

10 Internal Communications Best Practices During COVID-19

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COVID-19 changed how companies communicate with their employees overnight. Many changes came out of necessity. Some have actually strengthened their companies. And a lot of the changes are still in flight.

Simplr Research interviewed customers and communication leaders to understand how changes are constantly evolving. In this eBook, we've highlighted 10 emerging best practices that are helping companies manage their crisis communication, keep their distributed employees connected, and make the most of this unprecedented situation.

10 Emerging Internal Communications Best Practices

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UNDERSTAND EMPLOYEES' "ME" TAKES PRIORITY OVER COMPANY'S "WE"

We all know this. But the point is too important to skip. The human condition requires human communication. Organizations must be transparent, authentic, and empathetic. Now is the time to lose HR corporate speak and legal formalities. Employees aren't going to bed at night thinking about the new product launch or expanding into new markets during this time.

Types of questions on peoples' minds:

- Can you guarantee that I'll still have a job?
- Does my job put me at risk of being infected?
- Does my employer care about my safety?
- Are my children missing out on their education?
- How long will I be able to pay my bills?
- Will my performance be measured the same during this time?
- Do I have the flexibility to take care of the household and help out extended loved ones?
- When is this going to end?



Many of these questions can't be answered immediately, and that's okay. Merely addressing these questions and letting everyone know you're thinking about it is better than silence.

COVID-19 has forced companies to examine how their messages are received by employees. Now is the time for organizations to be transparent, authentic, and empathetic to their employees.

MAKE IT CLEAR HOW AND WHEN YOU'RE COMMUNICATING

Knowledge saturation should be a concern because there is so much information sharing happening. It's natural that many internal communicators are worried about over-communicating. How do you strike a balance when employees consume degrees of information at different levels?

Many experts recommend organizations communicate critical information once a day, the same time every day, on a channel you control. Here's why:

	Why	Tips
Communicate critical information once a day	So employees can stay on top of critical updates	Communicate the approach to employees and why you're doing it this way. It will help them better manage their days and prevent fake news from getting out.
Communicate at the same time every day	So employees know when they can expect updates and don't get distracted trying to stay up to speed	Let employees know when and where they can expect news. Be sensitive to timezones. If it's a slow day, that's okay. Tell everyone that there are no major updates. The same holds for employee FAQs.
Communicate on one channel you control	So your messages won't get lost in messaging apps or in email	Most commonly, a company intranet is the best place for this information: You control what is frontpage news for as long as you need. Employees trust the news is vetted. Try to conform to one source of truth and use other channels to drive traffic back to that source.

Critical news channels can't be a firehose. A well-structured information hierarchy helps combat knowledge saturation and over-communicating. Focus on structuring and curating news updates smartly so employees know the difference between the "need to know" and "everything else." Once employees are familiar with and can differentiate the two, continue to share news and content frequently and regularly.



Quick caveat: Be sensitive to local realities. Today's reality for New Orleans is different from Beijing's.

CHECK IN ON PEOPLE

It may sound cliché but everybody is handling the COVID-19 crisis differently, particularly those who are impacted financially or newly working from home. Some people have young children. Some have college students returning. Some are single parents. Some are all alone. Understanding differences in working environments is important because it heightens the importance of empathy. Because of this, engagement surveys and pulse check polls should happen on a frequent and consistent basis.

The primary intent behind employee engagement surveys has implicitly changed whether we admit it or not. Don't just rely on benchmark data. Instead, reach out to employees and understand how they're doing.

Checking in and understanding your employees

- Ramp up the employee pulse check surveys.
- Don't lose momentum and think they're unimportant.
- Set up processes to close-the-loop. Surveys are useless if you don't act on findings.



Many communicators see their role as advocates who champion the voice of the employee. If this is you, stay true to that purpose and make sure you don't get stuck in a corporate communications or crisis team bubble. Talk to frontline employees and actively seek their reality.







Additionally, analytics and sentiment analysis from pulse checks will provide valuable insights. Use this feedback to help refine messaging. More broadly speaking, take time to review your intranet and email analytics to see what's changing. For example, you can't assume your readership statistics and time-of-day open rates will be the same as they were before this transition. Most organizations are seeing a shift in types of content that employees are interested in. Take note of this and adjust your editorial or content calendar accordingly to meet employee needs.

ALIGN WITH THE IT DEPARTMENT AND AUDIT YOUR “COMMUNICATIONS TECH STACK”

It’s no secret that COVID-19 has elevated the internal communications function. Leaders from other departments, particularly IT, are now appreciating the importance of internal communications more. When most desk workers were abruptly forced to work from home, IT’s initial focus was on the transition of technology, and asked questions like: Do employees have the tools to work? Will our network handle the bandwidth changes? Is our infrastructure secure?

Now that many organizations have settled in, the next phase highlights challenges in what we call an organization’s “communications tech stack”. These tools impact an employee’s productivity and overall connectedness. As time goes on, standardization on these technologies will become increasingly important to prevent employees from feeling even more socially isolated.

Here is an example of a full communications tech stack:

Tool	Best-of-Breed Example	Why you need it	How it should be used
Web conferencing		To replicate the conference room	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting face-to-face for longer discussions
Team messaging		Instant feedback and collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For primary communication among team members • When you need immediate answers
Office productivity suites		Excellent for real-time collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A standard productivity suite for the entire organization for easier collaboration
Modern intranet or an internal communications platform		<p>Highlight important communications that could get lost in Slack and email</p> <p>Keep employees in touch with other departments and the broader organization</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As the organization’s source of truth for critical communications • To create a virtual watercooler for employees to connect • For departments to share updates with the broader organization • To find experts and help across the company • To provide employees a gateway to their broader digital workplace
Email		Legacy tool that the entire company is familiar with	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you’re communicating outside of your organization • If a response isn’t required in the next 24 hours
Everything else		Sales, HR, expense management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make accessibility easy • Use your intranet as a front-door to access all other applications

Aligning technology with IT

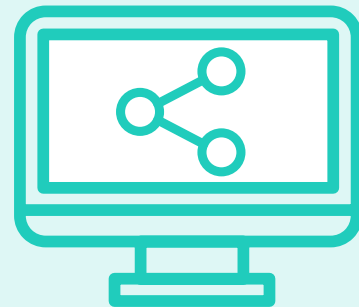
Audit your existing infrastructure and evaluate whether:

1. Your organization is missing any components
2. You aren't standardized well across the organization. Using multiple tools that serve the same purpose hurts productivity.
3. Your organization is using outdated technology

COVID-19 has spurred a new sense of urgency for many organizations to prioritize company communications. Internal communications professionals should partner with IT to mitigate gaps because these issues negatively impact an organization's ability to communicate. If you haven't prioritized company communications before, now is the time to act.

Tips to align and fill in your communications stack with IT:

- **Prioritize security**
Work with IT to understand the requirements.
- **Evaluate software by ease of deployment**
Standing up new technology should take a reasonable amount of time and effort.
- **Check the integration breadth with existing software**
Make sure the integrations are meaningful and integrates with your existing workflow.
- **Keep IT administration low**
Don't rely on technical resources or IT for day-to-day updates and changes.
- **Think about scalability**
Make sure the software can keep up with demand and number of users.



LEADERS HAVE TO LEAD. NOW IS THE TIME.

Leaders of most organizations are in a difficult position right now. Most have tough messages to convey. And many have to make even tougher decisions with layoffs and furloughs. It's human nature to want to curl up and avoid interactions beyond the essential. But leaders need to combat this urge and be more omnipresent communicators than they've ever been before. Employees' engagement and mental well-being depend on leaders and so does the organization's long-term culture.

It's time for genuine empathy from leadership. Leaders need to step up and be present and listen to their employees. Employees need to be heard. Leaders need to be transparent and honest, whether the news is good or bad. Now is not the time for preaching.

Even if there isn't news to be told, silence isolates employees. Many of us are at home with only a fraction of the interpersonal contact that we get in the office. Our demons can get the most of us. It's important that leaders steady the ship and help us feel connected.

Communications don't have to be about COVID-19 all of the time. In fact, most employees yearn for more operational updates. While the message is always important, many leaders fail to understand that it is important to consistently beat the drum with updates.

Admittedly, this is a lot, but your intranet's CEO Corner should never be short of content. And remember your job! Leadership's content can be boring and long-winded. Employees want the information to be regular, timely, short, useful, relevant, interesting, unique, clear, and inspiring. Many CEOs are creating low-production videos from their phones, because videos are consistently the preferred medium. Also, be careful not to turn tonedeaf and keep the conversation authentic and transparent. If the company is experiencing turbulence, don't sugarcoat things.

Here are some examples leaders (or their ghostwriters) can use:	
Talk about the strategic roadmap and your vision for the company	Simply share what they've been working on recently
Take time to reflect on the company's history	Reiterate strategy and what we are trying to do
Share perspective on interesting industry/competitive news	Simply post progress toward company goals and metrics
Double-click on various company values	Refocus on the company mission
Squash fake news and company rumors	Highlight letters from customers
Recap board meeting or earnings call highlights	Recap customer meetings
Call-out how the {X} department is contributing to the overall plan	Give shoutouts, congratulations, and kudos to users or departments
Recap departmental highlights	Videotape your leaders learning new things
Share company (or personal) philanthropic efforts	Build out your leader's personality and discuss personal passions

It's not only about getting employees to consume critical information. Leaders need to constantly beat the drum to show they're still leading and to convey a sense of organizational security.

ENCOURAGE TEAM BONDING ACTIVITIES FROM HOME

Have some fun! An upside of everyone working from home amid COVID-19 has been all of the creative ways coworkers are staying connected. Many organizations are programatizing virtual team building whether they're having virtual happy hours or doubling-down on their internal social networking.

It's important to understand why organizations are doing this. Every employee handles the new social distancing differently. Some feel terrible while others actually prefer the new normal. But generally, all of our internal networks have been constrained by working from home since we interact with fewer people. It's harder to stay connected with coworkers in other departments who aren't in our conference calls. These activities help build a sense of corporate cohesion, help combat social isolation, and spark connections across employee networks.

If you're running out of ideas internally, here is a list of ideas:

Pet Photo Contest	MTV Cribs: Remote Team Edition	Virtual Lunch
Curate Music Playlist	Lunch of the Day	Share WFH 'Office' Set-up
Virtual Fitness Bootcamp	TV Show/Movie Suggestions	Remote Team Talent Show
Team Building Jeopardy	Guess Who? Co-worker Edition	Share a Meme/Joke
Baby Picture Throwback	Work from Home Resolutions	Virtual Bingo
Share a Recipe	DIY Craft Challenge	2 Truths and a Lie
Virtual Pub Trivia Night	Remote Group Yoga	Virtual Dance Battle
Quiz of the Day	Online Book Club	Fitness Challenges
Open Mic Karaoke	Remote Scavenger Hunt	Team Building Family Feud
Video Charades	Co-worker Appreciation Day	Share your hobby
Parent Support Groups	Virtual Pictionary	WFH Slack Channels
Online Movie Night	Meet your co-worker chain	Virtual Happy Hours & Board Games
Would You Rather?	Video Game High Score Challenge	Company Bake-Off

10 INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS BEST PRACTICES DURING COVID-19

Intranets make it easy for employees to connect and engage with the broader organization. But some organizations have even gone beyond their company intranet to facilitate connections.

Other activities include:

- ✔ Offer reading hours for their employees' children
- ✔ Set up new intranet affinity sites (e.g. parenting tips channel, gardening projects, meditation tips, etc.)
- ✔ 24-hour Zoom sessions for coworkers who simply want to work with others to chat with in the background
- ✔ Set up virtual music channels with coworker DJs
- ✔ Encourage employees to blog about their experiences thus far
- ✔ Create a phone-chain buddy system for employees to check in on each other
- ✔ Mail letters or care packages to employees' homes



Again, employees interact differently. Some don't want to engage on a non-professional level. Some activities will be wildly successful and others won't be. That's all okay.

NORMALIZE THE ABNORMAL “NEW NORMAL”

Part of your company culture has changed permanently in the past few weeks. Every organization is different with their unwritten rules. But how many of us have experienced things that just weren't 'normal' a few months ago: working outside, bedroom offices, children joining conference calls, or taking breaks to walk around the block. Depending on where your culture started, organizations should not be limited to only sharing news and updates. Organizations should be conscious of these evolving unwritten rules and address new norms. You want to help employees feel like it's okay if they take an hour to help with childrens' homework or if they use green screens on customer Zoom meetings.

Work with HR and leadership to adapt and address the changes head-on. You need to explicitly communicate new cultural norms in addition to news updates. If certain activities are okay now, but not permanently, address it now and let everybody know. You can't afford to let de facto practices completely overrun processes that exist for a reason.



Should I trust this source?

A recent poll claimed employees trust their employer's content more than they trust the media.

So what is an organization's role? While you have a job to squash fake news (both internally and externally), it's equally important for your company to know its limits.

For health advice, most organizations:

1. Make it clear that they aren't the expert
2. Defer only to internationally accepted sources like the CDC and WHO

DON'T LET PROCESS AND PERFECTION HAMPER YOUR INTENT

Many of us are finding that our production capabilities are diminishing. Maybe we've lost budget. Maybe we miss in-office resources and productivity. Right now speed and transparency trump absolute perfection. Of course, this doesn't apply everywhere and the most important communicates need to be thoroughly vetted. The point is, friction can delay what's most important. Can't make a studio quality video? Record a selfie video on your phone instead.

You're also likely noticing that many employees are taking the initiative to connect themselves. They're coming up with creative and fun ways to make light of the current situation. Don't get caught up in trying to control it all. And don't try to orchestrate it all. Instead, have an open mind and amplify the great ideas and practices happening across the organization. Use your platform to showcase the great organic connections being made across the organization. These employees are making your job easier!

“Perfection is the enemy of the good when it comes to emergency management. Speed trumps perfection. Be fast and have no regrets.”

— Dr. Michael Ryan,
Executive Director of the World Health
Organization's Health Emergencies Program



**Focus on progress,
not perfection!**

We can apply the same idea when it comes to navigating and connecting your workplace.

BE AWARE OF HOW YOU ACT AND SPEAK

Whenever flights experience turbulence, people immediately look at the flight attendants. What's their reaction? Is this a big deal? The same holds true for your employees. Company leadership and internal communicators need to be keenly aware of how you're acting and speaking.

Here are some things to be mindful of:

- Be empathetic. Everyone's stresses are not your own
- Read the room. Ask for feedback and gut checks so you're not accidentally tone deaf
- Assume positive intent in people (and try not to let the "what if demons" get the most of you)
- Give your leaders a break. These are tough times for everyone, and their jobs aren't easy.
- Don't gossip
- Ask yourself if you're helping clarify or adding noise
- Prepare for constant change



**First put on
your own
mask before
helping
others.**

Be sure to also take care of your own well-being. Many internal communicators are exhausted and have been running on adrenaline. Focusing on yourself and your loved ones isn't selfish — it's critical. Make the time to do it. And heed the advice you're likely sharing with employees: If you need help, ask. If you need a break, take one. Many internal communications trade groups including IABC, ALI, and Ragan Communications are all providing avenues for communications professionals to commiserate and learn new best practices.

PREPARE AHEAD TO CONDUCT “BUSINESS AS UNUSUAL”

COVID-19 permanently changed corporate culture and communications. There will be no v-shaped recovery to normal. For example, manufacturers who implemented social distancing protocols won't go back to the past. Many of these processes are here to stay. Many of us have experienced a communications rate that is the inverse of the COVID-19 curve. In the beginning there was a lot of communication. Now we're in a lull, prepare to ramp up communications as we begin to return to the office. Start preparing now.

For those who were fortunate to work from home, they'll return to new rules. Many will be nervous to return. Many will require new levels of flexibility because their children's school got canceled. Many will just want to work from home more.

But more than anything, employees have benefited from the added attention given to them by leadership, HR, and communications teams. People are going to expect the same level of transparency, communication, cross-functional team building, and cultural investment. Organizations that fail to deliver will experience a dropoff in employee engagement and talent will leave when they get a chance.

Another consideration to prepare for may be the economic realities of a recession. Start planning how this will impact your communications and your existing resources.

Whatever the future holds, internal communications professionals should rally resources across the organization now and start planning for this new normal. Begin to lay the groundwork with leadership to standardize new processes. Work with IT to fill technology gaps for the long term. Team up with HR to keep the company's empathy alive.



Make sure you're documenting what you're doing now and put that into your crisis communications plan.

Because you'll likely be doing a lot of these things for several months.

CONCLUSION

As we put together this eBook, we tried hard to avoid cliches. We tried to stay away from phrases like “amid these troubling times” or prey on themes of uncertainty. That said, a few things are certain: organizations are rewriting internal communications best practices as we speak. Many companies are waking up to dormant communications gaps. And a lot of the recent changes will be here to stay. Some good, some bad. This disruption will yield winners and losers. Company communications has never been more important for employees’ well being and company performance and longevity.



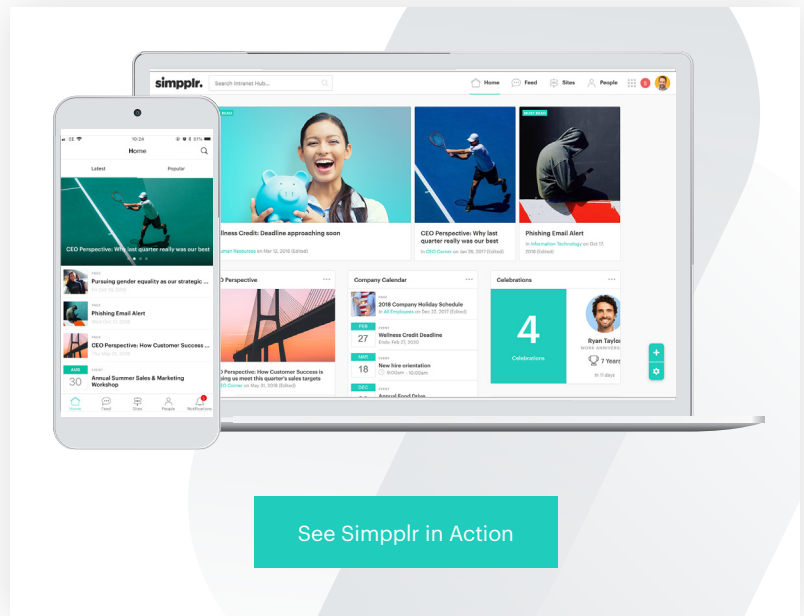
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Simplr partners with many leading brands, including Workday, AAA, Vertex Pharmaceuticals, DocuSign, Eurostar, and Columbia University. Our customers are improving productivity, increasing employee engagement, and reducing employee turnover. More importantly, the improved internal communication is helping employees find work meaningful and fulfilling.

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