



insight
content
technology

Trends Report 2021

Inside: the 10 key IC, IT and HR themes for 2021, to help you settle into a new, hybrid world of work that has people front and centre.



8th
year



The chapters

1. Hybrid
2. Listening
3. Digital
4. Audience
5. Wellbeing
6. Authenticity
7. Learning
8. Culture
9. Onboarding
10. Profile

HELLO

Human communication in a hybrid world



There's really no snappy way to sum up 2020. It threw so many challenges at so many people. And in so many unexpected ways.

We've all had to adapt as communicators. And quickly.

We've had to be agile (and not just in a Joe Wicks lockdown workout kind of way). In the way we work. Where we work. How we interact with colleagues. What we communicate. And how we do it. How we plan. How we rip up that plan and start again.

Against these layers of change, we've seen important IC, IT and HR themes emerge – priorities for focus in 2021. What's notable is how the human element is a thread weaving them together.

We've had to rely more on digital communication recently. As we move into a hybrid world where we'll be working across different locations, although digital is a great enabler, we believe it's crucial that organisations keep a close eye on strengthening that human connection.

For instance, it's been inspiring to see so many examples of authentic leadership during the pandemic. We have to help our leaders continue this approach – if they return to the old ways of corporate, overly prepared, PowerPoint-heavy presentations then we'll have missed a rare opportunity to effect long-term, positive change.



“**Internal communication has proved to be a vital glue that sticks people, information and organisations together, finding and sharing stories that keep a firm connection to organisational culture, vision and values.**”

So, our Insight team has filtered these findings through our Four Pillars™ methodology to identify the key IC, IT and HR themes, put together into 10 clear chapters for this, our eighth annual Trends report.

We hope you find it useful, and that it inspires and shapes your thinking about communications in 2021 as we settle into a new, hybrid world of work that has people front and centre.

Suzanne Peck
Managing Director, Sequel Group





**If you only read
one section in this
report...**

**We've pulled together our 10
key take-outs to challenge
your thinking and help you
focus on more effective
human communication in a
hybrid world.**



01

‘Hybrid’ is the word we keep hearing from our client organisations about how they want to help their traditionally office-based employees find the most productive home and onsite working in 2021 and beyond.

You should care because... you’ll have a crucial role to play in defining the ‘what?’, ‘why?’ and ‘how?’ of this cultural change.

We can help by... running tailored, targeted and measurable comms campaigns that clarify, drive and embed this new way of working.



02

‘Active listening’ takes practise, but it can help you to build trust and gain a deeper and more accurate understanding of employee issues and situations.

You should care because... it will improve the way you, your team and your organisation communicate in 2021.

We can help by... running one-off or regular measurement activities to give you an insight into what your colleagues are feeling, why, and what you need to do about it.



03

Wherever you are in your **digital transformation** journey, tools like Microsoft Teams, Yammer and SharePoint will continue to take much of your attention this year.

You should care because... the most common feedback we hear in communication audits is that people are overwhelmed by the number of channels at their fingertips.

We can help by... refining your channel mix, creating campaigns to embed the right behaviours, or facilitating training sessions to help you and your comms colleagues get the most from your investment in digital tools.

04

Many organisations have reported a divisive rift of **'us and them'**, particularly as frontline employees continued to work on site when everyone else was being told to 'stay home to stay safe'.

You should care because... this type of challenge has amplified the need for audience segmentation to make sure that different groups are getting relevant support and messages.

We can help by... building a picture of your employee audiences, shaping digital channels to give your colleagues personalised content, or creating tailored comms for factory / retail audiences.



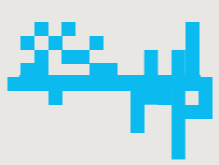


05

With the pandemic highlighting – and exacerbating – physical and mental health issues, organisations must boost their support and guidance for **better wellbeing**.

You should care because... 60% of employees say their mental health has worsened during the pandemic.

We can help by... using our Four Pillars™ Index to help you check the pulse of your employee experience and wellbeing, with recommendations for attention and action.



06

Covid-19 has put leaders – political and corporate – under the spotlight like never before, which means long-term implications for the way in which they communicate.

You should care because... 80% of employees say that a **culture of authenticity** improves the workplace.

We can help by... finding the employee feedback that inspires real change, running comms training for managers, and shaping leader / manager presentations to make them memorable.



07

In 2020, lots of training was cancelled as priorities changed, but organisations need to pick up the pace on thinking how the pandemic has transformed **learning and development**, forever.

You should care because... 94% of employees stay at companies longer if employers invest in their development.

We can help by... running online training courses, from effective planning and delivery of your digital transformation, and better use of individual online tools like Teams or PowerBI; to improving your writing, presenting or facilitation skills.

08

The new hybrid working world means **company culture** is changing. How can we embed purpose, and develop and maintain the culture we want, when employees are split across so many different locations?

You should care because... 9 out of 10 employees would be willing to earn 23% less if they could have a more rewarding and meaningful job.

We can help by... refining strategic narrative and 'big picture' messaging, or helping line managers to develop their communication skills and explain 'what it means for me' to their teams.



09

Vacancy

Covid-19 has prompted many organisations to rethink the way they **onboard** people. Your employer brand has to provide clarity about your purpose, while your induction materials have to help new recruits settle in when they might not be able to meet new colleagues in person.

You should care because... 63% of HR professionals have experienced new recruits quitting before they've even started.

We can help by... repurposing pre-boarding or onboarding materials to help new recruits feel valued, welcomed and informed.

10

Hello

With circumstances changing daily, **the value of good communication**, effective channels and clarity of message made a huge difference to organisations in 2020. IC is more relevant than ever in 2021.

You should care because... really?

We can help by... doing any of the things we've mentioned in this section. Shaping, planning, creating, delivering for short-term support or longer-term help. We're helping organisations make their important relevant, memorable and interesting, so get in touch for a chat.





No place like home?

Working from home defined the lives of half of the UK's workers in 2020. But is the traditional office getting ready to stage a comeback?

74%

of leaders plan to give their employees choice about where they work after the pandemic
Gartner

Hearing an alarm. Putting on a tie. Carrying a handbag. Receptionists. Caffeine-filled air... So began the Dettol advert to enrage them all.

Appearing on London Underground stations in early September as office workers tentatively started to return, the advert was designed to invoke some nostalgia for the office. It asked us to clean surfaces (good advice) so we could get back to the little things we loved (fine), like 'Those weird carpets', 'BCCing' and 'Proper bants' (ah).

The backlash was swift, with critics calling it outdated, patronising and self-serving. But perhaps one of its main crimes was misjudging the mood of the nation's office workers. Rather than reinforcing our collective love for office culture, it inspired a chorus of people to share how much they prefer working from home.

We're not in Kansas anymore

For many, working from home was one of 2020's biggest changes. The Bank of England's Chief Economist said the number of us working mostly from home rose from around 5% pre-pandemic to 50% during the first national lockdown.

So, have we been changed for good? There's certainly been lots of talk about its benefits. For employees, a better work/life balance, increased productivity and more flexibility. For organisations, fewer absences, an increased sense of trust between employer and employee, and reduced costs. Indeed, a Stanford professor estimated organisations could save \$2,000 for every employee working from home.

According to YouGov, 91% of employees surveyed want to carry on working from home at least some of the time after the pandemic ends.

"There will be a major shift away from the traditional workplace, even when social distancing is no longer a requirement," says Professor Alan Felstead of Cardiff University.

But not everyone agrees this shift is for the best. There are those who say working from home blurs the lines between work and personal life, encourages people to work longer hours, and overloads workers trying to juggle work and home responsibilities, like childcare.

Then there's the home office itself. Unlike the lucky ones with a separate space,

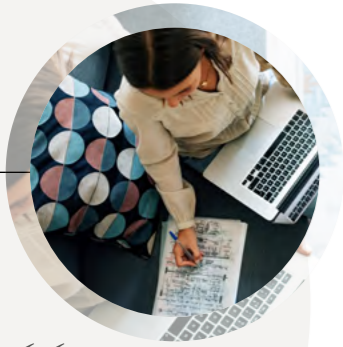
many have found themselves working from kitchens, bedrooms, living rooms – wherever they can make do.

On top of that, organisations must contend with increased cyber security risks, growing cultural siloes, and the challenges that come with encouraging collaboration and innovation. (In fact, some of these are such important issues, we've given them their own chapters in this report.) →

We expect a huge cultural change in terms of how we use our physical office spaces. The headline is yes, you might go to 'the office' once or twice a week rather than every day, but what will you actually do when you're there? And what will that space look like?



home



“
Can I see a future where part of every week, certainly part of every month, a lot of our employees will be at home? Absolutely.”

James P. Gorman, Morgan Stanley CEO

office



“
I don't see any positives. Not being able to get together in person, particularly internationally, is a pure negative.”

Reed Hastings, Netflix Co-Chief Executive

Of course, “during the pandemic” is the huge caveat hanging over everything we’ve mentioned so far. Will people be happier to go back into offices once they perceive it to be less risky? Is it harder to maintain a work/life balance as a home worker when both your personal and professional life must be conducted from your house or flat?

Hard questions to answer definitively without a crystal ball, but we believe that the answer must lie in flexibility, choice and balance. Working from home continues to be the Marmite of employee experience, so you can’t offer employees one absolute or the other, or you risk alienating huge parts of your workforce.

The best of both worlds

As a result, ‘hybrid’ is the word we keep hearing from our client organisations. The trend we expect to see is employees finding the best of both worlds, with part of the week at home, and part in the office. Again, if that’s what they want, because every office worker’s circumstances will be unique.

This new approach could potentially benefit both employer and employee, and indeed

some of our clients have been working in this way for years. One based in central London has the desk space to accommodate around only 30% of its local employees at one time, and from what we’re hearing it’s likely that more organisations will follow this model to create a new future of work.

Hotdesking has been in vogue for many years now, and we expect this to go a step further in the coming years. A likely scenario is that businesses reduce their traditional desk space, and dedicate more to collaborative spaces – meeting rooms and breakout areas. So the change in mindset will be that you go to ‘the office’ for purpose, rather than by default.

As with any cultural change, Internal Communications and HR will have a crucial

role to play in defining and communicating the ‘what?’, ‘why?’ and ‘how?’ Visible leadership support, complemented by early adopters and ambassadors, can help to drive and embed that change, and sidestep any potential pitfalls along the way.

Of course we can’t forget the tragic circumstances that have brought us here. But working together, we have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make a long-lasting difference to the employee experience.

So whether employees are keen to get back to those weird carpets and the caffeine-filled air, or truly believe there’s no place like home, they will use this experience to choose where, when and how they work. And, of course, which organisations will give them that choice.

**Three top tips for...
 The hybrid office**

- 1.** Use ambassadors to help your colleagues through this cultural change. If you’ve spent years working at ‘your desk’ it might not be easy to switch to hotdesking or hybrid working.
- 2.** Share case studies to demonstrate the benefits of this new approach – how are teams working together across multiple locations to make projects a success?
- 3.** Work with leaders and line managers so they embody the new behaviours. If some of them default to a ‘presenteeism is best’ attitude, then hybrid working will fail quickly.



Sounds like progress



Sometimes what people don't say is more important than the words they actually use. Active listening is an essential soft skill that can improve the way you, your team and your organisation communicate in 2021.

93%

of communication is non verbal

Most of us have been there. You're singing along to a song on the radio, when your companion starts laughing and says: "Those aren't the words!"

Just for the record (pun intended), we can confirm that the Eurythmics didn't sing that sweet dreams are "made of cheese"; and Starship definitely didn't build this city "on sausage rolls". And while we're at it, we're 100% sure that Queen didn't say you should be "kicking your cat all over the place".

17-25%

We remember 17-25% of the things we hear

But while mis-hearing some song lyrics merely has the potential for embarrassment, failing to listen to your stakeholders or your colleagues can have a much more serious impact.

MIT research has shown that strong listeners are essential to creating engaged teams, which correlates to positive business performance.



“If we were meant to talk more than listen, we would have two mouths and one ear.”

Author Mark Twain

And as many of us transition to a hybrid workplace where much of our communication is virtual, 'being a good listener' is more than a nice to have. As auditory scientist Seth Horowitz says: "Listening is a skill we're in danger of losing in a world of digital distractions and information overload."

Take that a step further and consider a wider 'listening perspective': the CIPD says that an effective employee voice contributes to innovation, productivity and organisational improvement.

When you survey your colleagues, are you open to what they're telling you, or are you just looking for evidence to support your opinions?

When you're running a focus group, are you picking up what isn't being said? Even though you might feel that you're listening, you could be missing out on crucial information.

Practising active listening helps us to better understand how people are really feeling and what's important to them, and it can also help to mitigate our unconscious cognitive biases.

For instance, the 'false-consensus bias' describes how, in groups, we tend to overestimate how much others share our

views. So giving people an opportunity to have their say, and to do that in a variety of ways, means we can check whether there really is that level of consensus before we decide on the actions.

Active listening takes practise, but the rewards are there to be found, in terms of building trust and gaining a deeper and more accurate understanding of issues and situations. And that's valuable from both a personal and a business perspective. A study conducted by York University psychologist Faye Doell found that people who 'listen to understand' have better, happier relationships with others.

Plus, you never know what you'll hear...

The value of soft skills was reflected in a FEIEA survey at the end of last year that found that 'improving my active listening' was high up on the list of communicators' actions for 2021. But active listening isn't always easy. When someone is talking to you, are you busy thinking of what to say next? If that sounds like you, then you're not really listening to what they're saying.

Three top tips for...
Active listening

1. Listen without jumping to conclusions. You don't know what the other person's thoughts are, and the only way you'll find out is by listening.
2. Repeat back what the other person is saying, using some of their words. This will help you to make a more thoughtful response.
3. Don't rush to fill silences, especially if you're interviewing someone or running a focus group. A pause can provide a space for people to say how they're really feeling.





actions for 365 in 2021

Wherever you are in your digital transformation journey, tools like Microsoft Teams, Yammer and SharePoint will continue to take much of your attention this year. Here, we share our guidance for what to prioritise in the next few months.

1

Fix your mix

When we carry out communication audits for our client organisations, the most common feedback we get from employees is that they're overwhelmed by the number of channels at their disposal.

If you've been playing catch-up with your digital transformation in the last few months, you might well find that your people have ended up with six different ways of making a video call, or sharing some social news.

Action: refine your communication mix to make sure that each tool / channel earns its place, you don't have duplicates, and everyone has clarity about which tool to use for which purpose. Do some research to assess whether people have access to the information they need, and are comfortable with the mix of tools available.

2

Show people 'how'

With so much happening so quickly last year, many organisations found that, while they had the tools they needed, they didn't have time to build the culture around them.

If you didn't have a collaborative organisation before coronavirus, then just switching on Teams won't have magically changed that.

Action: review your communication and training plans to make sure they help people understand how to use the tools – both from a practical point of view (the 'to do X, go here and press this button' guidance) and from a cultural perspective. How do you want people to use online tools within your organisation – what is appropriate for you and the way you work?

3

Stay social

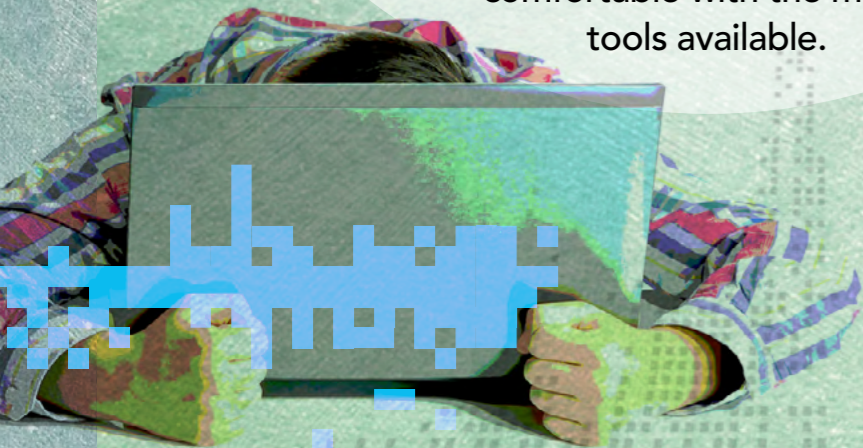
Tools like Yammer have played an important role in bringing people together online. But as we move into a hybrid world and office-based people start to return to the workplace – albeit probably for a portion of their week rather than all of it – it might be tempting to pay a little less attention to these channels.

However, we think they'll continue to be a crucial part of many organisations' channel mixes, helping to develop a sense of community across the business as people split their time across multiple locations.

Action: keep the conversation flowing by using ambassadors and leaders to start, continue and inspire discussion. And use your social tools for promotion too – if you write a profile of an employee in your online publication, ask them to let people know about it on Yammer.

“We've seen two years of digital transformation in two months.”

Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella, April 2020



75m

Teams now has more than 75 million daily active users
Microsoft

4

Strengthen your 'single pane of glass'

For many people, Microsoft Teams is THE central 365 tool – the place where we do most of our online work. And last year we saw notable improvements in the way that it integrates with other 365 tools like Planner and Yammer Communities, giving people access to them directly within the Teams environment.

As the year progressed, we saw more clients also bringing in third-party integrations like Workday, so people can carry out basic HR tasks within Teams as well. And soon you'll be able to add a SharePoint site to the main navigation menu, so your colleagues can view your intranet homepage with one click. All this points to Teams ensuring its place as the window into our world of online work.

Action: investigate the app integrations to see which Microsoft or third-party tools you can bring directly into your Teams environment to make people's lives easier, and to increase adoption of Teams. What would be most useful?

5

Find the Power in your business

While Teams, SharePoint and Yammer usually hog the 365 headlines, there are some less high-profile tools that can really make a difference to your business.

We're starting to see more of our client organisations delve into the Power Platform – Power BI, Power Automate and Power Apps. Power BI is the one that we think will really take off in 2021. Being able to analyse all sorts of data with a bit of Artificial Intelligence help – and then to create live, visual dashboards – is one example of how you can get the most from this powerful (pun definitely intended) app.

Action: build your knowledge about the capabilities of the Power Platform and think about how to apply them to your business. But most importantly, consider who has access to these tools... do you really want anyone in the business to be able to easily and quickly create a business app without appropriate oversight? (Hint – the answer is very much 'no').

6

Demonstrate the value

While 365 and similar tools have become a 'must have' – and will continue to be so in the hybrid world – it's still vital to show how they are helping the business to achieve its goals. Not least because you'll want to secure further budget for comms and training activities to support adoption and realise the long-term benefits of these tools.

Action: use a mix of qualitative and quantitative measurement to track adoption, employee understanding and attitudes, and examples of how the tools are i) addressing day-to-day pain points and frustrations and ii) enabling efficient, collaborative working. And then use these stories as case studies.





A company divided cannot stand



This chapter is definitely NOT about everyone going 'back to the office' in 2021. Here's why...

You may have noticed that throughout this Trends report we've avoided writing about 2020 as though everyone worked from home during lockdown.

That's because some people weren't able to do that, either because they were on furlough, or because their role simply couldn't be done from home.

Those working in the medical profession are the obvious example (and we should take this opportunity to thank them for all they've done during the pandemic).

But perhaps you have colleagues working in supermarkets and other shops, in factories or in laboratories. Roles that necessitate being 'on site'.

If you make decisions about your channel mix without truly understanding what it's like to work in a factory or on the shop floor, you're more likely to invest in the wrong areas.

For similar reasons, in our client work at Sequel we've avoided using the terms 'back to the office' or 'back to work' in creating content and strategic campaigns, and during discussions about what 2021 might look like. Because a) many people have been onsite throughout the pandemic and b) because 'back to work' makes it sound like you can only do good work at your place of business.

These discussions have highlighted the way in which the various restrictions we've seen in the last year or so have created a new divide between those on the frontline and those working from home, as well as those on furlough.

Many organisations have reported a sense of 'us and them', particularly when it comes to frontline workers putting themselves at risk when everyone else was being told to 'stay home to stay safe'.

A simple IC example: in the early days of the pandemic, one organisation was telling office-based colleagues being sent home that "their safety was the company's number one priority". But they couldn't use that same messaging with factory-based colleagues, who were continuing to work on site pretty much as normal (with the appropriate safety measures of course).

This type of challenge has amplified the need for audience segmentation to make sure that different groups are getting relevant support and messages.

It's all about the people

There are many ways in which to think about your audiences, depending on the context. For instance, if you're running a digital transformation project you might consider creating personas based on technical understanding.

Or for a change programme, you could think about 'level of engagement' – in other words, what you say to an advocate (and how you say it) would be different to what you'd say to a potential blocker, based on their likely attitudes to the change. →



But in this case, ‘type of role’ is a good starting point (with the usual caveat that personas are always going to be sweeping generalisations). For instance:

- Office-based
- Factory-based
- Retail-based
- On the road
- Hybrid (i.e. a mix)
- Furloughed.

Why would you add to the comms noise and share a ‘how to set up your home office in an ergonomic way’ article with someone who works on the shop floor? Or talk about ‘in-store social distancing’ to someone who never works in that environment? Taking an empathetic approach to marrying your channels and messages will help those messages to cut through.

And of course you can segment your audiences further, by considering division, team, region and so on. You’ll need to consider what is appropriate and realistic for your own organisation.

Mixing it up

While digital channels have been essential tools during the pandemic, relying solely on sharing information online runs the risk of alienating your factory or retail colleagues.

As one focus group attendee told us recently: “I have colleagues who don’t have

a corporate email address, or a personal one. I print off digital comms for them when I can, but otherwise they miss out. So don’t assume that putting everything online is right for everyone.”

Traditional channels like team meetings and posters remain a valuable part of the communication mix for these audiences.

Here, employee research is crucial to understanding what your colleagues in these roles need from IC. What do people really want to know? How do they want to be communicated with? When, and how often?

If you make decisions about your channel mix without truly understanding what it’s

like to work in a factory or on the shop floor, you’re more likely to invest in the wrong areas. Or to spend time working on projects that aren’t having an impact.

Understanding your different audiences is the first step in eliminating the ‘us and them’ divide, and bringing people together for a common purpose.

“
If your audience isn’t listening,
it’s not their fault. It’s yours.”

Author Seth Godin

Three top tips for... Segmenting your audience

1.

Avoid making assumptions about your audience groups. Use your comms network, or ambassadors, to learn more about the people within your organisation. You can’t do it all alone.

2.

Use personalisation to make sure that your colleagues get the content that’s going to be most useful for them. From a digital perspective, you can use tagging to shape your SharePoint Communication site, or news app, or weekly emailer.

3.

We’re hearing from factory employees that they’re looking for more content around health and safety, and reward and recognition in particular. Use these as a starting point, but ask them what they really want and need to know.



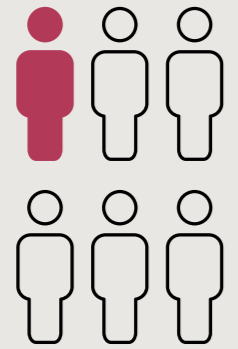


In good company.



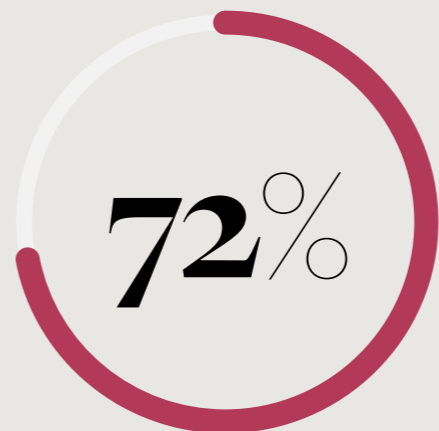
1 in 6

people experience common mental health problems



96%

of illnesses are invisible



72%

of employees aren't aware of what health support is available at work

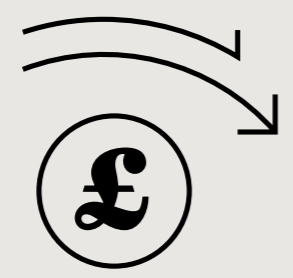


89%

of employees at companies that support wellbeing initiatives are more likely to recommend working there

3x

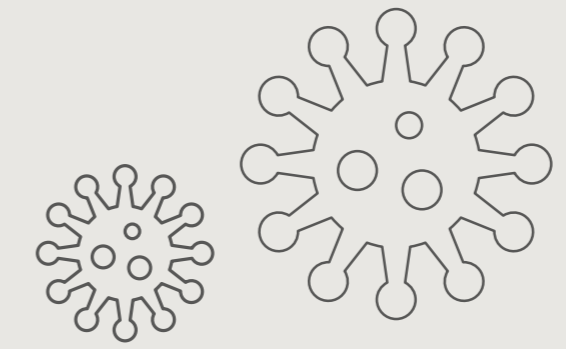
more employees are turning up to work sick since 2010



£34.9bn

lost in UK productivity in 2016 due to mental health issues

“
It's ok not to be ok.”



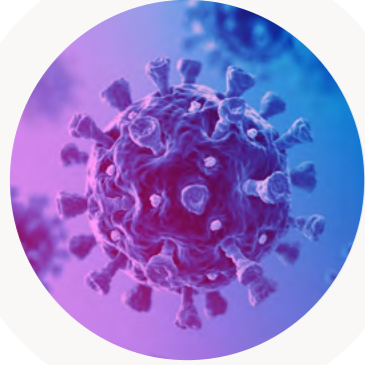
3 in 5

adults say their mental health worsened during the pandemic



39%

of internal communicators say communicating health and wellbeing is a top three priority in 2021



72%

of employees
aren't aware
of what health
support is
available at work

How organisations can help

1. Make sure employees know where to find health and wellbeing tools and information. Clearly sign-post policies so people understand their sick pay and benefit rights.
2. Encourage good physical health. It doesn't have to be expensive gym or fitness app memberships. Our clients have organised fitness challenges, encouraged walking meetings, and held employee-led mindfulness and fitness classes.
3. Bring in the experts. Curate a bank of informative content – from nutrition to financial wellbeing – or create your own seminars or 'Ask an expert' service.
4. Help line managers to support their teams with guidance and training on communication and pastoral care. And don't forget their needs too – provide bespoke support and resilience training for those looking after others.
5. Inspire a culture of care, reminding people 'It's OK not to be OK' and encouraging colleagues to check in on each other. We've heard from organisations who trained employees as mental health first aiders and held informal, online 'drop-in' sessions for anyone who wanted to talk.
6. Help employees to work flexibly and set boundaries between work and home. Other companies have taken it further, offering sabbaticals and unlimited vacation time, resulting in a marked uplift in wellbeing.
7. Make your communications accessible to everyone. Write clearly, make user-friendly layouts, consider colour, describe images, and give videos captions and transcripts.
8. Whether employees are working onsite or remotely, communicate health and safety requirements regularly and clearly. We find visual communications are the most effective way to engage employees with these kinds of messages, whether it's an infographic of dos and don'ts, or a video of a leader walking through social distancing measures on site. Personal stories are also a powerful way to signal that it's OK to speak up and to encourage employees to share their own issues.



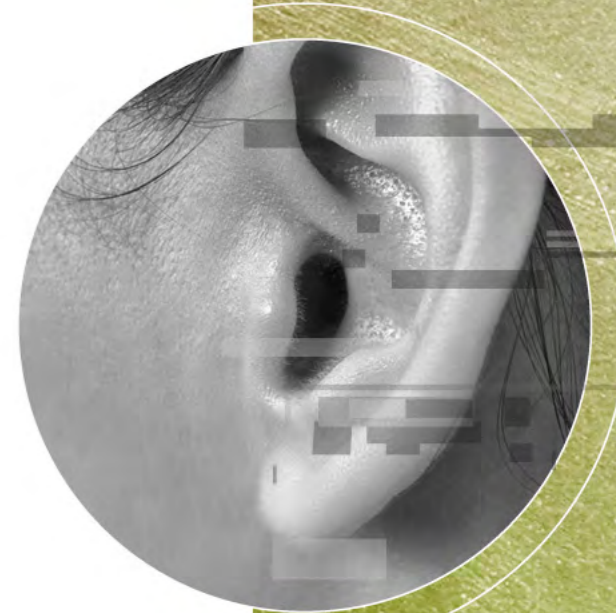
“

The first wealth is health.”

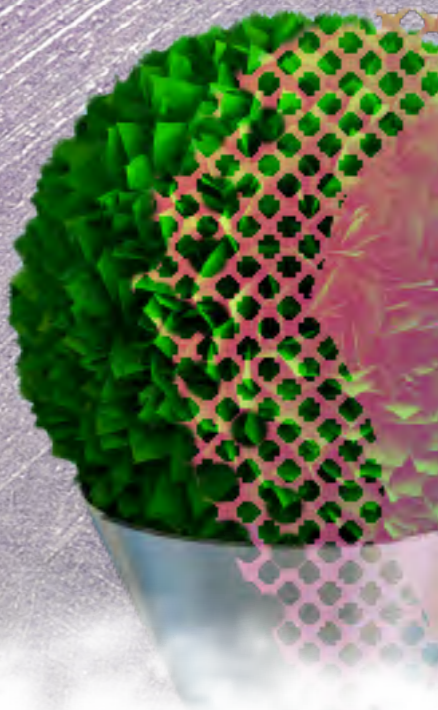
Philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson

Sources:

American Psychological Association, Centre for Mental Health, CIPD, Invisible Illness Awareness, IoIC, Mind, NHS Digital, Vitality.



Authentic leadership: the genuine article?



Does it matter if your CEO's puppy wanders into shot during their latest video message? Absolutely it does – but maybe not in the way you think...

80%

of employees say that a culture of authenticity improves the workplace
HBR research

Covid-19 has put leaders – political and corporate – under the spotlight like never before. Some have risen to that challenge better than others (we'll leave you to make your own judgements on that one!), but what's clear is that there will be long-term implications for the way in which leaders communicate.

The key trend we've seen is that leaders who've dropped their guard, invited colleagues into their world and shown genuine empathy have fared best. By some distance.

Glassdoor surveyed employees in the UK and US to rank their views of their CEOs' performances during the pandemic. The leaders at the top of the board were those who – according to their employees – had demonstrated they cared for their workforce in word and deed.

One example we like: Airbnb Co-Founder and CEO Brian Chesky earned praise in May 2020 for his note to employees that shared news about redundancies in an open and honest way.

He got straight to the point; outlined the rationale; and explained how the company was approaching the reductions, what employees could expect, and what support was available.

To those colleagues leaving the company, he

finished by saying: "I am truly sorry. Please know this is not your fault."

On the other side of the coin, Cineworld employees told journalists that they'd found out about cinema closures on social media, rather than from internal channels. As one said: "To find out you may no longer have a job from the media is awful."

From our own client work, we've seen powerful examples of leaders who've filmed authentic video updates from their homes over the past year. They're not polished films by any means (and if a family pet wanders into a shot then so much the better), but they're human and genuine, and have really connected with employees.

But as we move towards the new hybrid world, there will be a temptation to default to the old ways, to the traditional hierarchical approach to communication.

Having seen this more authentic approach to leadership communication, do you think your colleagues will be happy for your CEO to revert back to the formal, over-prepared, 'Death by PowerPoint' presentation?

As Paul Tufano, CEO of AmeriHealth Caritas, says: "If CEOs can step into a ministerial role – extending hands virtually, truly listening, relating to and connecting with people where they are – there is enormous potential

Three top tips for...

Authentic leadership comms

1.

Be transparent. So often we hear from employees in our client organisations that they're frustrated with spin, or avoiding difficult subjects. Encourage your leaders to be upfront and tackle tricky subjects head on.

2.

Help your leaders to find their own voice, one that allows them to communicate in a genuine and open way that feels natural and helps them to connect with employees.

3.

Play to your leaders' strengths. They might not excel in Town Hall meetings, but be more comfortable working in smaller groups. So invite them to drop in to team meetings from time to time, have more one-to-one conversations, or get involved in Yammer discussions.

to inspire people and strengthen bonds and loyalties within the company."

So talk to your colleagues about what has connected with them, and use that evidence to guide your leaders along this new path of authenticity.

It's true that not all leaders are natural communicators, and in this new world they don't need to be. You can help them with the quality of messages and the best way to deliver them.

But the best advice of all: be yourself.

“
Be yourself –
everyone
else is taken.”

Poet Oscar Wilde



Lessons in learning

Last year lots of training was cancelled as priorities changed. But 2020 may have transformed how organisations think about learning and development, forever.

However much you might feel like you were treading water last year, we'd like to assure you that you learned a lot. Lessons included: 'How to count to 20 in various songs'; 'How to run an online quiz'; 'How to bake sourdough'; and 'How to get out of yet another online quiz'.

The same goes for organisations, which had a steep learning curve. Indeed, McKinsey reports that more than 90% of executives say they expect the fallout from Covid-19 to fundamentally change the way they do business over the next five years.

But at the same time, fewer than 30% feel ready to address the upcoming changes. Then throw in that 85% of the jobs that will exist in 2030 haven't been invented yet, and the case for upskilling employees is clear.

We're encouraging client organisations to embrace new approaches this year, by investing in online learning platforms, virtual training sessions, and just-in-time and self-directed learning.

A long-overdue innovation

When the pandemic hit, learning and development was in limbo. We've heard from clients who said the focus understandably shifted from preparing for the future to coping with the present. Traditional in-person training was cancelled, and budgets were reduced as businesses began to feel the economic impact.

However, as Andy Lancaster, Head of Learning and Development Content at CIPD, says, this was an opportunity in disguise. "Coronavirus has forced our hand," he explains. "It is a catalyst for a long-overdue learning innovation."

Pre-pandemic research from Training Industry showed that 29% of organisations planned to increase their eLearning investment during 2019-2020. In reality, People Management reports 50% of organisations launched online training in 2020, compared to just 15% before. Overall, 75% changed how some or all training was delivered because of coronavirus.

This tallies with our experience too. For example, traditionally our Microsoft 365 for Communicators course (run for the Institute of Internal Communication) would have been delivered in-person, over a couple of days. However, sitting in front

of a screen for seven hours at a time doesn't have quite the same effect.

Instead, we broke the session into smaller chunks, held over several days. We replicated the dynamic of working in a group with break-out sessions, and made the most of teaching time by swapping individual activities for light 'homework' where delegates could apply it to their own situation. In future sessions, they shared their experiences for peer group learning (and we ended up with a 92% satisfaction rate, so forgive us this once-only pat on the back).



“**Yet, I am still learning.**”

Artist Michelangelo, aged 87



Curation over creation

We're encouraging client organisations to embrace new approaches this year, by investing in online learning platforms, virtual training sessions, and just-in-time and self-directed learning.

After all, there's a lot of change to get to grips with – whether it's adapting to new digital tools or learning to practise social distancing on site – so we need sure-fire ways to help people learn and adapt.

94%

of employees stay at companies longer if employers invest in their development

LinkedIn

15%

Online learning accelerates the learning process by 15%

Towards Maturity

For example, digital transformation remains a priority for many of our clients. We're advocating for a 'just-in-time' approach by creating 'how-to' videos that walk people through how to use their new tools and sites. These guides are available on demand so people can dip into them when they choose, just in time to meet their needs.

According to Dublin City University, HR leaders say curating this kind of learning content is a trend we're going to see more in future. It will be up to IC and HR teams to direct people to the content and help them to identify the right ones for their needs.

But while organisational learning could be transformed by new technology and training formats, the fundamentals remain the same.

For organisations to grow and people to thrive, organisations must nurture a learning culture, where development is encouraged, skills are shared and curiosity is rewarded.

We replicated the dynamic of working in a group with break-out sessions, and made the most of teaching time by swapping individual activities for light 'homework' where delegates could apply it to their own situation.

Three top tips for...

Learning & development

1.

Online learning doesn't have to be death by PowerPoint. Encourage collaboration with virtual study groups and breakout sessions, and create variety with video and podcasts.

2.

Empower employees to learn at a time, place and pace that suits them, and suits hybrid working. Create and curate libraries of learning content, and then make sure they know how to access it and identify what they need.

3.

Use leaders and managers as ambassadors and role models for your organisation's learning culture. Empower them to promote success stories and reward learning behaviours.



Whatever happened to culture?



The new hybrid working world means company culture is up for debate. We're having the argument so you don't have to.



'Nice to have'. The 'fluffy' stuff. What communicator hasn't heard these terms thrown around by someone in the business about aspects of our work? Usually when you're arguing for activities that you know will lead to a stronger company culture and connected, engaged employees.

As half the country went to work from home at the height of lockdown in 2020, the essence of company culture continued to be debated. Did community really matter when you could get more done when not distracted by office chat? Do you need to chat with co-workers in the breakroom when you can catch up at the beginning of a video meeting?

Well, the simple answer to both is yes. But don't worry, we've got the arguments to back us (and you) up.



“**Conversation is how we swap ideas, discuss issues and suggest solutions. And counter intuitive as it may seem, chatting makes employees more productive and innovative.**”

“Look, work is business, not personal.”

Whether you worked onsite, at home, or a mix of the two, social distancing will have had an impact on how much you connected with your colleagues face to face in 2020.

Some have used this opportunity to show how productive they can be when working in isolation. Yes, they might be missing the 'social' aspect of work, but they can get that elsewhere from their friends and family.

Those same people may scoff at research that shows a link between having a best friend at work and the amount of effort you put into your job. Or that says employees sharing social time contributes 50% of positive change in communication patterns.

Indeed, we've heard from organisations who say the most effective engagement activities in 2020 were those that might be brushed off as a 'bit of fun'.

Things like virtual coffee breaks and team quizzes may seem to be about wellbeing (which they are – and that's important too), but they're also about working effectively. Research shows that productivity increases by around 25% in organisations where employees feel connected to each other.

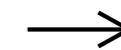


Action: Organise 'social time' with dedicated slots in the diary to bring people together. Sessions can be on a topic, or freeform: we've found a mixture is a good way to keep it fresh.

“But, if they're talking, they're not working.”

Years ago, when IBM needed to reinvent itself, the chairman circulated a memo telling employees to stay away from water cooler chat and get back to work. He thought they were avoiding work, but actually this is where employees discussed how to solve the company's problems.

Conversation is how we swap ideas, discuss issues and suggest solutions. And counter intuitive as it may seem, chatting makes employees more productive and innovative. Research from MIT showed that informal chats contribute between a third and a half to a group's productivity. In contrast, email added nothing.



QUIZ

With social distancing and working from home directives in place, we're missing those spontaneous 'water cooler' moments. Grabbing someone for a quick sense check as they walk by. Overhearing a conversation in the kitchen. In the long-term, this is going to have an impact on the bottom line.



Action: *In the new hybrid workplace, a mix of structure and spontaneity will help to encourage these exchanges. Create safe spaces for conversations onsite, and encourage knowledge sharing on social networks with 'Ask the expert' and brainstorming sessions.*

If you run a campaign to encourage people to list their skills, experience and expertise in your online people directory (eg Delve), then everyone will know who to turn to with ideas and / or problems. You can also use this insight to create an organisational 'knowledge map'.

"Come on, people just want to get through the day job and go home."

Research and experience show that most people want purpose at work, and those that have it are happier, more engaged, and more productive.

Back in 1974, Studs Terkel – writing his oral history of work – found that people who truly enjoyed their work "had a meaning to their work over and beyond the reward of the paycheck".

It doesn't need to be that bigger, altruistic 'purpose' – curing cancer, putting a man on the moon. As Bruce Daisley, business podcaster and ex-Twitter VP, puts it, it's that voice in your head that says: "If I didn't show up today would anybody care? Would anybody notice?" Basically, am I making a contribution?

With change and uncertainty set to be a continuing theme in 2021, it will be important to clarify and communicate your organisation's purpose – and to help employees understand their role in it.



Action: *Show the link between individual stories and wider business success, share customer stories to show where your work has made a difference, and coach line managers to reiterate the purpose and what it means specifically for their teams.*



90%

of employees would be willing to earn 23% less if they could have a more rewarding and meaningful job
HBR



“**Work is about a search... for daily meaning as well as daily bread.**”

Author Studs Terkel



Getting on board with your employer brand



Developing and improving how organisations onboard new people so that new recruits become ambassadors for your brand, wherever they are, is a growing challenge in a hybrid world.

88%

of companies don't onboard well. As a result, 20% of new hires leave within the first 45 days of starting
Gallup

It was a familiar refrain towards the end of last year when we were talking to many of our clients: “We had a couple of colleagues join our team in the spring, and eight months on it's bizarre that I haven't actually met them yet!”

Starting a new job can be a challenge at the best of times, but during a pandemic when you can't follow the usual induction / onboarding processes and get to know your colleagues in person, it's even tougher. It's tough too to understand the 'way we do things around here' when you're working remotely, which makes understanding business strategy, values and objectives even more important.

Helping new employees to better connect with an employer brand is, we think, going to be a priority in the new hybrid world, especially as so many people seem to have taken the time during lockdowns to reflect on their lives, and what they contribute to society either personally or through their work.

Demonstrating an aspirational employer brand – and actually living up to that promise – will help to define and cement your culture (see chapter 8) in this new environment.

Steps that organisations are taking to remodel the onboarding process to better reflect their employer brand include personalised messaging; onboarding roadmaps with detailed 'what to expect / what we expect' statements; virtual video tours of the 'usual' place of work; new recruit 'playbooks'; interactive games, scenario simulations and quizzes; manager and team 'welcome' videos; and scheduled time for reflection and one-to-one feedback.

Another area for improvement that's been highlighted by the pandemic is the poor quality of induction materials. So often we hear in focus groups that the documentation isn't user-friendly, that there's little consistency, and it really doesn't create a sense of story or belonging, of shared vision, or of employer brand. And very rarely is there an explanation of the various IC channels, which tool to use for which task, and how to actually use them.

When you're working at home and can't just ask the person next to you for help, it can be tricky to get the answers you need. No new recruit wants to be Teams calling a new colleague every five minutes to ask: “Where do I find X?”

Many organisations often forget the crucial pre-boarding phase – that time between someone accepting a job offer and their

first day of work. Incredibly, one in four people drop out during this period, so your communication has to set high standards from day one.

Our research shows that this 'consideration gap' is a key pinch point, so don't go quiet once you've made a job offer – give people the information they'll need for their first day, start to engage them with your employer brand, and build on the confidence that they've made the right choice in joining your organisation. You've spent time and effort in finding the best talent, so making your pre-boarding and onboarding fit for the new working environment is time and money well spent if it keeps new people motivated.

“**Onboarding new hires in a completely remote way challenges us to bridge the digital with the personal. We understand that while we are physically far apart, there is much that can be done to create a sense of camaraderie, collaboration and connection through shared mission and purpose.**”

Roslynn Williams, Chief People Officer, Dun & Bradstreet

Three top tips for...
Onboarding

- 1.** Review the tone, style and accessibility of your onboarding materials: do they paint a true picture of your employer brand?
- 2.** Are you selling your story? Is the bigger picture clear, memorable and engaging?
- 3.** Video can't fully replace in-person introductions, but it's a powerful way to help people to understand the business, the vision, the brand and the people, and start to build relationships.

Making that human connection



Although this is the final chapter of this year's Trends report, in many ways it's the most important. A classic case of 'last, but not least'.

50%

of communicators believe they will be more involved in organisational change programmes in 2021

IoIC research

With the caveat that 2020 was a nightmare for many, many people, one of the changes the pandemic brought about was making internal communication more relevant than ever.

We all needed clear and relevant information quickly. With circumstances changing daily – and minute by minute at times – the value of good communication was there for everyone to see.

Particularly for senior leaders: there was lots of discussion at IoIC Live, the Institute of Internal Communication's conference, about how Board-level appreciation of strategic communication has skyrocketed. And long may that continue.

And while we don't know what the future holds, we're confident that IC as a profession will continue to play a central part in helping organisations to work efficiently and effectively; in bringing people together and building a much-needed sense of community; and in providing the clarity of purpose that helps to create engaged and motivated employees.

There will be challenges of course – 'prepare for the unexpected' would be a good motto for 2021 – but we can build on the way that IC's profile has risen in the last 12 months.

We think there are three core areas to consider here.

1. Collaboration

So far in this chapter we've talked about IC, but communicators can't exist in isolation. Working together with our friends in IT who can enable the clever online tools that support our working day, and our friends in HR who can support our work around employee wellbeing, is crucial if we really want to have a positive impact on our colleagues day to day.

2. Measurement

To keep the momentum going, we need to demonstrate that our work is making a difference. Anecdotal evidence is one thing, but hard and fast measurement is the only way to prove to stakeholders that our messages, our campaigns, our training, our tools and channels are helping people to work effectively, stay well and ultimately achieve our organisational goals.

We all needed clear and relevant information quickly. With circumstances changing daily – and minute by minute at times – the value of good communication was there for everyone to see.

3. Finding the human

We have plenty of technologies at our fingertips, and whether you're using Microsoft 365, Workplace by Facebook, Google's G Suite or something else entirely, those powerful online tools will be meaningless without the human element. In terms of how we use our understanding of our audiences to shape our channel mix; how we develop a collaborative culture; and of course in how we communicate with each other.

Many organisations were playing catch up with their approach to IC last year, and the requirement of responding to the pandemic certainly sped up the pace of change.

But now, as – hopefully – the world starts to slowly open up again, we can use what we've learned to embed new ways of working and communicating for the medium term. Setting us up for whatever challenges are around the corner.





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Sequel Group
79 Essex Road
Islington
London N1 2SF

+44(0)20 7354 5577

hello@sequelgroup.co.uk

www.sequelgroup.co.uk/resources

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