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O
nline workers are lucky devils, eh? They have it all: intranets brimming with the latest news and functional information, colleague directories and downloadable assets; chat functions; videos on tap; videoconferencing; and a social network at their fingertips – not to mention front-row seats to town halls and other leader presentations. And despite our grumbles about inbox overload, most of us are not ready to resign our email accounts. Engaging online workers still takes effort, but actually *reaching* them? Easy.

Much as we may wish for a homogenous workforce, where communication is fluid, channels do not discriminate by role and there is no "them and us", offline workers are a different kettle of fish to desk-based colleagues. Internal communicators need to not only fathom how to reach these workers, but also understand who they really are.

This audience presents more challenges than simply being offline. There is geography – where mobile workers are out selling or delivering, rarely in one place at the same time. Many offline workers are in a shift structure; even if you can get a message to their workplaces, how many are not present for three or four days or longer? One or two desktops between dozens of factory workers might not be practical or, these days, hygienic. And offline workers may not be tech savvy, because they don't use these tools day in and day out. How quickly can they get up to speed with that new app you're planning?

Yet, somehow, internal communicators need to find a way to include them in two-way discussions and get information to them quickly, consistently and easily. If a part of your organisation feels left out or secondary – and often offline employees are the larger

BEYOND THE WIRE

If your organisation has a large number of retail staff, drivers on the road and colleagues in warehouses, your biggest – and endless – challenge as an internal communicator will likely always be how to connect with offline employees, and what content you share.

part – it diminishes their motivation and sense of belonging.

Craig Smith, lead consultant at The Big Picture People, says: "Any level of separation in an organisation is not good, on a moral and business or strategic level.

"I've seen sub-cultures that are isolated. Those employees batten down the hatches and create their own identity. They are not doing what we need them to be doing – they don't understand it or engage with it."

Outline the deeper purpose

Craig believes this is a missed opportunity. "Frontline colleagues are often customer-facing, which makes them great ambassadors. Do you really want them to be just a pair of hands you direct?

"We shouldn't just communicate what to do. We all do a better job when we know the deeper purpose. It leads to better outcomes."

Logistics company Kuehne+Nagel employs thousands of people in roles such as warehouse operative or driver. They are not sat in front of a computer and most don't have email addresses. Joanna Freeman, until recently UK internal communications business partner and now future talent manager, agrees these employees need to know why they do what they're doing.

"To some of our customers, a lorry driver is the face of our organisation," says Joanna. "He or she is the person who rocks up at a Costa Coffee site and delivers milk. Those employees need to understand what that delivery means.

"If you treat offline workers like you don't care as much about them as you do about online workers, they won't care about the business. They feel disconnected. They can only be

so proactive in looking for information when they can't email or call their colleagues."

Simple rules

At facilities management services company OCS Group, the workforce is predominantly essential workers – cleaners, security officers, hospital caterers, porters, etc. There are about 75,000 of them – far outnumbering the 6,000 office workers. They have no email address, they cannot access online systems and, with a licence needed for each user, it is costly to provide Microsoft 365 access to everyone.

Despite multiple channels, getting information to them is no small feat. A print magazine covers culture and values and is bulk delivered to sites, but is time-intensive to produce. Line managers' weekly huddles are pivotal, but some managers are responsible for dozens of people spread out across an entire region.

As in many organisations, employees have different educational backgrounds and understanding of English. Translations can be complex and costly, but, when done, have to be done well.

Shan Chatoo, group head of corporate communications at OCS Group, says: "We have some employees with very low literacy levels. When we communicate, a lot is by voice or pictorial. We translate into local language. We make a conscious effort to maintain a simple tone of voice. We don't use jargon."

Every country has its own Facebook presence and Facebook communities are popular. It's rare the comms team uses that social channel to tell stories, says Shan. "The loudest voices on Facebook come from the frontline. Offline employees post throughout the day and over the weekend – they connect as →

and when they need to, and that's how it should be."

And it's typically light, social content, adds Shan. "One guy recently posted a photo of a goose he rescued at the side of the road that morning. Those stories start a conversation."

Sharing the strategy

Shan believes the offline audience is not primarily interested in big business news. "It's not going to help their day-to-day. They want information like operational manuals and health and safety guidance, as well as wellbeing support, which includes feel-good content like recipes."

Messaging around values, brand and strategy still needs to filter through. "We look at it from another perspective," Shan considers. "If we need to convey a strategic message, we'll spin it in a way that interests them."

Communication needs to enable the offline audience to think about their scope for progression – to be the next team leader or business unit director. "Show them how they can be part of the strategy and how your approach can help them grow in their position," says Shan. "Am I going to be a cleaner throughout my life or is there a way I can do something different?"

> ❝ **We want people to have organic huddles, but it can be noisy in a factory. Provide a place close by where employees feel comfortable and not like they are being dragged into a room for death by PowerPoint.** ❞
>
> **CRAIG SMITH**, THE BIG PICTURE PEOPLE

Retaining the right people and explaining the opportunities is key, Shan adds. "When you recruit and develop someone, you don't want to lose them. You want committed and engaged people who feel proud and have a story to tell about who they work for. You don't want to hear anyone tell you in an exit interview that they didn't feel connected."

Jack Dewinter, communications business partner for components and packaging manufacturer Essentra, believes everyone has some interest in how the business is performing, but it can be on a more practical level for offline workers.

"I often refer to [internal communication consultant] Roger D'Aprix's model of the basics that all employees want to know," says Jack. "What's my job? How am I doing?

How can I help? Where are we heading? In a manufacturing role, people may not have the same level of interest in company strategy, but they still want to know the impact on their job. Are there still overtime opportunities? What does the order pipeline look like? What new growth opportunities are we looking at? What needs to change and why?"

Joanna of Kuehne+Nagel believes internal communicators can be guilty of not sharing top-line strategic business matters with offline workers.

"Yes, some people want to just do their job and go home, but some are interested in the future goals. We shouldn't assume they don't want to hear about that.

"I've held focus groups to find out what people in our warehouses think of the print magazine. A lot have said they want financial updates, because they care about whether or not the company is financially stable. I think that's a personal preference – it's not related to where someone sits in an organisation."

As a result of feedback, Joanna included a high-level update in the print magazine. "Our colleagues asked for it, so we did a lay person's guide to the financial results. Those who are not interested in that type of thing don't have to read it."

Team talk tactics

Aside from the internal magazine, flyers and noticeboards work well at Kuehne+Nagel – the monthly bulletin that goes to online employees is printed out and displayed – and managers' daily team briefs are critical, but these, of course, present an age-old challenge.

"How do you make sure managers actually cascade messages?" considers Joanna. "Some are not communicators by career. They are brilliant at what they do day to day, and then they get promoted and we expect them to suddenly start communicating. It's important we continually educate and support managers on this."

Make it as easy and comfortable as possible for them to add this string to their bow, adds Craig.

"Give them materials, support and space to help structure conversations. We want people to have organic huddles, but it can be noisy, especially in the middle of a factory. Provide a place close

Factory workers at Essentra are a key component in a diverse and geographically spread organisation

STAYING CONNECTED WHILE APART

Reaching offline workers becomes more of a challenge when they are forced out of their working environment. Kuehne+Nagel swiftly found a solution when 2020's first lockdown came calling.

Kuehne+Nagel warehouse teams and other offline colleagues stayed connected during lockdown thanks to a specially created microsite

When Covid-19 took hold, Kuehne+Nagel quickly developed a microsite to keep colleagues connected while they were out of the workplace and ease their eventual return.

Joanna Freeman, at the time UK internal communications business partner, says: "We were conscious we had 4,000 people about to be furloughed, so we needed a way to make them feel they were still part of the company and to show we cared about their wellbeing.

We were in full lockdown and concerned about how employees would deal with that, so we wanted to provide good news they could engage with.

"We've always struggled with how to communicate best with offline employees. Covid gave us the impetus to test a microsite option."

With information security a concern, getting the site set up wasn't easy. "I had to agree what we would publish and what we wouldn't, such as customer names," says Joanna. "Some of the content,

such as survey results, is password-protected."

The site is not business themed, because anyone can access the site on the internet and furloughed employees were not allowed to read business news. It includes book reviews, quizzes, recipes and health guidance. One highlight is an Unsung Heroes section, which applauds teams and individuals who have helped keep the country moving during the crisis.

"That really took off," says Joanna. "I didn't have to search for stories. People

loved the opportunity to share and get involved in the fun stuff."

Daily email updates and messages from the CEO encouraged people to return to the site.

Leaders had confidence in the channel from the start. "We put together a proposal and they told us to go for it, and we got proof of its value when we had stats for how people were reading it. It showed us that even when people were on furlough, they still engaged in what the company was doing."

to where colleagues work, where they feel comfortable, and not like they are being dragged into a room for death by PowerPoint."

In Essentra, it's not easy to pull people out of the day job. The company has 70 operational sites and around 7,500 employees around the world – a dispersed, diverse and multicultural organisation. Many employees are machine operators, working on shift systems. Offline colleagues don't have access to internal social channels, and content is developed largely for traditional face-to-face formats.

"Most offline teams – whether in retail or in a factory making something – have team huddles or toolbox talks. At Essentra, we have created simple guides and made them user-friendly, so that everyone understands

We asked: In your organisation, which of these is the most effective channel for reaching offline employees with the information they want and need?

61%
Line manager team talks

17%
Mobile: text/chat/app

12.5%
Social network tool

9.5%
Print material, including the staff magazine

how they should be used and, in Covid times, the requirements of social distancing and wellbeing."

Jack says the comms team tries to make the best use of all channels available, but accepts that face-to-face is relied upon more than is ideal because it is difficult to cover everyone quickly.

"If you need to get urgent information out to those employees, you want something that directly connects to them, more than a manager cascade," he says. "If someone is off shift, they can't wait four days to get an update or announcement."

Covid-19 has "stress tested" the comms approach, Jack reflects. When the pandemic emerged in January 2020, some global colleagues started to use WhatsApp (WeChat in China) routinely. The team has →

plans to use other digital solutions more formally on a global basis in 2021.

"Our CEO has been doing regular video bulletins and we have been compressing the files so we can send them down the mobile channels. If it's an important message and you want to ensure consistency, you can't rely on a notional cascade from tier to tier. You need to have leader engagement with the frontline, and make sure you have the tools to cover everyone within an agreed timeframe.

"Leaders are also running regular virtual townhall meetings with global sites using Microsoft Teams meetings, delivered in local language with local managers doing translations along the way."

App appeal

At OCS, chat tools are a double-edged sword. Over time, staff have taken the initiative and started communicating via their own means.

"They are filling a gap with WhatsApp or, in Asia, LINE," says Shan. "As we work more closely with governments and healthcare services around the world, we have had to align information security practices and have had no choice but to shut down those informal chat groups."

For many organisations, the solution is an app. OCS has been exploring the viability of an all-employee app, an idea that sprung specifically from consideration into how to reach the frontline. A pilot has confirmed

there is an appetite for the technology, but highlighted the need for the comms team to research exactly how the platform will serve different clusters of the audience (see below).

"What you think people need might not be what they will actually use," says Shan. "Our tool has to be fine-tuned for different business sectors and countries. What will work for one of our security officers in Malaysia won't work for someone doing the same role in the UK.

"Have conversations with employees, otherwise you could end up down a rabbit hole with something that isn't used."

Essentra recently carried out an online all-employee engagement survey. Offline employees could respond via kiosk and factory PCs – with a necessary wiping down of the computer after use – though smartphone access was available via a QR code. Colleagues were encouraged to use their own devices, which proved popular; the survey had more than 90 per cent response.

Jack reflects: "I hope as a communication community, we can influence more rigour in how we get grass roots dialogue regularly and not just through the employee engagement survey, so there is an understanding of employee perceptions and of how things are landing."

It's good to talk

Don't be too radical. A flashy bit of tech too far removed from how offline colleagues

typically communicate could fall flat. Replicate or enhance the social ways offline employees absorb information: manager's verbal cascades, team huddles, focus groups or casual chats with workmates in corridors or the canteen.

"Foster those types of conversations formally within the organisation, without being power hungry," says Craig. "Feed into it, so you're not relying on a grapevine."

And you don't need to single out offline workers for that tactic.

"Even for online employees, we need

Among groups where literacy levels are low, visual and interactive tools can clearly explain critical messaging and strategy. Here, oil and gas workers play a board game developed by The Big Picture People to help them understand a part of their company's behavioural safety system

to move the focus away from just downloading stuff. Switch to having a conversation. For strategic information, make it discursive."

Use channels that fit the environment where people work, adds Craig. "Audio often gets forgotten, but it allows people to multitask. We used to produce briefings that drivers could listen to while on the road. It was a while ago – and on cassettes – but there are modern versions now.

"Done well, audio and podcasts can fill in communication gaps if people don't have time to read documents or have check-ins. And there is a level of intimacy, especially if people recognise the voice."

Enhancing time together

At The Big Picture People, Craig and his colleagues rely on the principles of storytelling and activity-based discussion, from learning maps to bespoke board games.

"The board games are really effective for engaging participants who normally fold their arms, look at their fingernails and don't make eye contact. Those tools can be disarming – people forget themselves and you can draw them in.

They may not traditionally engage with this type of communication, but if you can build those techniques into conversations in a curated, structured way, it will feel natural and organic for them to think and talk about things going on in the organisation that they don't normally engage with. You see lightbulbs going on."

At a time when we've realised not to take face-to-face time for granted, make the most of the moments when you can bring people together.

"When you can be in the same room, don't squander that moment by showing presentations," says Craig. "Use visuals in more imaginative ways to steer real interactions and conversations. It's not a nostalgic, retro comms thing. It's a precious commodity."

We are inherently social creatures, Craig points out. "In the timeline of humans being together socially and communicating with each other, the use of digital and social media is a tiny sliver at the end. We have to recognise we are predisposed to want to talk to other people. We draw from their energy.

"People have seen Zoom and Teams as the answer to problems, and it helps us work from home, but we still need the social experience. A lot of spark and meaning comes from the connectivity of people in the same social space. That's a tool in our arsenal we can't forget about." Ⓥ

66 I hope we can influence more rigour in how we get grass roots dialogue regularly and not just through the employee engagement survey, so there is an understanding of how things are landing. **99**

JACK DEWINTER, ESSENTRA

Throughout the pilot, internal communication engaged with line managers to bring them on board with the idea, but deliberately did not offer training.

Shan explains: "We said, 'This is the app, off you go.' We are working with people whose literacy levels are low, and across a massive age range – starting at 18, and we have an employee who is 80. That is vast. We need to understand if someone who is not into tech could pick it up and use it fairly easily."

The internal communication team surveyed users during the pilot and talked to them via video, tweaking the app as feedback came in.

"The output of the pilot was that if we want frontline staff to use it, it needs to be a business utility in their pocket and have everything that helps their life at OCS – moving from paper forms to processes like booking a holiday," says Shan. "It needs to be like a mini intranet."

"And they want a Facebook community – they want what they use now, but to be able to do that through the app."

In parallel to rolling out the tool, you need to invest in effective change management communication, advises Shan.

"How do you get people to download an app and be comfortable using it? If you have someone who has been using WhatsApp for years, how are you going to get them to move to a company app on their personal phone?"

It's a learning curve for communicators too. You have to look at your content strategy.

"If you are used to targeting content to office people only via intranets or publications, you need to adjust how you write and communicate and consider your image use," says Shan. "An app is not a place where you can publish 200 words. It's a complete sea change."

OCS Group employs around 75,000 offline workers worldwide