept and the differing reasons why voice is, or is not, used.

### **Factors**

Wilkinson et al., (2004, pp. 6-7) take a broader, multi-dimensional approach to employee voice, suggesting that is based upon five factors:

1. communication/exchange of views (an opportunity for employees and managers to exchange views about issues)
2. upward problem-solving (an opportunity for employees to provide feedback on specific topics)
3. collective representation (an opportunity for employee representatives to communicate the views of the workforce to managers)
4. engagement (a feeling on the part of staff that they are able to express their views to managers in an open environment)
5. a say about issues (the opportunity not just to have a 'voice' on issues but an expectation that these views will be taken into account and may lead to changes in how decisions are made).

This is essentially a communicative process with an emphasis on openness and upward feedback that is taken seriously. In a qualitative study of employee voice, Wilkinson et al., (2004, p. 7) conclude that voice as communication was by far the most common immediate response to the question asking managers to explain their understanding of the term 'voice'. For example, the HR Manager at Eiretel is quoted as saying that, "voice is about corporate communications and the strategy is designed in such a way that all employees can represent

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their views to management, rather than it just being the other way around”. However, the importance of informing employees so that they are able to make an effective contribution is omitted from this discussion.

### **Links to other concepts**

Employee voice is also a term that overlaps with others such as involvement, empowerment and democracy and is linked to participation in organizations (Budd, Gollan and Wilkinson, 2010). Marchington and Wilkinson (2005) suggest that there are three dimensions; direct communication, upward problem-solving and representative participation. Peccei et al., (2010) take a similar approach, based on three voice mechanisms: the recognition of a union for collective bargaining, the presence of joint consultation through an establishment-level joint committee or works council, and the existence of formal mechanisms of direct participation, such as team briefings, quality circles, and problem-solving groups. Issues relating to this include how these three mechanisms are best integrated within an organisation, the significance of more informal levels of voice, or the importance of employees being suitably well informed to be able to make an effective contribution. In a longitudinal study in the UK, Peccei et al., (2010, p. 433) found an upward trend in information disclosure between 1990 and 1998, followed by a levelling off between 1998 and 2004. Importantly, according to Peccei et al., (2010, p. 432) “disclosure does, in fact, seem to have a positive effect on financial performance...nevertheless, many managers are clearly disinclined to share information with employees”. They conclude that “there is, therefore, a need for management to learn about, and to come to terms with, the processes of information-sharing”.

### **Interpersonal communication and employee engagement**

The conduct of direct communication in team peer, project peer and line manager settings is a key component of the overall employee engagement jigsaw and without this, effective corporate internal communication will have far less impact. As Luthans and Peterson (2001, p. 379) have highlighted, the level of engagement of a manager is a major factor in the ability of her/him to engage their team or group. Bambacas and Patrickson (2008, pp. 65-6) prioritise the ability to provide clear and consistent messages. However, Truss et al., (2006, p.42) conclude that “the ability to consult and involve are critical managerial skills that require more development for a substantial proportion of managers...” They also report that 46 per cent of people do not feel either interested or involved in their job (Truss et al., 2006, p. 25). This may be because as Waymer and Ni (2009, p. 220) observe, employees can sometimes find themselves “battling against the dominant discourse of the organisation”. In the

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context of change communication, Salem (2008) identifies poor interpersonal communication skills and conflict avoidance as key obstacles. In terms of the way feedback is provided to employees, Attridge (2009, p. 391) suggests that positive feedback is critical and when supervisors focus on strengths or positive characteristics this has a dramatic effect on feelings of engagement. As MacLeod and Clarke suggest (2009, p. 75), engaging managers are at the heart of organisational culture, “they facilitate and empower rather than control or restrict their staff; they treat their staff with appreciation and respect and show commitment to developing, increasing and rewarding the capabilities of those they manage”. This is effectively taking a relationship management rather than a communication management approach, where trust and trustworthiness are primary factors and is reflected in “communal relationships” that result from symmetrical communication (Kim, 2007, p. 168).

### **Integrating internal communication and employee engagement**

According to Saks (2006) and Kress (2005, cited in Welch and Jackson, 2007, p. 186), internal corporate communication reinforces the importance of “clear, consistent and continuous communication in building employee management”. Marques (2010, p. 55), suggests that responsibility (content and context), conciseness, professionalism (business-like) and sincerity in internal communication results in “improved interaction, greater trust, greater understanding, enhanced efficiency, better performance, and enhanced gratification”. In O’Donovan’s (2009) survey of business leaders about employee benefits, clear communication emerged as a strong differentiator in employee motivation in a recession; 79 per cent of business leaders who answered negatively to all questions relating to utilising employee opinion, rewarding staff for their efforts and clearly communicating with their employees have perceived a drop in motivation. Only 12 per cent of business leaders who feel they clearly communicate to employees perceived a drop in motivation. Attridge (2009, p. 389) reports that research conducted by consultants Watson Wyatt (2007) indicates that “...firms that communicated effectively with their employees were four times more likely to also have high levels of engagement...” Mercer’s People at Work Survey (2002) also found that “...better communication from company executives is associated with better engagement from employees”. Tourish and Hargie (2009, p. 17) suggest there is also a link between internal communication (based on accurate information, trust and interaction) and actual job satisfaction. This is a departure from an emphasis on work activity itself (Leiter and Bakker, 2010, p. 2). Furthermore, the CIPD (2010, p. 17) also argue that two-way dialogue is critical to employee engagement and that “...strengthening the individual links between employees and top management – in the form of the CEO or directors – is increasingly high on the agenda in many organizations”.

## Research Design

### Aim

The research set out to establish the link between the practice of internal communications and the four enablers of engagement identified in *Engaging for Success*. The first phase of the research in 2011 surveyed professional internal communications practitioners, to better understand what proportion of their time is spent on activities that support the four enablers of engagement, how much time they would ideally spend on these activities and, from their perspective, the different levels of commitment and understanding across organisational hierarchies. The central aim of the research is therefore to identify the practitioners' perspective on the role of internal communication in support of employee engagement. In doing so, the research identifies key organisational factors that influence the focus of internal communication in organisations. The second phase of the research will be conducted in 2012 to see how the perceptions of internal communication practitioners compare to those of people managers.

### Survey

An online survey was conducted between July and August 2011 that combined a range of graded questions and open-ended questions. The key questions for the survey were:

Enabler One: Strategic Narrative

*How much time is spent on strategy communication?*

*What is the level of employees' understanding of strategy?*

*Would you like to spend more or less time on strategy communication?*

Enabler Two: Engaging managers

*How much time is spent on line manager communication?*

*What is your line manager's attitude to team communication?*

*Would you like to spend more or less time on line manager communication?*

Enabler Three: Employee Voice

*How much time is spent on employee feedback and evaluation?*

*How often does feedback from employees influence change?*

*Would you like to spend more or less time on employee feedback and evaluation?*

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### Enabler Four: Integrity

*How much time is spent on leadership communication?*

*How visible are your leaders?*

*Would you like to spend more or less time on leadership communication?*

A total of 357 internal communications practitioners based in the UK completed the survey. Respondents were more likely to be in a senior role working in a team of less than 10 and located in London and the South-East of England. There was an equal balance of respondents from the public and private sector and across small, medium and large enterprise.

### **Focus groups**

An initial analysis of the findings was used to inform two focus groups. These focus groups enabled a deeper exploration of the following two questions that emerged from the survey findings:

1. Why do practitioners not do more of what they aspire to do?
2. What's stopping practitioners taking more of a leadership role?

## **Discussion of findings**

### **Current practice**

When it comes to what practitioners currently do, the research explored categories that connect directly to employee engagement drivers. What emerged is that operational communication dominates current practice:

- Fifty-eight per cent said that business/operational communication occupies more than 25 per cent of their time and 17 per cent said it occupies 50-75 per cent of their time.
- In contrast to this, 45 per cent of practitioners said they spend only 10-25 per cent of their time on line manager/team communication.
- Fifty-six per cent of practitioners said they spend less than 10 per cent of their time on employee feedback/research.

Change management, the intranet and events are primary aspects of current practice. Some focus group attendees expressed a frustration at the constant demands to produce mouse mats and/or other gimmicky communication items. Other attendees cited examples of the team moving to become more proactive, and in one

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specific case this was directly as a result of the appointment of a new director of communication. Another attendee remarked that communication directors with a strong media relations background do not always appreciate that internal communications requires a different approach. There was also a sense that internal communication is often seen as “a nice thing to do” rather than as a hard, technical function with real value. Better approaches to measurement were suggested as a way forward to make stronger business cases. This was cited by focus group members as critical to establishing more credibility and gravitas for practitioners.

### **Allocation of resources**

Resources are split between operational communication and the more impactful engagement drivers; strategic communication, employee feedback and research and line manager and team communication. This represents a key challenge for the profession – how to ensure that employees feel well enough informed and at the same time spend more time on key engagement enablers. When it comes to devoting more time to engagement enablers, 81 per cent of practitioners want to give more attention to employee research and feedback and 71 per cent want to spend more time on strengthening line manager and team communication. This suggests that internal communicators sense that they hold the key to employee engagement but senior managers fail to see the benefits; only 24 per cent of practitioners believe that the board think communication is really important.

As highlighted above, internal communication activities are often driven by immediate business requirements and are focused on general day-to-day operational based communication demands. This is a reactive approach based on information output. It is a positive finding in some respects; it indicates a willingness to do what is necessary to keep employees informed. However, a general sense of practitioner dissatisfaction is very evident. Some focus group attendees expressed frustration at the constant demands to produce mouse mats and/or other gimmicky communication items, driven by the “let’s just give people stuff” mindset of senior managers.

It is clear that internal communicators want – and need – to get in to the driving seat and leaders are doing themselves and their organisations a disservice by not encouraging more employee feedback. In difficult economic times, a quick and cost-effective way to tap into innovation and engagement through internal communication is staring senior managers in the face. However, practitioners have a responsibility too. They can’t always expect organisations to hand opportunities to them on a plate, they have to articulate the business case and demonstrate how internal communication adds value to employee engagement and performance.

**Leadership confusion**

Senior leader visibility is firmly in place in many organisations, though there is a small perception, 17 per cent, that senior leaders are elusive. Regular executive road shows are cited by many respondents, with floor-walking, blogging and breakfasts or lunches also in place. However, some organisations appear to be resistant to leadership visibility: “Our MD won’t speak to staff or hold a town hall meeting”, and “our CEO is frequently criticised for her lack of visibility”.

There is a mixed understanding of the importance of internal communication and the board, the executive team, senior managers and line managers all remain fairly uncertain about it. Although most practitioners believe that internal stakeholders rate internal communication as “quite important”, only 24 per cent of practitioners believe that the board think of it as really important. The figure for senior managers was similar at 23 per cent. The executive team rate it slightly more favourably; 34 per cent. However, the focus of attention for the executive team is not strategic communication, but operational communication. This is not unsurprising as executives are naturally interested in communicating activities to which they are close. The downside to this is that higher level topics about organisational strategy are marginalised and a strong narrative may not be secured. This picture suggests that, at a senior level, the understanding of the importance of internal communication is not considered to be firmly established and this has profound consequences if levels of employee engagement are to be raised. The drivers for the amount of time spent on communication vary according to internal stakeholder group interest in communication:

- Board – focused on functional communication (functional communication is defined here as geared towards the demands of functions in organisations such as IT or HR)
- Executive – focused on operational communication
- Senior Managers – focused on strategic communication.

This is counter-intuitive in some respects, almost the opposite of what might be expected from the board. The implications are far-reaching; there is still a lot of work to be done to establish understanding of the value of strategic internal communication and employee engagement at board level. This is important as the analysis suggests that the level of interest in internal communication is influenced by and is directly proportional to

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the level of interest of your manager. And, unsurprisingly, there is a correlation with management visibility and interest in internal communication. There is also a correlation between the amount of time spent on functional communication and stakeholder interest in communication. Functional communication increases where stakeholder groups *aren't* interested in communication. This suggests that functional communication is the default position for internal communication practice and is where most practitioners spend a lot of their time at the moment. The level of change resulting from employee feedback and the level of improvement in internal communication is directly proportional to the level of interest of senior managers in internal communication. Respondents who reported improved internal communication and feedback leading to change also gave the executive team as their most important stakeholder group. Internal communicators believe that the wider employee population below management values internal communication the most. Analysis of the gap between the board and front line employees indicates that private sector value gap is minimal, on average 16 per cent, but the charity sector has the largest value gap at 45 per cent.

Despite the UK government focus on employee engagement, many senior managers still don't appear to completely understand it. Typical practitioner comments are: "resistance", "lack of buy-in", "commitment", "lack of clarity", "not seeing engagement as a priority", "leadership does not want to be candid", and "fear and refusal to accept internal communication as a necessary, separate function".

### **Line managers**

Practitioners deliver a hard-hitting verdict on line manager attitude to communication. At best only a quarter of practitioners believe that line managers have a positive attitude towards communication and 45 per cent believe that they "need encouragement". At one focus group, members agreed that line managers are the pivotal point in organisations. However, as one practitioner put it: "there is always a last-minute scramble" for line managers to do team briefings. In terms of measurement of the impact of line manager communication, the research suggests that very little is done at all.

The relatively weak support for internal communication at senior levels is further compounded by what is seen to be a low level of belief in it by line managers. Forty-two per cent of practitioners believe that line managers rate internal communication as "quite important". However, a significant similar number, 41 per cent, feel that line managers do not rate internal communication very highly. In the focus groups, reasons suggested for this

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included a fear of running meetings, induction training that emphasises tasks, being too busy, and the perception that it's a PR function. At one end of the scale this represents a complete antithesis to internal communication, as one practitioner at the first focus group reported about her former organisation, "line managers didn't see it as their responsibility at all to tell anybody anything". This is often offset in organisations where "pockets" of good practice are found, usually as a result of line managers who are personally passionate about communication.

Line managers being too busy was raised, but seen to be an excuse by some. Another issue highlighted was that line managers perceive internal communication practitioners to be a reactive team which is there to respond simply to basic communication needs, often in a crisis. There was a consensus that it is the role of the internal communicator to help line managers themselves to become better communicators. Another more understanding perspective also emerged: employees promoted to line manager positions may not have confidence in their communication skills and find communicating with their team "fairly frightening". One focus group attendee reported that the fear of line managers had been removed in his organisation simply by building in a conference call to the cascade communication process that allowed people to seek clarification on information before meetings were held.

Support provided consists primarily of briefings, with some training (that is optional), presentations, coaching and Q&A documents. Many respondents say that no support is given: "very little support offered", "need to do more", and "currently do not support", "seen as HR function".

Less evaluation of line manager communication is conducted than for strategy, and what is done is still part of annual employee survey, though one or two respondents do conduct spot-checks. Typical comments are: "not directly assessed", "we do not evaluate this", and "no formal evaluation".

### **Improvements in practice**

Despite the frustrations, many practitioners believe that internal communication in their organisations has improved significantly in the past five years:

- 40 per cent believe practice has improved significantly.
- 37 per cent believe it has improved slightly.

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Improvements are attributed to five things (in order of frequency of mention with typical comments shown):

- Restructure of internal communications team: “expanded internal communications team”, “more structured approach”, “alignment to business functions”, “designated team”, and “tie-up with HR”.
- Leadership: “new CEO”, “increased CEO involvement”, “endorsement by Director General”, and “recognition that internal communications is important”.
- Social media: “intranet news channel”, “social media added to intranet”, and “improved intranet”.
- Audits: “employee survey results” and “strong audience insight”.
- Approach: “new channels” and “new tone of voice”.

This is an indication of the growing understanding of internal communication in some organisations. Those that report significant improvements are more likely to have a team of more than ten people, more likely to belong to an organisation that takes action on employee feedback, more likely to involve employees in strategy and have higher levels of commitment from the board and line managers to internal communication.

Practitioners believe that there is more understanding of effective internal communication. However, the key factors for transforming the way that internal communications is practised are the way that teams are organised and managed, and enlightened support from the CEO, the board and senior managers. It is clear that the introduction of social media for internal communication is also having an impact. However, at present, a lot of social media is not being used very *socially*, it is more a different way of informing employees rather than enabling dialogue.

### **Integration with HR**

There is often a sense that communication and engagement is not joined up. Typical practitioner comments are: “internal communications staff not empowered”, “HR think they own communication and do not engage with others”, “organisation operates in silos”, “lack of systems/prioritisation”.

### **Employee feedback**

It is unrealistic to expect feedback to “always” change what an organisation does, but encouragingly 54 per cent of practitioners say that this happens “sometimes” and this underpins their desire to facilitate more feedback. However, there is a general sense that senior management often don’t really want to hear feedback. Typical comments are; “senior leaders have a very cavalier attitude to employees, they don’t trust them” and

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“directors do not listen”. A significant proportion of practitioners, 38 per cent, report that feedback only rarely or occasionally changes what the organisation does. This reflects the comments made about apathy. Employees should be told why changes cannot be made because if they are not told then this simply increases disengagement.

### **Towards ideal practice**

Ideal practice represents far more focus on employee research and feedback and line manager communication. Research does not mean more monolithic surveys. Practitioners report employee fatigue with the annual employee engagement survey that includes just a few questions about internal communication. Instead, research incorporates more listening and collation of upward feedback that is taken seriously. Practitioners also acknowledge the importance of the role that line managers play in internal communication and engagement and they expressed a strong desire to do more to support line managers. The amount of time spent on employee feedback and evaluation is indirectly proportional to the amount of time spent on strategy and leadership communication. This is particularly noticeable in large organisations.

An over-emphasis on leadership communication at the expense of more time spent on employee feedback is likely to lead to employees feeling communicated “at” rather than “with”, leading to disengagement. Barriers towards ideal practice are reported as a lack of time and resources. Although some focus group members acknowledged that this sounds weak, it is a significant challenge in turbulent economic times. It is clear that practitioners do not feel able to press the case either for resources or to change practice away from the dominance of operational communication towards more employee feedback. As one focus group member put it: “internal communication practitioners are not brave enough”. The current lack of measurement of internal communication is very telling. It is consistently reported as haphazard and output focused and there is very little reporting of communication objectives that inform measurement. Both focus groups suggested that better processes of measurement would provide practitioners with stronger business cases and give them more credibility with their internal stakeholders.

Practitioners want to focus much more on employee research and feedback and line manager communication. Sixty per cent would keep the amount of time spent on business, operational and functional communication the same, and a significant minority, 15 and 22 per cent respectively, would actually reduce time spent in these areas. The clear conclusion is that employee research, feedback and line manager communication should be increased but not at the expense of less time on business, operational and functional communication. When it comes to the barriers preventing practitioners doing more employee research, feedback and line manager

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communication, most put it down to a lack of senior management understanding, inadequate processes and systems and most of all, lack of resources.

### Conclusion

As the understanding of employee engagement evolves and more granularity emerges, a distinction between what Saks (2006) terms work and organisational engagement or what Gourlay et al., (2012) term transactional and emotional engagement is becoming more established. The terminology blurs and is linked to other concepts such as commitment and organisational identification. However, in summary, employees are engaged (or disengaged) by their job *and* wider organisational factors. Evidence is now starting to point to the wider organisational factors as being more important drivers for engagement than line manager influence, contrary to earlier propositions. This is important for internal communication theory and practice as it establishes a critical value for the function in establishing the first primary driver of emotional engagement, *meaningfulness*, through regular communication about an organisation's vision and future objectives. The second key driver that is recognised by many academics and practitioners is employee *voice*. Here, internal communication theory provides a useful framework for two-way communication processes that can be applied to the most important of all stakeholder groups, the employee. However, the focus on meaningfulness and voice does not suggest that line manager interpersonal communication should be ignored. Attention here is drawn to the skill of maintaining clarity and consistency of messages and internal communication theory and practice could incorporate more support for learning and development for line manager communication skills.

Research conducted with internal communication practitioners indicates that they believe that the board, the executive team, senior managers and line managers generally see internal communication only as "quite important", with significant numbers reporting that it is no more important than any other function or not very important at all. Practitioners expressed an overwhelming desire to give more attention to employee research and feedback and on strengthening line manager and team communication. In terms of employee voice, there appears to some resistance to this from senior managers and this represents a significant barrier to better performance through higher levels of engagement.

It should be borne in mind that this research reflects the perception of practitioners and is therefore a one-sided view of the situation. Further research is planned this year with managers to explore their view on internal communication and engagement. However, the initial findings presented in this paper are a wake-up call for UK plc. Employee engagement is unlikely to improve until internal communication registers more strongly at senior

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management levels. And, until line managers believe in the importance of communication and are supported and trained as communicators, a further gap in the employee engagement process will remain largely closed.

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