

Employee Engagement

It's Time to Invest in HR Communications as

Part of Total Rewards

We've all gotten the message: effective total rewards strategies are part and parcel of driving employee engagement. But is the importance of communications getting lost in the fine print?

Studies demonstrate that a high level of employee engagement is a key success factor to driving growth for companies, according to an Harvard Business Review study "The Impact of Engagement on Performance," (Sept. 2013). An even more important factor in that same study is effective communications.

Fighting the Tide

Several current trends in the workforce are making it more challenging than ever to get

through to your employees: A rise in remote work options that have more people away from the office, increased complexity of total rewards program offerings, and the overall surge in the amount of information coming at employees.

Companies have long had people dedicated to communicating externally — marketing, public relations, public affairs and now corporate social responsibility. In contrast, communicating *internally* to what most companies profess is their most important asset has been left to HR people. Perhaps, it's because HR professionals are deemed to have good communication skills because of



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their profession. But they are rarely trained in communications or marketing. Because employee engagement and effective communications now play a greater role in total rewards strategies, companies realize they need to develop an HR communications function that can help their messages and information stand out in employees' cluttered email inboxes or social media streams. Companies are creating dedicated professional communications roles as part of the HR team, and it's beginning to make a difference.

The Challenge

The good news is that employees seem to care about HR communications. The bad news is that only 30 percent of respondents in a HR study are happy with what they saw in these communications and 50 percent are indifferent, reveals the "Human Resources Communication Study" by Davis & Co. Aon Hewitt found that only 40 percent of respondents in its survey felt that "communication from HR is effective," according to the "Aon Hewitt Workforce Mindset Study". Adding to the challenge, your current employee population isn't the only audience. Prospective employees (recruits) and past employees (alumni and retirees) are also important. The rise of social media as a personal means of communication has made it easier for people to rely more on friends than any company messaging when considering employment or buying products. Some companies are considering strategic communications across these three employee groups through a lifecycle approach — recruiting and hiring, onboarding, managing careers (total rewards, development) and exiting the company (retirement, new company).

Say What? Say It How?

During the past six months, CAHRS (Cornell Center for Advanced Human Resources Studies) has held several working groups on the subject of HR communications. Here are

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some key takeaways that surfaced on how to improve your HR communications and break through the clutter:

- There isn't a single silver bullet for the most effective and efficient way to communicate to employees. All want communication the way they want, when they want, so you need to use multiple vehicles to get through to people in different ways. There are also various levels of stakeholders to consider; for example, individual, company and community. This all drives complexity but also effectiveness.
- Sharing real stories of how things affect individuals is one way to break through the clutter of information coming at your employees. Empower your HR team to bring these stories forward to HR communications so

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they can be captured and shared, and/or make it easy for employees to share directly through your online portal.

- While HR communications experts may build the communication plans and deliver the toolkits and materials, you can't underestimate the impact of managers who will be the ones on the front line delivering the message or answering questions. Make sure you communicate directly with managers about the important role they play.
- Social media usage can be a key component to your HR communications plan, but it's important that the information is authentic; otherwise, employees will be skeptical and it may backfire.
- Companies are still struggling to figure out the effectiveness of their communication programs. Almost all companies are using engagement surveys — yearly or biannual long surveys followed by shorter, more targeted pulse surveys to measure engagement and drive actions. Measures here include the participation rate as well as engagement scores (raw and trends). Other measures include: turnover trends, productivity, financial savings, etc. “Like” buttons or “comments” are useful on portals for people to click after they read something. Outcomes, though the most difficult to measure, may be the best. For example, if you roll out a new communications

campaign about benefits open enrollment, how many more people might enroll by the deadline?

These are complex times with a slew of information coming at your employees. And yet we know employee satisfaction with HR offerings is highly correlated with overall job satisfaction, states the “12th Annual U.S. Employee Benefit Trends Study” by MetLife in 2013. The writing is on the wall — it's more important than ever to make sure you have your HR communications and total rewards teams in lockstep on both the total rewards strategy and communication strategy that will keep your employees satisfied and engaged. In the end, they are the ones that will drive your business performance. [LW](#)

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