



Communication evolution

In a world of constant distraction, the barrage of emails and ever increasing social media chatter, employers are finding it harder than ever to connect with employees. But one thing is clear: When it comes to benefits, historical means of communication no longer cut it.

Only 22% of HR professionals surveyed for a Society for Human Resource management study on communicating benefits said that they “strongly agree” with their organization’s employee benefits communication efforts. But with such a massive amount of compensation locked up in benefits — according to the Department of Labor’s most recent data, approximately 31% of compensation for employees in the private sector is spent on benefits — benefit decision-makers have a responsibility to ensure employers’ investment is delivering value. And yet it remains incredibly difficult, particularly with an annual open enrollment cycle, to measure the effectiveness of benefit communications delivered through traditional means such as paper, or even email.

But organizations such as the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association are pioneering new ways of

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communicating complex health care, benefits and other workplace information to employees and, more importantly, measuring results.

For the past two years, ASHA, the professional association for speech-language pathologists, audiologists and speech and hearing scientists, based in Rockville, Md., has been using Airbo, an engagement and communication platform that works much like Pinterest, only for employee communications. Twenty-two percent of ASHA’s workforce is age 34 or under, and the organization’s human resources director, Janet McNichol (pictured left, with some of her employees), was looking for ways to better engage and educate this demographic.

With Airbo, users create ‘tiles,’ which are then posted

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PHOTOGRAPH BY JONATHAN THORPE

to a virtual bulletin board. An email gets sent to employees, alerting them a new tile's been posted. Employees then visit the board on whatever device they're using, while employers can see metrics in real-time about how their employees are engaging in the messaging.

As employees work their way through the content, they're guided to answer a question at the end, which is designed to gauge their understanding of the information.

McNichol says new content she posts on Airbo averages about 100 completions, meaning 100 of ASHA's 275 employees have read the information and answered the question. "The same can't be said for intranet messages and emails," she says.

Despite the rapid adoption of smartphones, many employers are still communicating through these mostly traditional means.

"I've seen large organizations where HR sends out a monthly email that's five pages long," says Keith Kitani, CEO of Guidespark, an employee engagement and communication company that primarily uses video to help employers communicate about benefits. "How can any employee sort through all these [benefit] programs and figure out which ones to use and really connect with?"

When Jennifer Crick, director of human resources at Alta California Regional Center, a nonprofit organization that serves developmentally disabled people in California, recently surveyed her workforce to ask them how they preferred to receive information, just one-third of the organization's 418 employees said they prefer email only.

"Emails go into a void," she says. "You don't know if people are reading them or paying attention to them or taking action on them."

There is no one-size-fits-all way to communicate, but employee expectations of benefits communications are being shaped by the seismic shift in people's lives as consumers, says Kaulen Taylor, a partner with Aon Hewitt.

"The way we're used to being communicated with as individuals in the consumer marketplace is vastly different than the way we're engaged and communicated with in the employee workplace," she notes. "That disconnect between my life outside work and the way I'm engaged with

[at work] just widens ... and I think employers are challenged to keep up with that."

But benefit decision-makers also need be cautious when implementing new digital tools and platforms, says Vlad Gyster, CEO and founder of Airbo, who believes the consumerization of employee communication should benefit HR managers just as much as employees.

"The risk is [these tools] could be perceived as making more work for [them] when there is not much capacity left," he says.

As benefit managers evaluate new communication technologies and platforms, they should "almost be a little bit selfish about it because that is the best thing for employees," he continues. "Find ways to implement these technologies that reduce your workload as well. It can't just be about boosting employee engagement because that's not sustainable. It has to be about enabling HR to do more with dwindling resources."

Generational challenges

Some employers point to differences in generational habits being one of the bigger communication hurdles to jump when crafting benefits messaging and considering delivery strategies.

Traditional print communications are what baby boomers have grown up with, and they may be used to getting information that way, Kitani says. And yet, based on his experience, companies with employees whose average age is late 40s have reported seeing higher, if not the highest, engagement rates in video.

"It's interesting we all jump to the conclusion that this is only for the young generation, but the 6 billion views on YouTube a month are not just by young people, they're by everyone," he says.

ASHA's McNichol admits she believed Airbo would appeal primarily to the millennials at the organization but one of the tool's biggest fans is set to become Medicare-eligible this year. "Sometimes I think we expect our younger staff to prefer those tools and that's not necessarily the case," she says. "We do try to put the information out there lots of different ways so we can meet people where they are."

Change management

Parker McKenna, chief human resource officer for Springfield (Missouri) Public Schools, was recently at the forefront of a system-wide restructuring of the school system's leadership team.

"Everyone was affected," he said of the reorganization. And with more than 4,000 employees and 60 facilities, the task of effectively educating and communicating the company message was no small task.

"We tried not to differentiate, and we wanted one voice," he says. "We started talking about the 'why' for the change, and working with the communications department, were able create a clear message from the executive level down."

To be successful, employers must have their finger on the pulse of their employee population, McKenna advises. "Get that by asking, 'how do you prefer to be communicated with?'"

Second: It's really important to understand the climate and culture of organization, says McKenna. "What's helping or hindering your engagement? Once you know that, build your communication around those issues."

For example, if employees don't feel they're being a part of the communication, you need to tackle that head on, he says.

"Think about things like blogs or town hall forums that can help specifically address gaps in culture or engagement," McKenna adds. "Those I think are keys to helping organizations communicate the right way and ultimately engage."

Another tip Kitani suggests is to take an evolutionary approach in making changes to your communications structure.

"Don't think, 'I've been doing my brochures, but now we're going to strictly text messaging,'" he says. "Those kinds of dramatic things may not be the most effective. You evolve to that, and then you measure its effectiveness."

In addition, she's taken a new approach to the more traditional one-and-done communication strategy.

"People think something has been communicated — they check it off their list when it's been posted or shared in some way," she says. "The way we define it here is, it hasn't been

communicated until somehow the person on the receiving end has acknowledged they've received it. We just keep putting it out there again and again in all these different ways until people are acknowledging that they've received it. When we get signals that people have received the information and made a choice about it, then I can check it off the list"

Understanding the needs of the employee audience — their behaviors, attitudes, and demographics and analyzing and segmenting that audience appropriately "and being able to say 'these are the people we need to engage in these programs or activities' will be important to creating new communication strategies," says Taylor.

"It goes back to the less of the one-size-fits-all in communication and more targeted, precise one-to-one level of interaction that we've come to expect in other aspects of our lives," she continues. "If I log on to something online, [it] knows I've been here, knows what I've bought, knows way more information about me than I could ever imagine and I'm being set up and directed to the things that matter most to me based on the data points coming together."

Replicating that kind of consumer experience in the workplace will help employers in their goal of getting people get to the things that matter most to them, and cut out the noise of the other things that don't.

And as employers start to move toward more digital formats, measuring engagement levels will become easier. "We think that's going to be a critical step for companies to think about when they try these new forms," says Kitani.

The big takeaway is that the shape of communication has shifted and now is the time to make that shift in the benefits communications space, Taylor adds.

"Once size won't fit all from a channel or message," she reiterates. "Take baby steps to build out the ecosystem to be more dynamic and targeted. It'll take a lot of change, but now is the time. I think we've been sitting back as HR and benefits communicators. There's no more waiting — we're about to be completely left behind." ■

With files from Andrea Davis.