2020

THE MODERN EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE REPORT

SEQUEL

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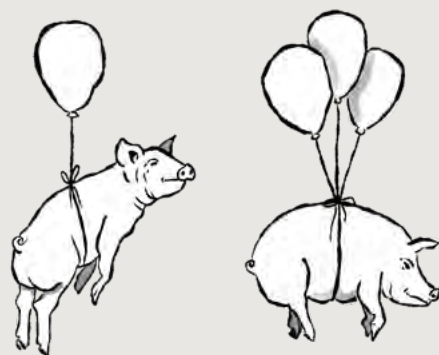
Inside

Three reasons why employee experience matters

89%

89% of employers think people leave for more money, but in reality only 12% do.
(Gallup)

40%

Companies with a strong employee experience see a 40% lower employee turnover than those that are poor in this area.
(Morgan)

22%

But only 22% of business leaders say their organisation is 'excellent' at establishing a differentiated employee experience.
(Deloitte)

Employee experience:
the human connection

All good communication starts with understanding your audience.

Sometimes it's tempting to quickly launch into a new project, platform or plan to demonstrate action, but the first step should always be understanding what your people really need.

In last year's report we considered the employee experience from the perspective of the workplace. This time we're all about the human point of view.

In short, how does a typical employee feel about their life at work today? Based on our research with a range of clients, we're quietly confident that right now many of your people are feeling frustrated. They might be tearing their hair out at the lack of essential digital tools to do their jobs, or the minimal support they get for the tools that have been introduced.

They're probably feeling isolated too, because they're working in different locations and – in the absence of quality line management – are being left to work things out for themselves. And your colleagues may well be dubious about your communication culture, as well as the level of perceived honesty within your messaging.

Employee experience is the meeting point of technology, environment and culture. Communications, HR and IT make the perfect team to work together to get it right, delivering significant impact and change in performance within the workplace.

So this year's report outlines seven common issues – themes that we've identified from our client work in the last 18 months. We hope it gives you practical insight that helps you to create a better employee experience in your own organisation.

Suzanne Peck //
Managing Director, Sequel Group
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Run your own focus group

At the end of each chapter, we pose a question about the topic we've discussed. Imagine you were running a focus group with 10 employees from across your business; if you asked them the same question, what do you think they'd tell you?

If you only read one section in this report…

We've pulled together our seven key take-outs to challenge your thinking and help you view the employee experience through your colleagues' eyes.

7 THINGS

1

In a report on the 'freedom of disconnecting', Google state that overloading people with social media, email and news apps creates "a constant sense of obligation, generating unintended personal stress". Even thinking about your phone could be causing you some harm.

As well as being bad for our health, when we're stressed it impairs our ability for decision making and rational thought. In an organisational context, this means lower productivity and reduced innovation.

5

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.

Or, as one IT manager put it to us: "They say young people are supposed to be good with IT. Clearly just not the ones that we employ."

2

A report for Salesforce found that a staggering 86% of employees did not clearly understand their companies' strategies. This resulted in nearly half of employee time being spent on work that wasn't helping the company achieve its goals.

If large numbers of your people are effectively walking in the wrong direction, you've got next to no chance of achieving your goals. As executive consultant Ken Perlman has said: "Clarity = speed".

3

When we're presented with unsettling situations, our first instinct as humans is one of self-preservation. Organisational development expert Edgar Schein calls this 'learning anxiety', saying that change could inspire fear, such as fear of temporary incompetence ("I'm never going to get my work done properly if I can't learn this new system").

To combat this, organisations must increase their people's sense of psychological safety, which will help them understand and support change.

4

Building trust is about treating people like adults. We work more effectively when we have information: we feel trusted and are able to make considered choices.

As successful investor Keith Rabois says: "If you want people to make the same decisions that you would make, but in a more scalable way, you have to give them the same information you have."

6

It can be surprising to learn that so many of us are 'deskless' workers. Several studies, from the likes of Emergence Capital, place the figure at about 80% of the workforce. Clearly, that's a significant audience that IC, HR and IT need to understand and support.

Many remote employees tell us that they feel isolated. Often that's down to two things: poor line manager communication; and poor communication channels.

7

Front-line employees usually have the clearest idea of what's working and what isn't. There's often an 'iceberg of ignorance' within organisations, where executives are aware of around 1 in 25 of the problems known by front-line colleagues.

As leadership coach Kirstin Lynde says: "If you don't cultivate the art of collecting sentiments that can be hard to hear, you'll pay a price. You'll miss out on good ideas, you'll slow your pace of leadership skill development, and good employees may leave."

Too much of a good thing

An influx of information and ever-connected technology is changing the way we consume content, communicate and collaborate. But with employees increasingly frustrated by a communication overload, are we having too much of a good thing?

Overwhelmed Oscar

Most likely to say:
"Stop sending me information about other parts of the business."

Comms coping method:
Deleting emails without reading them.

You no longer have to wait for your morning paper – the BBC News app is ready for a quick scroll whenever you wonder what's going on in the world.

Can't get the new Coldplay song out of your head? (A good or bad thing, we'll let you decide). No need to wait for it to come on the radio when you can stream it through the likes of Spotify or Apple Music.

Even catching up with friends can be immediate and constant thanks to instant messaging and video calls.

This 24-hour access to technology and information is also influencing how we work, particularly when it comes to communication and collaboration. There are more ways to connect with colleagues, no matter where in the business – or indeed the world – they are, and more places to create, store and share information.

But at what cost to the employee experience? Increasingly we're hearing that people just don't know where to start when it comes to communication.

"When I'm receiving so much information, how can I tell what is the priority?"

"With a plethora of channels and tools at my fingertips, how do I decide what to use?"

System overload

It's said that in 1900 the total amount of information available to us had doubled about every 500 years. By 1990 it had doubled about every two years. With this increase came definite business benefits.

For example, a fully informed workforce can be more innovative thanks to sharing best practice, and more focused thanks to a strong understanding of the wider business context.

But when the pace of change is accelerating – with some futurists predicting that this year information will double every 35 days – there's a real danger of information overload.

Indeed, we often hear from employees that they're already overwhelmed by the amount of communication they receive. They're a time-poor audience who are receiving too many messages, too often.

When we hear this feedback in focus groups, we'll ask people to put their hand up if they've ever deleted a corporate communications email without opening it – and nearly every time, every hand in the room is in the air.

So rather than keeping employees informed, sending too many messages can mean they're more likely to miss things because they don't have the capacity or
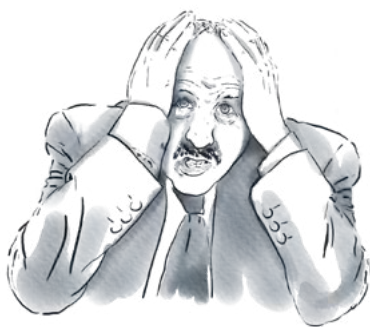
How can effective communication help?

Stop the email

Email can often seem like the quickest and easiest way to get a message to a large audience, but more often than not you're just adding to someone's already overburdened inbox. Next time you go to email, stop and think – the chances are there will be another, more effective way to get the message out.

Think data

Invest in data analysis that will help you segment your audience for more effective digital communications and technology that will let them subscribe to different areas that interest them.

Size matters

Whether it's a written piece of content, presentation or video, remember to keep it short and sweet. With reduced attention spans and limited time, people are bound to be unimpressed by a 900-word email or 25-minute video. Make your communications as easy and painless to digest as possible to keep your audience onside.

time to engage with them. Or they could decide it's too taxing to try, and switch off entirely.

On top of that, some researchers say the stress of not being able to process information as fast as it arrives can deplete and demoralise you. Edward Hallowell, a psychiatrist and expert on attention-deficit disorders, goes as far to say that trends like this in the modern workplace induce what he calls 'attention deficit trait', with characteristics similar to those of the genetically based disorder.
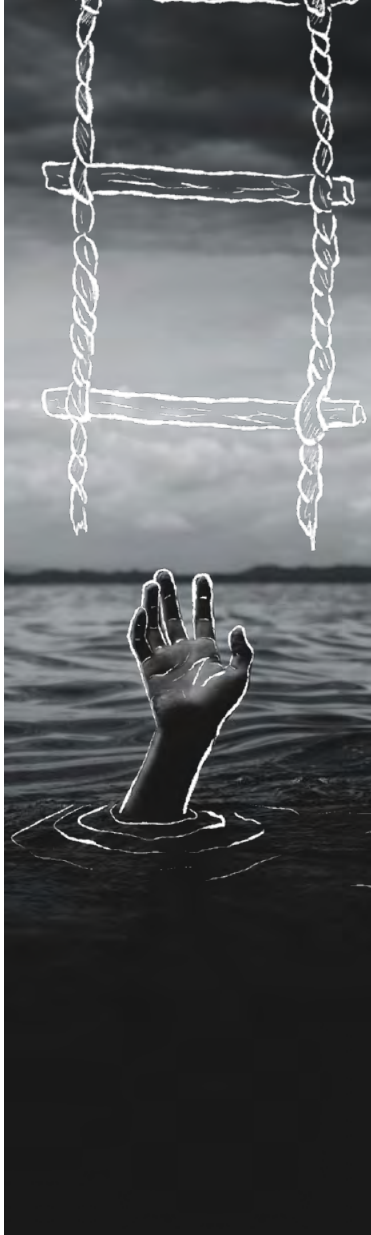
And there's the fact that when people are looking for information, there are many avenues to choose from, and a mountain of content to wade through to get to what they need.

Take intranets for example. Employees are often frustrated by poor search and navigation. While this is undoubtedly a technological issue (for instance, they're unlikely to have Google-level search capability), it's certainly not helped if the intranet is filled with outdated and replicated information – and too much of it to boot.

This is having a real business impact, particularly when it comes to productivity. Research from Teleware suggests that more than a third of employees have wasted significant portions of the day because of difficulties retrieving valuable information.

Nomophobes anonymous

It's not just the content we're finding overwhelming – the technology we're using to consume it is demanding more of our time and attention.

THREE QUOTES FROM OUR OWN RESEARCH WORK

"When I get back from a holiday I just delete all the emails that came in while I was away. I'll never get to them, so what's the point of keeping them?"

"Please tell me – what is the company trying to achieve with this overload of information?"

"Sending more emails doesn't mean sharing more necessary information."

According to RescueTime, an app created to monitor mobile device use, we're spending an average of three hours and 15 minutes on our phones every day. Ofcom reports the average person in the UK spends more than a day a week online, with 78% of the population now using smartphones, compared to 17% in 2008 after the first iPhone came out. It seems we're a society with a touch of 'nomophobia' – the fear of being without a mobile device.

It's creeping into our working lives too. The continued reliance on email, coupled with the rise of enterprise social networks and collaboration tools, has brought the good and the bad of an ever-connected life to our workplaces.

Thanks to these tools, we can now work flexibly from almost any device, at a time and in a place that suits you. For organisations there's more choice of how to reach different employee audiences, using a wider and more engaging variety of media – from online question and answer sessions with leaders to livestreaming the town hall for remote workers.

But it's a tricky balance. It can be easy for organisations to go too far with their digital communications, offering too many channels and filling them with too much content. More than being confusing and frustrating for employees, this can actually have an impact on their mental health and wellbeing.

In a report on the 'freedom of disconnecting', Google state that overloading people

Information overload costs the U.S.
economy $900 billion a year.

Harvard Business Review

with social media, email and news apps creates "a constant sense of obligation, generating unintended personal stress". Even thinking about your phone could be causing you some harm.

David Greenfield, expert in clinical psychiatry and founder of the Centre for Internet and Technology Addiction, says: "Your cortisol levels are elevated when your phone is in sight or nearby, or when you hear it or even think you hear it."

So with organisations increasingly relying on digital and mobile-enabled channels for communication, and pushing employees to engage with them, are we in fact stressing our people out?

As well as being bad for our health, when we're stressed it impairs our ability for decision making and rational thought. In an organisational context, this means lower productivity and reduced innovation.

Plus research shows that the ramifications are longer lasting than the initial jolt of cortisol an employee might get from a digital notification.

One research programme concluded that we get a 'stress hangover', affecting us even after the cause of the stress is gone.

To understand how this applies to the way we communicate, you just need to look at an example from a Microsoft study. They found that people take an average of 25 minutes to return to a work task after being interrupted by an email notification. Not good for the individual or the organisation.

Finding a balance

Too much information, too often and too many channels, too frequently used, are leaving employees confused, frustrated, ill-informed and stressed. It's important that organisations can strike a balance, using their digital communication powers for good and not abusing them by bombarding people with messages, just because they can.

A clear message from our own Sequel Insight work is that you can't please all of the people all of the time. So that's why it's important to let employees have a say in what information they're receiving, as well as how and when.

For example, using targeting and personalisation can streamline your communications offering. You might choose to do this by role, department or location, giving people the information that's the most relevant to them. By doing so, you'll reduce the burden on people's time (and indeed inboxes), making it more likely they'll engage with the communications they do receive.

You can also hand the reins over to employees. Channels like Yammer and Workplace allow people to pick and choose what

Only 28% of organisations personalise any element of messaging in their email communications.

Poppulo

topics and colleagues they want to engage with, and how they're notified (or not, as the case may be) of new content and activity.

After all, we're certainly not saying to give up your digital channels. Rather, think about the way you're using them, particularly the frequency and volume of messages you're sending out.

Make sure every message earns its place and every channel has a clear purpose to help employees navigate your communication landscape. It's an overall approach to communications, where less is certainly more.

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A question for your virtual focus group

If you asked the members of your panel whether they were getting a useful amount of communication, how many would respond positively?

Are you walking in the wrong direction?

An employee who understands where their organisation is headed, and how they can contribute, is able to make informed, appropriate and effective decisions. The problem is they may be heading towards a destination you haven't planned for.

Disconnected Diana

Most likely to say:
"I know what we're trying to do, but no-one's told me how we're going to do it."

Comms coping method:
Making it up herself.

$1 million is wasted every 20 seconds because of poor organisational performance.

Project Management Institute research

The case for 'line of sight' – understanding why you do what you do, and how you fit in to the big picture – is well established.

For a start, 'clarity of purpose' is the first tenet of our own Four Pillars™ of IC (sitting alongside 'effective interfaces', 'effective information sharing' and 'consistent leadership behaviour'). In other words, our research has found that creating a clear line of sight for employees provides a solid foundation for high-performing organisations.

Other studies have found similar results. For instance, a Chief Executive Group study concluded that motivating employees to help achieve your strategic vision increases profitability by up to 27% over a six-to-12-month period.

So it should be of concern to everyone that so many people have a foggy line of sight. A report for Salesforce found that a staggering 86% of employees did not clearly understand their companies' strategies.

This resulted in nearly half of employee time being spent on work that wasn't helping the company achieve its goals.

In our own work, we often speak to people who think they understand their company's strategy, but after further discussion we find that they actually have a fundamental misunderstanding of what their employer is trying to achieve.

THREE QUOTES FROM OUR OWN RESEARCH WORK

"I want to feel the vision. Tell us how we can make it part of our journey. I want to be included and know the direction ahead of time, not after it's done."

"I don't even know what the other departments in the business are."

"What is our strategy?"

And if large numbers of your people are effectively walking in the wrong direction, you've got next to no chance of achieving your goals. As executive consultant Ken Perlman has said: "Clarity = speed".

Feed on frustration

But the good news is that many people do want to know more. A Zeno Group survey found that 57% of respondents said they would perform better at their jobs if they better understood the company's direction. This reflects the frustration we hear from people in focus groups.

A typical comment is: "We heard about a new growth target, but it wasn't clear how we're going to get there, and what we need to do."

How can effective communication help?

Support line managers

A Watson Wyatt study found that only 40% of managers have a clear understanding of their organisation's strategy. If managers don't have clarity, they can't translate it for their teams.

Think visually

The best way to make sure employees emotionally connect to – and remember – your message is to make it visual. There's a simple reason: our brains find it easier to comprehend than text. So translate your business narrative into a 'big picture' graphic that tells the story of your journey – and helps people to see the role they can play.

Keep listening

Don't wait two years to discover that most of your people don't understand your strategy. Little and often is the key – use a mix of research methods to assess awareness, understanding and action. If you spot a downward trend, you can do something about it in good time.

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. In fact, Deloitte figures show that 87% of Millennials believe success should be measured by more than just financial purpose.

So as the competition for top talent increases, how can you demonstrate to every employee that they have a crucial role to play in helping your organisation achieve profit – but with purpose?

"When people see the connection between individual roles and the goals of the organisation, they get a lot of energy out of work. They feel the importance, dignity and meaning in their job."

Ken Blanchard and Scott Blanchard, co-authors of *The One Minute Manager*

A question for your virtual focus group

If you asked the members of your panel whether they understand where your organisation is going and how they can be part of that journey, how many would respond positively?

Chapter
3

Theirs not to reason why...

Change. A word that can strike fear into the hearts of employees everywhere. But are organisations so worried about the 'what', 'when' and 'how' that they're forgetting about the 'why'?

Changing Clara

Most likely to say:
"What does this mean for me?"

Comms coping method:
Updating her CV.

"People don't resist change, they resist being changed."

Peter Senge, Systems scientist and organisational development expert

"May I eat your sandwich?"
"Sleep on your sofa for a week?"
"Go before you in the queue?"
Whether someone is asking to share your food, invade your personal space or push in front of you, it's unlikely that you'll give them an immediate positive response. According to Ellen Langer, Professor of Psychology at Harvard University, this is because there's a key ingredient missing: 'because'.

Professor Langer ran an experiment in which researchers asked a queue of people waiting to use a photocopier if they could go first. The researchers found that when they used the word 'because', people let them do it – even if the reason that followed was as feeble as "I need to make copies".

Langer hypothesised that this is an example of the automatic responses that unconsciously guide human behaviour. In other words, our brains respond to reason.

With our minds in mind, it's no wonder that employees say they need more 'why' – particularly when it comes to change. In fact, when we've asked employee focus groups about change communications in their organisations, the biggest gripe is often that they haven't been told why change is happening and the reasons behind decisions.

### THREE QUOTES FROM OUR OWN RESEARCH WORK

"We're not stupid. We understand that decisions have to be made, and you're never going to keep several thousand people happy. But if we understand why, then we can reason."

"I want to understand the rationale behind some of the decisions. We're treated like robots."

"It's difficult to tell whether the messages have an impact on you or your job."
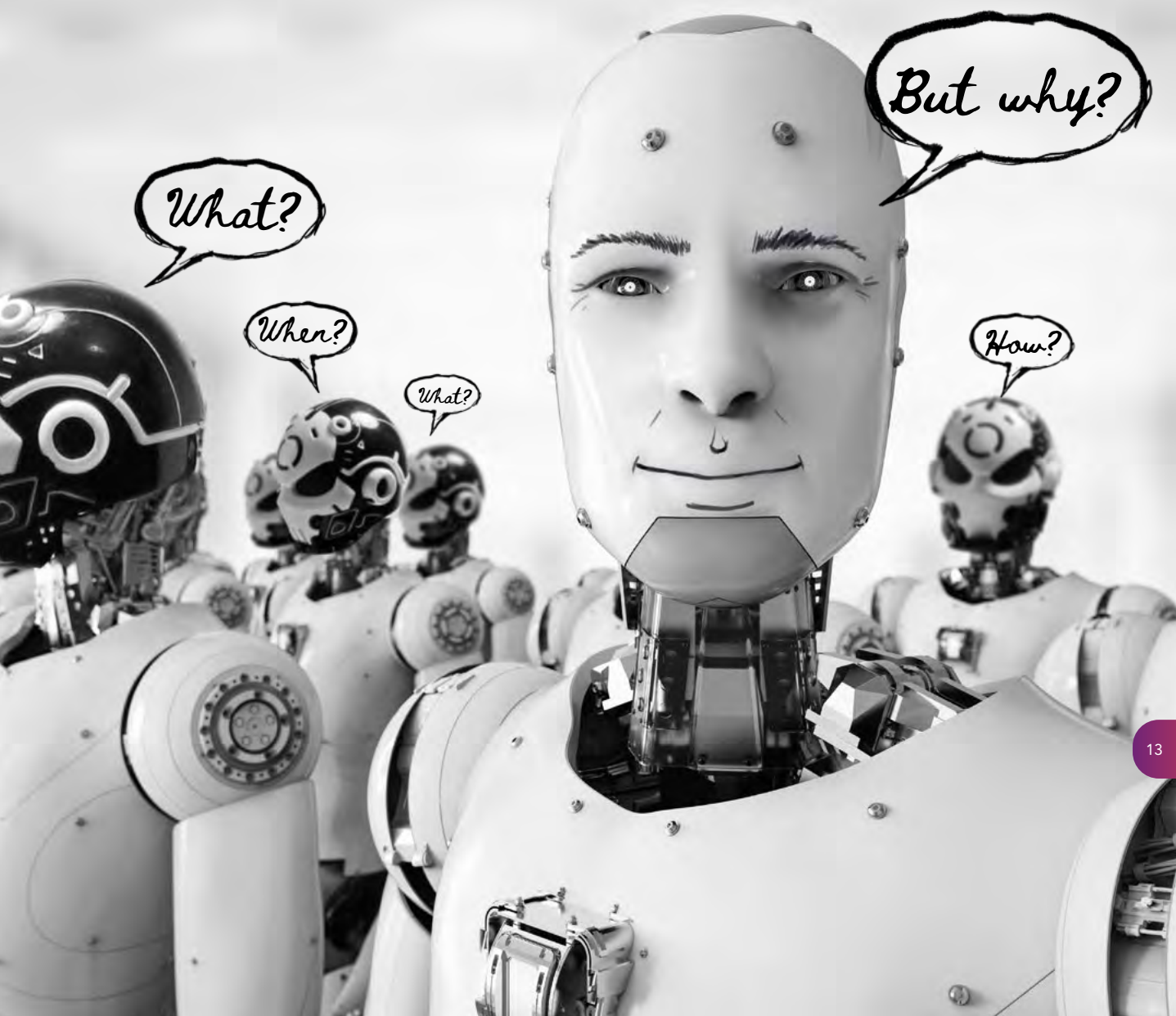
How **can** effective communication help?

Explain the 'why'

Include the reasons for change, even if you feel people are going to be concerned or unhappy about them. By explaining the decision-making process, you'll help people to understand why the organisation has made this choice – and hopefully bring them onside in the process.

Remember what social science taught you

Be aware that not everyone in your audience is coming at your change from the same place. Make sure your communications consider different frames of reference and put yourself in their shoes: ask "what's important to me in this scenario?"

Build a network

Assemble a network of leader and peer change advocates to help you translate messages locally. As well as advising on what issues will be important to their local group, they can also provide feedback to shape your future communications in that area.

To paraphrase one frustrated employee, people aren't stupid; they understand that change is a vital part of modern business. But if they can't understand the reasons behind change, how can they get onboard with it?

Selfish psychology

As Langer showed, explaining the 'why' can aid compliance. This is particularly important with organisational change, which often produces unsettling scenarios that inspire resistance in some form.

And when we're presented with unsettling situations, our first instinct as humans is one of self-preservation. Whether you're being asked to learn a new system or told about a restructure in your division, your first question will be instinctively and understandably selfish: "what does this mean for me?"

Organisational development expert Edgar Schein calls this 'learning anxiety', saying that change could inspire fear, such as fear of temporary incompetence ("I'm never going to get my work done properly if I can't learn this new system") and fear of loss of power or position ("Will the restructure mean I'm out of a job?").

To combat this, organisations must increase their people's sense of psychological safety, which will help them understand and support change.

Still with us? Good, because we're about to throw another spanner in the works. Your sense of psychological safety could be quite different to your peers', just as what concerns them about change could be different to what concerns you.

To borrow from the social sciences again, this is because we analyse and respond to the world around us through individual 'frames', which are shaped by our experiences and values.

So, if organisations are to communicate change successfully, they need to think about how their messages can mesh with their audience's frames (or 'frame resonance', if you're interested in the official term).

Which brings us back to the classic employee experience mantra: audience first. Organisational change needs to be planned with employees – and their self-preserving questions – at its heart.

Under the influence

Identifying and understanding the various frames of reference within your organisation can seem a mammoth and impossible task. You can't do it alone. Indeed, we suggest borrowing from the likes of Zoella and James Charles. And if you have no idea who we're talking about, let's save you the Google time – we're talking about influencers.

Just as companies use influencers as an extension of their brands, one that shows them as attainable and relevant, organisations can use them internally to translate and promote messages to their colleagues.

For maximum impact, this should be a mix of peers and leaders – think the 'every man' Joe Wicks to the inspirational Michelle Obama.

Of course, we're not suggesting you'll send your change programme 'viral', but the benefits are similar. By enlisting the support of people on the ground, you'll help to make change real for your colleagues by explaining the rationale behind decisions in a way they understand, highlighting the aspects that are relevant and important to them.

It also supports what we've seen in our own research – that people like hearing important messages face to face for those very reasons.

So, while recognising the need to share the 'whys' behind change is important, it's also only half the battle. For change to stick, organisations also need to make sure these central reasons are communicated as meaningful and relevant statements that connect with their different employee audiences.

Or we could keep it simple like Langer and say: you should really give employees the reasons for change, because we said so.

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A question for your virtual focus group

If you asked the members of your panel whether they understand the reasons for change, how many would respond positively?

Knowledge is power

*We have some bad news about bad news.
But at least we're talking about it...*
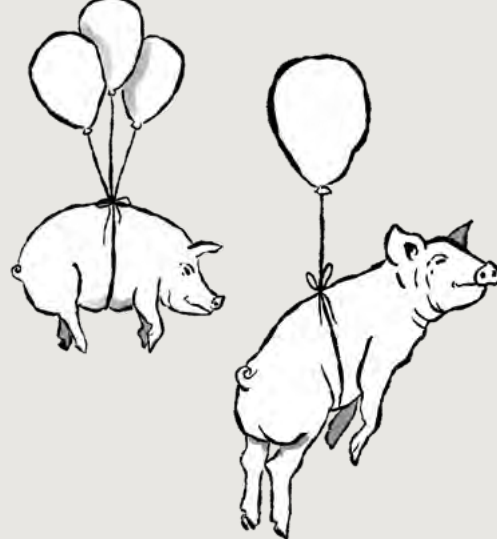
Dubious David

Most likely to say:
"Fake news!"

Comms coping method:
Starting his own rumours to feel in control.

THREE QUOTES FROM OUR OWN RESEARCH WORK

"They think people don't talk to each other. We know what's going on and what's not being communicated."

"I'm not sure I'd know the truth if they said it now."

"I don't believe the stats I see on customer satisfaction. It's just not the reality we see on the ground."

It started on 21 January 2017. Newly installed US President Donald Trump was making a speech at CIA headquarters:

- "There were 1.5 million people at my inauguration", he said. There weren't.
- "God looked down at my inauguration and said 'we're not going to let it rain during your speech'". But it did.
- "I have the all-time record for the number of appearances on the cover of *Time* magazine," he said. He doesn't.

As I write this, the *Washington Post* Fact Checker states that Trump has made 13,435 false or misleading claims (ahem) while in office. On average that's about 14 every day.

And of course the US isn't alone in trying to move through this challenging landscape of 'alternative facts': there are many similar examples of UK and other politicians making easily disprovable claims.

So is it any surprise that in this environment – fuelled by unregulated social media – that the levels of employee trust in central internal communication have fallen dramatically?

In the surveys we carry out for client organisations, we've seen scores around trust drop by 30% in the last two years.

Mind the gap

In focus groups, employees typically have three major complaints. Firstly, that bad news is ignored: it's brushed under the carpet in that very British way. "If we don't mention it, it might just go away." This communication gap creates the space for rumours to take hold.

"If there is a void of information, employees will fill it… and they will always fill it with negative information," says Jim Dougherty, a Senior Lecturer at MIT Sloan School of Management.

We agree. Here's one example from our own experience: a senior leader left a client organisation with little communication to employees. Even though it was a mutually beneficial departure with no hint of anything untoward, the rumour mill kicked into gear, creating all sorts of negative explanations.

Ignoring bad news just doesn't work. A study by software company Geckoboard found that 90% of people would rather hear bad news than no news at all. In fact, one in four had either quit a job, or knew someone who had, because a boss had insisted on keeping company information under wraps.

Skip the spin class

The second common complaint we hear is that if bad news is shared, it's spun to make it look like it's actually good news.

We heard one example recently about a client organisation that was introducing a new approach to project management. All very exciting on the surface.

> "What you are seeing and what you are reading is not what is happening."
>

But employees told us that, while this claim was technically true, the wider context was that the company was returning to the way it used to do things, because a new approach had been "a total disaster".

Corporate attempts to position the move as an exciting, positive, new change fell flat, because the people on the shop floor didn't recognise that version of events; it didn't tally with their own experiences.

And the third common issue is that people often don't understand *why* decisions have been made. Studies have shown that people are more willing to accept an unfavourable outcome if they believe the decision-making process was sound.

As someone told us in a recent focus group: "I want to understand the rationale behind some of the decisions – tell us 'this is happening because of X'. We're treated like robots."

The adult in the room

On paper, the approach to tackling these three issues seems rooted in practical, common-sense communication: tackle bad news in a direct, open way; and explain the rationale for decisions.

But of course that's easier said than done. Very few people – if any at all – enjoy sharing or dealing with bad news. CEO transition coach Michael Watkins calls the instinct to deny or ignore a problem "the CEO Syndrome". In this scenario, companies only face issues when they're too big to ignore. When they become a crisis, in other words.

You might have heard the story of the American CEO who had such an unrealistic view of business operations that the Board

at his company had no idea how much trouble the company was in until he retired.

Ultimately, it's about treating people like adults. A candid corporate culture has been "wildly successful" in some Silicon Valley companies, according to Paul Joyce, CEO of Geckoboard.

He says: "It can be an asset in recruiting top candidates, because if you treat people like grownups and trust them with information, word gets around."

What's more, people work more effectively when they have information: they feel trusted and they're able to make considered choices. As successful investor Keith Rabois says: "If you want people to make the same decisions that you would make, but in a more scalable way, you have to give them the same information you have."

So work with your colleagues to create a culture of trust. Remember, especially, that your front-line employees are likely to have a clearer picture of your business than you do, or your CEO does. They understand what's working and what isn't.

HBO CEO Richard Plepler has a very apt phrase for this situation: "The building knows the truth."

A question for your virtual focus group

If you asked the members of your panel whether they feel central communication is trustworthy, how many would respond positively?

How can effective communication help?

give as much as you can

This will demonstrate that the company trusts its employees. "If you can't tell people the hard stuff, they won't trust you," says David DeSteno, author of *The Truth About Trust*. And when people feel trusted, they're more likely to trust you back.

Look at processes

Are you creating a communication gap for the rumour mill to grow into? It may be something as simple as taking a while to approve blogs: contributors can get suspicious if it takes too long, because they think that their content is being sanitised (true story). Mike Volpe from software company Hubspot achieved great results by giving his Marketing team the trust to get things out quickly. "We found that employees do a better job when you give them that authority and responsibility," he says.

Be open

Avoid jargon – don't try to find an euphemism for redundancies like 'right sizing', 'rebalancing the level of human capital', or 'special forces philosophy'. (And yes, these are all genuine examples).

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Switch on, drop out

Despite huge corporate investment in digital transformation projects in 2019, many people are telling us that they still have better online tools in their home than they do in their workplace. What's going wrong?

No guidance, no support...

Frustrated Fiona

Most likely to say:
"Just make it work!"

Comms coping method:
Using unofficial tools to get things done.

"Hey guys. We've just launched Yammer. It's a lot like Facebook, so you'll work it out. Have fun!"

And with one short email from the CEO, Company X launched a new digital tool to its thousands of employees.

When we started working with this organisation several months later, some of its people told us that they still had no idea what Yammer was for. A few had taken the time to have a quick peek, but within a few moments had decided that it wasn't for them. That one and only opportunity to make a good first impression had been and gone.

Sadly, this is a common issue. 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.

There's an opportunity here, though, to make a real and significant impact. Digital transformation risk is the top concern of senior leaders, according to research conducted by North Carolina State University's Enterprise Risk Management (ERM) Initiative and

management consultants Protiviti Inc. Accordingly, companies are spending huge amounts on digital transformation projects: the International Data Corporation estimated that the figure would top £1.5 trillion in 2019.

But there's a huge problem. According to *Harvard Business Review*, 70p in every pound spent on digital transformation is wasted.

Plan to succeed
Of course there are many moving parts to these kinds of projects, but in our experience the core issue is poor planning, particularly around the communication – and understanding the audience(s) in particular. The launch email at the top of this chapter being Exhibit A.

In an *Industry Week* report, 71% of people cited the workforce as either very or extremely important in supporting their digital transformation strategy. For us, that's way too low. That's because digital transformation is not really about technology. A digital strategy just cannot work without the

70p in every pound spent on digital transformation is wasted.

Harvard Business Review

Go on, use WhatsApp. They'll never know, or care...

support of the people who will be using the tools.

For instance, you must be sure that the tools you're offering are actually providing the functionality that people want and need. And the only way to do that is to ask them. You might well find that they've already found workarounds to fill the gaps in your current channel mix. These tools are known as 'shadow-ware'.

One common example: in the last couple of years, we've found that employees in nearly every one

of our client organisations are using WhatsApp for work to some level.

Sometimes the users even include members of the IC, IT or HR teams, who should certainly know better. A typical conversation goes like this:

Sequel: "Do you and your team use WhatsApp for work messages?"
HR Manager: "WhatsApp isn't allowed here."
Sequel: "But do you use WhatsApp for work messages?"
HR Manager: "Of course."

In research carried out by ESN platform company Speakap, 16% of people said their HR or IC departments did not know that shadow-ware was being used frequently.

Carrying out research at the start of your project will help you to either understand what's out there already, so you can replace that functionality with an official tool (for instance Microsoft Teams is an obvious replacement for WhatsApp), or find a new solution that meets the requirements of your business.

And when you understand your colleagues' priorities, you can build on that knowledge to develop your wider communication plan to raise awareness, build engagement, and inspire action.

Just don't use WhatsApp to launch the roll out.

THREE QUOTES FROM OUR OWN RESEARCH WORK

"The company has tried different social channels in the past, all of which have succeeded only in being spectacularly less successful than the previous version."

"There are no guidelines on how to post what, where; and when to use which tool. I'm so confused."

"In our end-of-year review there was a song about how bad the intranet is."

How can effective communication help?

Plan your roll out comms

You can't just switch on a new tool and expect people to know a) what it is, b) when to use it, c) how to use it or d) how to get the most from it. Awareness doesn't guarantee engagement: as well as the 'what' explain the 'why' and the 'how'.

Be a connector

Digital transformation projects can be tough to get right, but they're almost certain to fail if people don't talk to each other. So bring your colleagues together and get everyone talking the same language. IC, IT and HR need to work together to make your project a success.

Go viral

Creating an ambassadorial community is an effective way of embedding new tools. Use this group to inspire others, demonstrate best practice and source case studies.

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A question for your virtual focus group

If you asked the members of your panel whether they have the digital tools to help them do their jobs, how many would respond positively?

Connected, but alone

*Whether it's down to a poor induction process,
an absent line manager, or a lack of quality
communication and tools, it's easy for employees
to feel disconnected at work. IC, HR and IT need
to work together to avoid an identity of isolation.*

Last year we worked with a company whose factory employees provided a couple of quotes that have stayed with us ever since. Here's one that stuck in our minds:

"We have a really strong safety culture. You can always spot the people who work here because when we walk down the stairs in the local Marks & Spencer on a Saturday we're the only people holding the handrail!"

And more pertinently for this section, one remote worker told us during a telephone interview:

"What do I think of the intranet experience? Let me just log on and check that now… I'm trying to log on but it's crashed… let me try again… oh it's crashed again… one more time… ok, I'm in now."

There are a few layers to unpick here. Firstly, it can be surprising to learn that so many of us are 'deskless' workers. Several studies, from the likes of Emergence Capital, place the figure at about 80% of the workforce. Clearly, that's a significant audience that IC, HR and IT need to understand and support.

Many remote employees tell us that they feel isolated. Often

Isolated Ian

Most likely to say:
"I'm just left to get on with it."

Comms coping method:
Ducking out entirely.

that's down to two things: poor line manager communication; and – as the earlier quote shows – poor communication channels.

The development of mobile technology in the last decade has created powerful new options for reaching people wherever they are, but a) an organisation has to provide them and then b) make sure that they actually work.

It's all very well having a well-planned intranet with fascinating content, but no good if you can't get to it when you're not in an office.

But there's a further question that we think organisations need to ask when they're considering the needs of their deskless colleagues – what do those colleagues actually want?

For some audiences, platforms like Yammer are an ideal option. For instance, we've seen several examples of Sales teams using that tool to keep in touch, share ideas, and celebrate (ok, boast) about their successes. In those scenarios, Yammer was carefully selected and then launched to develop

THREE QUOTES FROM OUR OWN RESEARCH WORK

"Our comms are user friendly to an extent, but for the guys on a tablet in their vans, it's not easy. It's all well and good for us on a computer in an office."

"When you ask your manager a question, often they don't know the answer because they haven't been given that information themselves."

"I'm new to the company and I'm struggling to get up to speed. I don't know where to find the information I need to do my job – communication wasn't even mentioned in my induction."

63% of HR professionals have experienced new recruits quitting before they've even started. Cezanne HR

How can effective communication help?

Start from day one

Think about your preboarding and onboarding process – what do new recruits really need to know about the way your organisation works? The HR policies? The communication channels? The digital tools? Do some research to assess how your people feel about the recruitment and induction process.

Support line managers

As well as the ideas we've already mentioned, think about how you can provide the tools, templates and materials that will support managers in their conversations with their teams. Just because someone is a great engineer, it doesn't mean they're automatically a great communicator. An investment in their development can ripple out to create a big impact on your business.

Listen

Ask your remote colleagues how they like to receive and send content. Through their PDAs, or work tablet? A personal device? A printed channel mailed to their home? More face-to-face sessions? A podcast? Tailor your approach to your audience to make sure it meets their unique needs.

a stronger community, and it's helped those teams to work more effectively.

But, as we said in the previous chapter, you can't just switch on a new digital tool and expect it to work like magic. Planning – and listening – are the crucial first steps in making any channel a success.

And creating a 100% digital comms mix for deskless colleagues is a risk. We've heard increasing calls for printed channels and other more traditional tools to complement the undoubted power of online platforms.

Take a factory environment where phones are banned, for instance: even the most engaged employee, having worked a full shift on a production line, is going to think twice about logging on to Workplace when they get home. Or even on the bus on the way there. But they might flick through a printed magazine during their break; or scan a poster that catches their eye on the way to the café.

A wider issue for employees in all locations is that often they're left to work things out for themselves. This can start from the day they accept a job offer. The importance of 'preboarding' is often underestimated, given that one in four people change their minds before their official start date (source: webonboarding). Get this wrong and you lose the best and brightest before they can improve your business – plus the candidates may well share their bad experiences on review sites like Glassdoor.

And the 'onboarding' process often fares little better. As we heard from one focus group participant recently: "My induction was pretty much non-existent. It

Managers account for up to 70% of the way we feel about our jobs.

Gallup

took a few weeks for me to get the things I needed to do my job. And after a while I realised that we have Teams, Workplace and Yammer here, but nobody had told me that, or explained what they're for. I had to ask around and work things out for myself."

We even heard of one induction at a retail company that lasted about three seconds – it was essentially: "Here's the till – away you go."

In fact, a webonboarding study found that a third of new starters have had a poor onboarding experience, while for 22% it has been so bad that they've changed their mind about a role.

Managerial minefield
Of course, the challenges don't stop there. Line managers play a huge role in the way that people feel at work – and even at home. As the cliché goes: "You join a company for the role, but leave because of the manager."

So when they go missing, or fail to communicate with their teams, is it any wonder that people – especially those working remotely or in the field – feel isolated? Maybe you're having that experience with your own manager right now.

But looking at it from the other side of the fence, they need help and guidance too. An Interact survey found that 69% of managers are often

uncomfortable communicating with their employees. Thankfully you and they have a few options to consider.

Group training or one-to-one coaching can be very effective, but creating an online area for sharing tips, experiences and ideas can also have a big impact. We've found that managers value this type of approach because they can learn 'in secret'. Let's be honest – very few are going to tell their manager that they don't know how to run a meeting, or deliver a presentation.

It's not all bad news, though. Whichever discipline you're working in, there are plenty of online and in-person communities to join in order to develop your own network and skills, whether that's through an organisation like the IABC, a website such as LinkedIn, or our own Sequel Presents events.

But telling your own manager that their communication skills leave a bit to be desired? You're definitely on your own there.

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QUESTION FOR THE READER

If you asked the members of your panel whether they have the support they need to do their jobs, how many would respond positively?

Look – and listen – before you leap

The chances are that your front-line employees know your business better than you do. So are you making the most of this valuable resource?

A couple of years ago, a high-tech new juicer arrived on the market. Called the Juicero Press, the unit was sold with packets of pre-juiced fruits and vegetables. A bit like a Nespresso for your five a day.

There was one problem, though. And it was a big one.

Early adopter consumers realised pretty quickly that the packets could be squeezed by hand – they didn't actually need the juicer at all. In fact, it sometimes took longer to create a smoothie using the £300 unit.

Overall, it was a classic example of overlooking the insight of your audience – what they need and what's important to them.

This lack of listening happens within organisations too. Often, they'll give employees what they think they want, rather than what they actually need.

We saw one example where a new intranet was created based on the opinion of one person. Unsurprisingly, it didn't connect with colleagues because it didn't offer the information, presentation style and tools that people actually wanted. Even a short period of research at the start of the project would have made a difference.

That's because front-line employees usually have the clearest idea of what's working and what isn't. There's often an 'iceberg of ignorance' within organisations, where executives are aware of

Silent Simon

Most likely to say:
"I thought my experience would count for something."

Comms coping method:
Keeping his ideas to himself.

THREE QUOTES FROM OUR OWN RESEARCH WORK

"It feels like there are barriers in place because you're cautious about what you're allowed to tell people. That creates distrust."

"I emailed a few managers about a really interesting conference I'd been to. I thought there were some good ideas we could learn from. I was told to 'get back in my box'."

"The people making the decisions are not talking to the people doing the job – that's why so much doesn't work here."

> "It's better to be punched in the face on Yammer than stabbed in the back on GlassDoor."

Executive consultant Laurie Hibbs

How can effective communication help?

Show the love

A culture of two-way communication doesn't just happen by default. You have to give people the tools and permission to share their views; and make sure that you communicate actions – even if the message is "it was a good idea in principle, but we can't do it now because of x, y and z." You won't be able to implement every good idea.

Think ahead

With great power comes great responsibility. When you have actions to implement, give them an owner. This demonstrates that you're taking the change seriously, and it motivates the owner to deliver.

Help line managers

Many organisations are focused on helping their managerial community to cascade information from the top down. But don't forget that active listening is a skill too; give your managers the support and encouragement to get feedback from their teams. This will help to shrink the iceberg of ignorance and help you to identify and fix common problems.

90% of employees believe decision makers should seek other opinions before making a final decision.

Fierce Inc study

around 1 in 25 of the problems known by front-line colleagues.

So it's easy to see why employees get frustrated when they feel that they're unable to share their extensive knowledge to help tackle common issues.

A Leadership IQ survey found that only 24% of respondents thought their leader always encourages suggestions for improvements, and 25% said suggestions or valid complaints never lead to important changes.

As leadership coach Kirstin Lynde says: "If you don't cultivate the art of collecting sentiments that can be hard to hear, you'll pay a price. You'll miss out on good ideas, you'll slow your pace of leadership skill development, and good employees may leave."

Applying stronger listening skills can make a huge difference. We worked with an organisation last year to review its digital workplace. The project team, made up of IC, HR and IT people, was keen to introduce some

cool new features. But when we started speaking to employees, the message came back loud and clear: "We don't care about bells and whistles – just make the intranet work!"

People were so frustrated with a flaky platform that took ages to load and regularly crashed, that if time and money had been invested in cool new features – without getting the basics right – there would have been an uproar. Accordingly, the project team changed course.

Listen and learn

But it's not enough to just listen; you have to take action too. We've been in focus groups where the first feedback from employees is "what's going to happen with this information?" They'd been burned on too many occasions before, giving up their time to share their feedback, which then disappeared into a black hole.

Another Leadership IQ survey found that 6 out of 10 companies are not taking meaningful action

on the data from their employee surveys. So why take the time to do a survey in the first place?

Iain Thomson from Sodexo argues that becoming the 'employer of choice' will be the biggest boardroom conundrum over the next decade. "It all starts with listening," he says. "Lifting up the bonnet and finding out exactly what's going on."

Take a moment to listen to your organisation. What do you hear?

A question for your virtual focus group

If you asked the members of your panel whether they feel that their opinions are listened to and acted upon, how many would respond positively?

Will you still love me tomorrow?

So far in this report we've talked about addressing current and short-term concerns... what about the longer-term picture? Here are seven ways in which the employee experience could change in the next few years.

① *"32% of jobs are likely to change significantly due to automation. Creativity, imagination and emotional intelligence will become more important."*

② *"Roles could be more project based than hierarchical. 75% of Generation Z employees say they would be interested in having several roles in one company."*

③ *"Already more than two-thirds of people around the world work away from a central office at least once a week: workspace could become meeting space."*

④ *"As the digital environment grows, the greater the danger it will create 'learned helplessness', where people struggle to use digital tools to address workplace needs."*

⑤ *"Depression is now the number-one cause of global ill health. As work patterns change, and digital tools increase, organisations will need to think more keenly about employee wellbeing."*

⑥ *"More people will work for longer, increasing the diversity of the employee audiences. We could soon see six generations represented in the workplace."*

⑦ *"Digital security will become ever more important: one study found that a typical employee has access to 17 million files at work."*

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Sources: OECD; David and Jonah Stillman; IWG; Deloitte; Varonis; Forbes; WHO

Illustrations by Anastasia Sichkarenko, Sequel Group

What else can we help you with?

We are Sequel Group, the employee experience agency that's connecting and inspiring people to deliver brilliant business performance.

We simplify communications, helping you to engage and empower your audiences wherever they are.

We do that by blending brilliant content, insight and technology that changes behaviour and delivers meaningful results.

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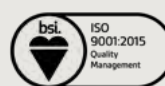
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