

Trends Report 2022

Inside: five key IC, IT and HR themes to help you accelerate your plans for hybrid working in 2022 and give your people the tools, support and meaning they need to be successful.



insight
content
technology



9th
year

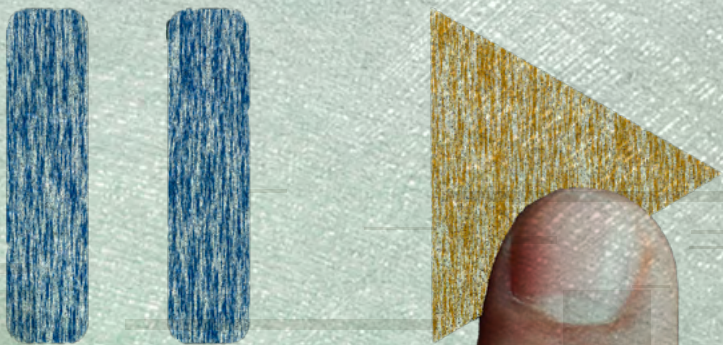


The chapters

1. The Modern Workplace
2. The Purposeful Workplace
3. The People Workplace
4. The Authentic Workplace
5. The Well Workplace

HELLO

From 'pause' to 'play' – picking up the pace of employee engagement in 2022



Just over 12 months ago when we wrote our 2021 Trends Report, *Human Communication in a Hybrid World*, we felt quietly confident that the themes we were discussing, around topics like hybrid working, digital transformation and leadership authenticity, would become increasingly important during the year.



And while things certainly headed in that direction, there was also a sense of the 'pause' button being hit. That all the plans and good intentions were there, but somehow comms professionals were still deep into 'just get on with delivery' mode.

From the conversations we were having with our clients at that time, we expected 2021 to be the year in which hybrid working and its potential for interesting comms and opportunities really took off.

But a host of factors in the following months, notably new Covid restrictions and variants, meant that, for many, those plans had to stay on the shelf.

Now, as we look ahead to the coming year, we sense that our fingers are hovering over the 'play' button – perhaps even 'fast forward' – as organisations look to fully realise the plans they've been preparing.

So, for 2022, our Insight team has taken a different approach to our Trends Report

and had a look back at some of the IC, HR and IT trends we've highlighted in the last few years. What's still a trend, how each has played out, and what's to watch and take action on for 2022.

And, our insights are rooted in and filtered through Sequel's Four Pillars™ methodology – a research-based approach to make sure that our thinking is relevant for the challenges you're facing.

We hope you find our ninth annual Trends Report an interesting read. It's certainly interesting to assess and filter industry thinking, and for us to then put these documents together.

We're delighted to share this insight with you and offer it to help you to shape and influence comms thinking and approaches, wherever you are.

Suzanne Peck
Managing Director, Sequel Group



Vive la révolution



The last two years have seen an unprecedented (sorry) surge in organisations using digital channels and tools to connect, collaborate and communicate. But are we making the most of the opportunities in front of us?



What we said

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.

2021

There's often an assumption from organisations that employees – particularly the younger ones – will 'just know' how to use new online tools. But that assumption doesn't hold up: just because you use Instagram at home, it doesn't automatically follow that you'll know how to use Microsoft Teams at work.

2020

What's been happening?

Back in April 2020, Satya Nadella, Microsoft CEO, said: "We've seen two years of digital transformation in two months." The first UK lockdown resulted in an accelerated digital revolution, both at home and at work, as we relied on technology to keep us connected.

And while virtual drinks and games have mostly been replaced by face-to-face interactions (did we hear a sigh of relief?), the stop-start nature of getting employees back on site, and continued hybrid approach to work, has kept digital channels front and centre.

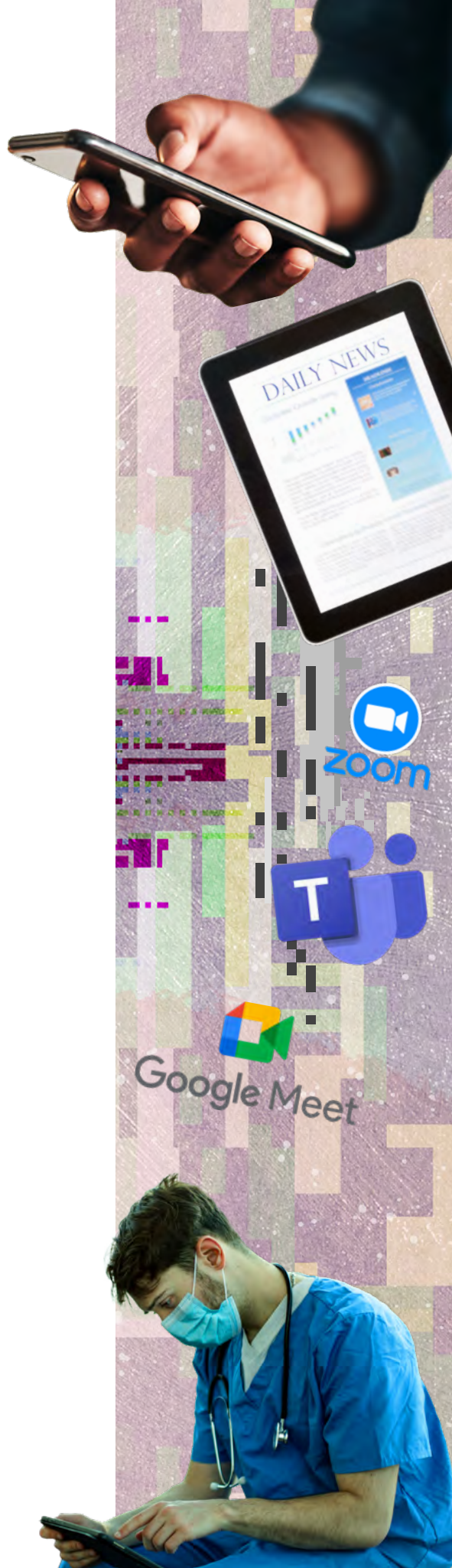
A 2021 survey of 1,000 organisations showed that 73 per cent have invested in more than one collaboration tool, with at least one of those tools enabling video meetings (*eWeek*). And we're not just talking desk-based workers, who we usually consider the archetypal digital channel user. In its Work Trend Index, Microsoft reports a 400 per cent increase in monthly Microsoft Teams usage among frontline employees from March 2020 to November 2021.

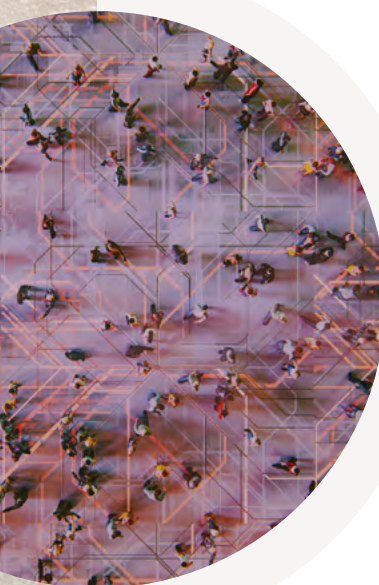
In fact, the biggest revolution in the modern workplace might just belong to frontline colleagues. Organisations embraced technology for the frontline, whether they were managing shift patterns, checking for the latest news, or onboarding a new joiner.

And it seems those frontline employees are fans. In that same report, Microsoft said that audience ranked technology third in its list of factors that could help reduce work-related stress. And 46 per cent of respondents even value technological tools over mental health support and wellness benefits.

So does that mean we're all tech-savvy, uber-connected employees and that the digital revolution is done? Well, firstly, we're not (and wouldn't wish to be) and, secondly, far from it. Let's explain.

The urgency behind organisations' scramble to launch collaboration and community platforms – with literally days' notice in





some cases – meant traditional planning couldn't happen. While this was good in some ways (less bureaucracy and quicker decision making), it also meant there was little time to prepare people, refine purpose, and arrange support and guidance.

For some, this has left them with overlapping channels, inconsistent workarounds and incompatible ways of working. We've heard from clients who say employees may have the technology they need, but not the skills or experience to make the most of them. Or the understanding of which tool to use for which task.

And of course, there's the impact on our wellbeing. The opportunities for flexibility and connection are also the downsides of a digital workplace. Employees say increased use of digital tools has left them overwhelmed and overworked.

Whether you're focusing on the positives or negatives, there's no denying that we're addicted. We now spend a third of our day on our mobile phones, up 30 per cent from 2019. Two million apps were launched in 2021 alone (App Annie).

While we're not recommending everyone rushes to start a company TikTok (2021's most downloaded app in the world), we believe organisations would be wise to

learn from these trends, consider their content approach and invest in their mobile offering.

Because the revolution may have blazed past in two months in 2020, but it's far from over. We need to get ready for the next wave. How? By meeting employees where they are.

As we said last year, digital technology is "meaningless without the human element". We must lean into employees' preferences and behaviours – internally and externally – and create a modern workplace that's all about the people who belong to it.



What's next?

Our top tips for making the most of your Modern Workplace in 2022:

- 1.** Continue to review and refine your channel mix by ensuring everything has a clear purpose. You can support this by making sure digital channels aren't getting too unwieldy or unfocused by creating a content lifecycle. Set guidelines to help content owners update or clean out old content regularly – and don't forget to set reminders!
- 2.** Invest in your employees' digital maturity and resilience with training and ongoing support. That might be a series of top tips on how to make the most of a collaboration platform. Or a lunch n' learn to help them recognise signs of digital fatigue and how to combat it.
- 3.** Learn from external trends. Our increased reliance on tech isn't just confined to the workplace. Research which apps and sites your employees frequent, and see if you can adapt any elements for your internal channels and content. It will help employees to recognise, understand and engage with your messages.



The background is a textured purple surface with a fine, grainy pattern. Three magnifying glasses are positioned around the central text. One magnifying glass with a wooden handle is at the top, its lens partially covering the word 'MISSING'. Another magnifying glass with a silver frame and wooden handle is at the bottom left, its lens partially covering the word 'purpose?'. A third magnifying glass with a black frame and handle is on the right, its lens partially covering the word 'our'.

MISSING:
have you seen our
purpose?

People are leaving their jobs in droves, on the hunt for better opportunities and meaning in their work. How can IC support organisations? How can we help employees find their purpose – and stop them finding the door?



What we said

And while generational groupings are always prone to sweeping generalisations, this desire for greater clarity does seem to be even more important for younger people, who view purpose as a crucial part of their day-to-day engagement.

2020

Research suggests that more than 70 per cent of people want to work for an organisation that is socially and environmentally responsible, meaning it's increasingly vital for businesses to have a clear and compelling purpose.

2019

What's been happening?

Hands up if you changed your job last year? With record numbers of people quitting their jobs, odds are that you – or someone close to you – decided they needed a fresh start in 2021.

Much has been written about the reasons behind the 'Great Resignation'. The pandemic forced some to switch careers to stay afloat. Some simply saw the opportunity for better pay. But for others, it was the mark of a greater sense of dissatisfaction.

In Chapter 5, we discuss how our collective mental wellbeing has taken a real hit over the last couple of years. Adam Grant, an organisational psychologist at Wharton, says once the initial panic of 2020 subsided, many of us spent 2021 in a state of 'languishing'.

"Languishing is the neglected middle child of mental health. It's the void between depression and flourishing — the absence of wellbeing," Grant explains. "Languishing dulls your motivation, disrupts your ability to focus, and triples the odds that you'll cut back on work."



a bad company culture is

10.4

times more likely to send your employees out the door than their pay packet

It's no surprise then that we've heard from employees that – after so many stops and starts over the last 18 months – they're feeling adrift and purposeless. And for most of us – 70 per cent according to research from McKinsey – that purpose is usually defined by our work.

We've talked about the importance of purpose in our Trends Reports before. How having a purpose makes employees more productive, resilient, satisfied and likely to stay at the organisation. And of course, with our business hats on, helping people to understand your goals and why they're important means you're more likely to achieve them.

In fact, a bad company culture is 10.4 times more likely to send your employees out the door than their pay packet, according to a recent study of Glassdoor reviews. And it seems a clear and relevant purpose is a big part of that. Last year, the MIT Sloan Survey found that 72 per cent of respondents strongly agree that it is "very important to them to work for an organisation with a purpose they believe in".

So what should organisations do about it? Well, the solution seems to lie with 'languishing'. According to Grant, to avoid languishing, we need to find that elusive state called 'flow'. In other words, becoming immersed in projects and –

you guessed it – feeling a sense of purpose.

More than ever before, organisations need to articulate their purpose, clearly and often, and show people the meaning in their work. Helping them to find an affirmative answer to the question: "Would it matter if I wasn't here?" Otherwise, don't be surprised if your people join the millions of others who are finding the door.



What's next?

Our top tips for how comms can find the meaning in work in 2022:

1.

Find out what your organisational purpose means to your people so you can make sure you're using the same narrative and relevant, logical, and consistent language. You could do this through a series of focus groups, host conversations on your internal social networks, or ask managers to run a themed team meeting and report their findings.

2.

Connect the dots between your employees' individual purpose, team purpose and wider organisational purpose. Highlight their personal role in, and reward that comes from, achieving their and your goals: "If you achieve X, we'll all achieve Y".

3.

Keep your purpose present by weaving it into your everyday employee experience. You might try: reiterating key messages and storytelling in your comms; making it a central element in your personal development process; and asking leaders to consistently link back to it when communicating.



Living a quiet life



Hybrid working had a bit of a false start in 2021, thanks to new Covid restrictions. But as the principle starts to really embed a new culture of work for many, it's more important than ever to understand how your colleagues are feeling, and how IC, HR and IT can support the transition.



What we said

The value of soft skills was reflected in a recent FEIEA survey that found that ‘improving my active listening’ was high up on the list of communicators’ actions for this year. 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.

2021

For the first time we’re seeing five generations of employees in the workplace, shaping culture and the way we work. Listening to employees’ feedback and establishing a continual and regular dialogue becomes even more important.

2019

What’s been happening?

“What is the single most important thing for a company? Is it the building? Is it the stock? Is it the turnover? No, it’s the people.”

Not words from Steve Jobs or Richard Branson, but from that legendary management guru David Brent. Even Sir David of Brentshire knows that a company is nothing without its employees.

OK, the rest of that quote from *The Office* somewhat undermines the principle (go look it up), but at its heart it’s spot on.

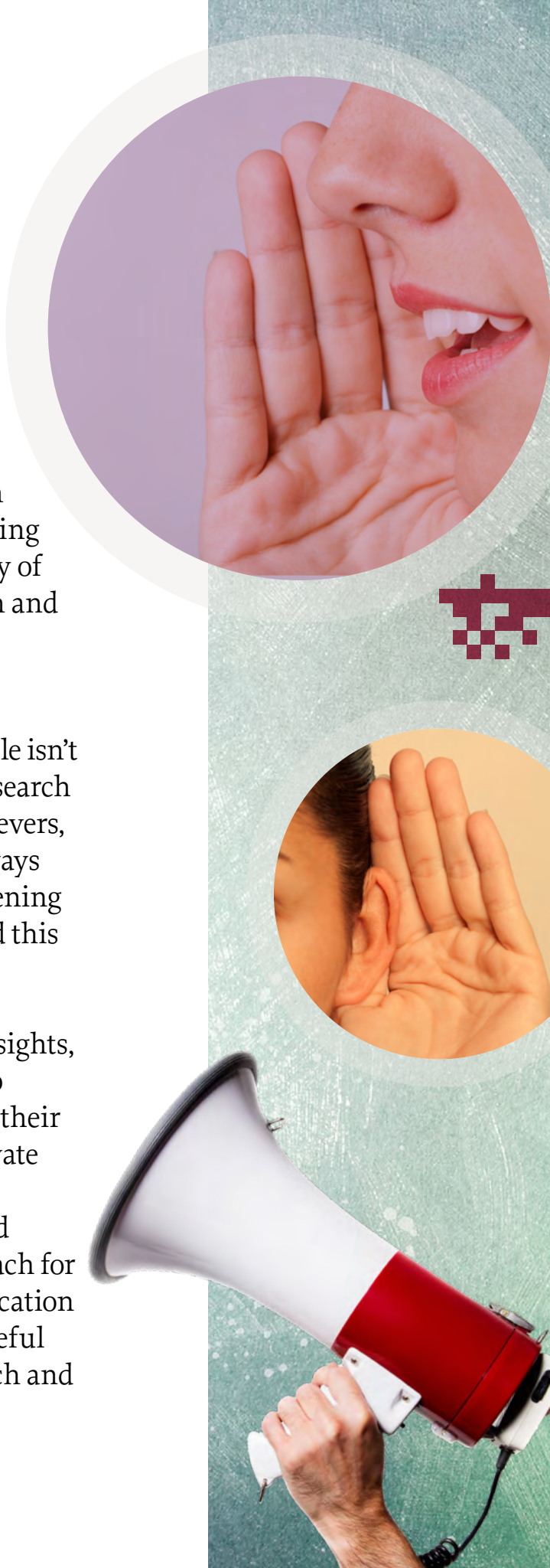
In our last couple of Trends Reports we’ve focused on helping organisations to find the ‘human’ in their communication, and the other chapters of this 2022 document discuss some of the areas in which we’ve seen progress.

But we still think there’s room to give employees a greater voice, and to learn more from people right across an organisation. Colleagues who feel their voice is heard are 4.6 times more

likely to feel empowered to perform their best work (Salesforce), so tackling this challenge is a very effective way of improving engagement, satisfaction and productivity scores.

Regular measurement is starting to become more common, but the needle isn’t moving as quickly as we’d like. In research carried out by HR organisation Achievers, 64 per cent of HR leaders said an ‘always on’ feedback tool is essential to a listening programme, but only 20 per cent had this kind of tool in place.

If you’re aware of Microsoft Viva Insights, you’ll know how it prompts users to select an emoji to register how well their day is going. Now in Viva that’s private information to help the individual employee monitor their feelings and identify trends. But a similar approach for employee engagement or communication channels could provide a flow of useful data to help you refine your approach and make the most of your budget.



“There have been more social movements in the last 10 years than in the last 100”



Or what about an employee network, which can bring together a diverse range of people from across your organisation to share feedback about your communication channels or specific internal campaigns? They can also surface important issues and stories you might not otherwise hear about.

With the pace of communication these days, it’s crucial to have ongoing information that can help to stop minor concerns becoming fully fledged disasters.

There have been more social movements in the last 10 years than in the last 100, and of course one of the reasons for that is people being able to communicate, share ideas and – let’s be honest – gossip at the push of a button.

Several organisations have hit the news recently as their employees have pooled resources to make the case for significant change within their businesses. It’s a hypothetical argument, but we think it’s fair to conclude that if employees had enjoyed a greater voice, then leaders could have known about these concerns, made changes sooner, and avoided some less-than-welcome publicity.

And don’t forget about larger-scale research either. This year we expect to see many organisations carrying out more detailed communication audits, to help

reshape their comms plans as hybrid working becomes the norm.

This change has been stalled by the ebb and flow of Covid restrictions over the last year or so, but as things start to settle down (we hope), we expect the ‘work is where you are’ plans first envisioned in 2020 will really start to embed a new approach.

And at this point, it’s hard to know whether the old ways will translate to the new world. Chances are that some will, and some will fall by the wayside – but until you ask your colleagues what they want, need and expect, you’ll be guessing.

And even The Brentmeister General would know that’s a recipe for disaster.

What’s next?

Our top tips for unleashing your people’s power in 2022:

1. **Build in a mix of quick, regular measurement and less frequent, more detailed research into your comms planning. Don’t worry about hitting external benchmark targets though. Look at your own organisation before comparing against others, where different influences will be at play.**
2. **Always remember to ‘close the feedback loop’ by sharing results and changes with your colleagues. Few things frustrate employees more than taking the time to share their opinions, and then watching that information disappear into a black hole.**
3. **Be bold – this is a rare opportunity to rip up the rule book and try some fresh approaches. Maybe you have a long-established channel that employees are telling you has gone stale? Then bin it and use that budget for something more suited to the challenges of 2022.**



Take it from the top



Open, authentic, empathetic – these continue to be the words we hear from employees when they tell us what they want from their leaders and line managers. But it isn’t always easy to meet those expectations.



What we said

Leaders who’ve dropped their guard, invited colleagues into their world and shown genuine empathy have fared best during the pandemic. By some distance. And you should care about that because 80 per cent of employees say that a culture of authenticity improves the workplace.

2021

Employees in many organisations have told us that they feel left in the dark or “on the kids’ table”, and that they believe leaders are being economical with the truth. As one person told us in a focus group: “We need to avoid the spin on every article that makes our company look like the greatest thing since the world was invented.”

2019

What’s been happening?

By the time you read this, the name ‘Sue Gray’ may have worked its way into popular language, or faded into obscurity.

But the fact that many of you will be familiar with this previously low-profile civil servant and her ‘Partygate’ report into the shenanigans at Downing Street shines a light on just how crucial effective leadership communication is to organisational success.

Not that that will be any surprise to communicators, of course.

- Employees who feel connected to their organisation and leaders stay longer and perform better (Forbes).
- Feeling respected by leaders is the top priority for many employees (*Harvard Business Review*).
- Three-quarters of employees see effective communication as the number one leadership attribute (Smarp).

Since our last Trends Report, we’re pleased to say that we’ve seen many examples of leaders continuing to communicate in an authentic, empathetic and open way. Partly that’s been driven by necessity, because virtual meetings have continued to be the default channel for most communication and automatically lend themselves to a more informal feel. But also by a trend for developing strategic narratives that act as a foundation for consistent storytelling.

Whether it’s for an organisation’s journey as a whole, a medium-term change programme, or a quick fix project, we’ve seen increasing demand for this type of communication activity.

And it’s easy to see why. Getting your narrative right at an early stage makes sure that you’re telling a common story, everyone is on the same page, and you’re using a tone of voice that’s consistent and appropriate.



Three-quarters of employees see effective communication as the number one leadership attribute

(Smarp research)

This foundation is giving leaders a helping hand with their communication activities. And it's supporting the cascade process, giving line managers more clarity about the story they're being asked to share with their teams.

This feeds into another key trend we're seeing as organisations work to thaw out their 'frozen middle' by improving the communication skills of line managers.

Many organisations have realised that often line managers are promoted because of their technical skills, rather than their communication abilities. So to address this common communication block, they're giving them support through training programmes, practical resources and online communities.

Try to get a change programme off the ground – like a digital transformation effort as you reshape your digital workplace – and it's almost impossible to be successful without getting your leaders and line managers on board.

Indeed, Gartner research has found that the most crucial element in the success of these types of programmes is leadership support.

But that's not enough. These groups need to understand the value of communication (thankfully that picture has improved

significantly in the last few years), and have the skills to communicate a clear, consistent and compelling story. That's certainly an area in which your time will be well spent in 2022.

We're so confident about that, we're not even going to ask Sue Gray to confirm it for us.

What's next?

Our top tips for authentic leadership and line manager communication for 2022:

1. Create strategic narratives for your communication and transformation programmes so that everyone is clear about the story you're telling, and how you're going to describe it.
2. Encourage the authentic leadership communication style that has emerged in the last couple of years – don't let your senior colleagues fall back into 'death by PowerPoint' mode.
3. Give your line managers the support they need to have effective conversations with their teams. Consider communication training for your line manager community so everyone has the tools they need.



Working at home, or sleeping at work?



After two tough years, it seems that – at the time of writing, anyway – we’re now able to start looking ahead with some optimism about the future. But that doesn’t mean we can forget what we’ve all been through in 2020 and 2021. Or just go back to how things were before.



What we said

60 per cent of employees say their mental health has worsened during the pandemic, so organisations must boost their support and guidance for better wellbeing this year. Inspire a culture of care.

2021

Many remote employees tell us that they feel isolated. Often that’s down to two things: poor line manager communication; and poor communication channels. But there’s a further question to ask: what do those deskless colleagues actually want?

2020

Work/life balance is of growing importance for many people when they’re choosing who to work for. The need for employees to travel in to one place of work and to sit at the same desk every day has subsided.

2019

What’s been happening?

There’s a popular theory that it takes 21 days to embed a new habit. Haven’t been to the gym for yonks? Not an issue. Go every day for three weeks and you’ll become a convert. By day 22 you’ll wake up every morning desperate to hit the treadmill or the weights.

There’s one problem. It’s a myth. The latest neuroscience research suggests there are too many variables in play to put any number on how quickly a habit is formed.

One of the reasons is that our brains are hardwired for laziness. They automatically look for the easy option, every time. *(By the way, this is one reason why it’s really bad practice to fill your employee survey with questions that are all in a similar format... eventually people will just take the easy option and default to answering ‘3 out of 5’ just to get the thing over with).*

This hit home with us recently when we were asking employees in one of our client organisations about their experiences of working at home during the pandemic.

It was noticeable how many people had similar stories: “I started out with good intentions, taking a walk at lunchtime every day. But then I had a busy few days and it was easier to grab a bite to eat at my desk, and then I just fell in to the habit of doing that every day.”

For others, their story was about being available outside of working hours: “I started leaving my Microsoft Teams notifications on into the evening, and that’s how things have stayed.”

The CIPD has talked about the challenges of ‘presenteeism’ and ‘leaveism’ (using allocated time off to catch up on work) during the pandemic. In its latest Health and Wellbeing at Work report it said: “With the recent increase in homeworking, digital technology has the potential to enable an ‘always on’ culture. There’s a concern that the boundaries between work and home life can be increasingly blurred, making it more difficult for many people to switch off.”



20%

of people in England are likely to need mental health support as a direct result of the pandemic.

It's easy to see how such trends can have an impact on people's physical and mental wellbeing. The Centre for Mental Health expects that 20 per cent of people in England are likely to need mental health support as a direct result of the pandemic.

Of course there are many other factors contributing to that, such as fear about catching the virus, losing loved ones, or feeling isolated. But for those whose experience is more 'sleeping at work' (in other words, feeling like they're at 'the office' 24/7) than 'working at home', hybrid working is a big change to adapt to.

And what about those colleagues who have been unable to work from home, and can't experiment with a hybrid approach? Those people who have been working day and night to keep our families alive, educate our children, or keep the lights on? 'Fear', 'fatigue', 'frustration' – these are the words we keep hearing from these audiences.

Keeping employees well is clearly a significant challenge for 2022. As Christine Deputy, Chief People Officer at Pinterest, has said: "We have to think about the expectations of employees coming into this new world and how we can support their wellbeing, because everyone is still trying to heal from the trauma of 2020 and now 2021."

But there are positive signs of change. Research from our client Bupa found that

nearly 30 per cent of UK business leaders are making employee mental health a priority.

So if you haven't already set guidelines for the new world of hybrid working, now is the time to do it. What is the culture that you want to see and encourage in your organisation? What is to be encouraged, and what is unacceptable? How can HR, IC and IT work together to embed that culture and make it stick?

Not only is this the right thing to do, but there are business benefits as well.

A study by the Global Wellness Institute showed employees were more engaged and productive in organisations with wellbeing programmes. Those organisations were more profitable too.

And those are some pretty good habits to get into this year.

What's next?

Our top tips for how comms can win at wellbeing in 2022:

1.

Getting your line manager community on board is a necessity at the best of times, but we think it's going to be particularly crucial in 2022 (so no apologies for mentioning line managers a few times in this year's report). You might put together a fantastic set of wellbeing principles for your organisation, but if local managers are set in their old ways of encouraging 'presenteeism' and turning a blind eye to 'leaveism', it will fall apart more quickly than a cheap biscuit in a hot cup of tea.

2.

You don't need to spend millions on a comprehensive wellbeing programme. Many of our clients are creating online hubs using free or low-cost resources; or encouraging employees to include their working hours in their email signatures, together with a message like: "I'm sending this message now because it suits my working hours. I don't expect that you will read, respond to or action this message outside of your usual working hours".

3.

Consider setting up a network of wellbeing first aiders, who listen to colleagues' concerns, provide reassurance and know when to bring in the experts. Overall they can inspire an open culture of 'it's ok not to be ok', and set the tone for the whole organisation.





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PRACTISING WHAT WE PREACH:

95% of Sequel staff say they know how their job links to our business goals

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