Internal Communications

Final Report & Recommendations

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Executive Summary

An organization’s ability to effectively communicate important information to internal audiences is critical to its success. When employees feel that they are valued, trusted and engaged, and when they have clear and transparent lines of communication with their management and leadership, they are likely to be more productive, happier and vested in the organization’s success.

At a large, decentralized organization like UW-Madison, it is our belief that the importance of these activities cannot be overstated.

A successful internal communications program can:

• Create and strengthen a sense of community and connection to the institution
• Improve morale, feelings of worth, being heard/validated by management
• Empower faculty, staff and graduate employees to become brand advocates. An employee can become an ambassador and defender of the UW-Madison brand as he or she works in the community, state and wider higher-education world
• Advance strategic priorities and key messages of the institution
• Improve the quality of work and service that the university supports
• Promote a sense of equity among the university’s workforce across all classes and shifts

Beyond those factors, a strong internal communications program is closely aligned with the chancellor’s Strategic Framework goal of recruiting and retaining talented faculty and staff and the university’s human resources philosophy and principles.

As part of this effort, several key philosophies should be observed:

• The institution’s leadership commitment to providing clear and honest communication, both in content and distribution, is vital. Messages to the workforce should always be transparent, timely, accurate and honest.
• Timeliness is essential. The community should learn about important news first from its leadership, not from the media or other external sources.
• The university’s internal communications strategies should be multi-modal, ensuring that consistent messages are transmitted across many channels, and in ways that range from face-to-face to social media.
• Information shared should not simply account for “what should employees need to know?” but “what would employees want to know?” Audience-focused communications providing utility and value across a wide variety of topics heightens the acceptance of core messages.

The Internal Communications Team has found that UW-Madison’s current internal communications follow many of these principles, however gaps exist and improvement is needed. The university’s main vehicle for faculty and staff, the Inside UW-Madison employee e-newsletter, is widely recognized and read on campus, but does not provide the necessary range of content and delivery options identified
during this project. The team has developed recommendations to help UW-Madison become a model among higher education institutions for internal communications practices. They include:

- Campus leadership should establish, and communicate with campus, the base level of commitment to robust internal communication
- Creating an employee intranet with an authentication portal and customization capability to tailor communications to each employee’s preferences
- Using messaging tools that aggregate a number of news items whenever possible
- Improving access to email distribution lists for campuswide announcements
- Creating a new Internal Communications Coordinator role within University Communications
- Developing resources and training materials that inform campus communicators how to best publish news items of campus interest to the appropriate communication channels
- Identifying best practices regarding the utilization of available technologies such as phone message texting and social media

Lastly, the team discussed and agreed on one additional, but key concept: Maintaining strong internal communications is actually a shared responsibility between employers and employees. One cannot succeed without the other.

Again, part of this process falls to “content owners,” such as campus units and governance groups, to initiate and disseminate a high level of communication.

For them to succeed, employees need to be given both access to information and the time and resources to view it. Then, critically, employees should be expected to consume the information that is provided.

If information is shared across a variety of channels, content providers and recipients are trained on how to send and receive it, and finally, expectations are set and maintained that employees will consume information, a positive workplace culture of information sharing is created.
Background

Communicating effectively with our students, faculty and staff can be a challenging proposition at UW-Madison. Information related to work life on campus – including announcements, status updates, policies, procedures and new initiatives – isn’t always heard or understood by the intended audience. In addition, employees are sometimes frustrated by not knowing where to find information. Many times, important announcements related to changes in procedures and policies are missed entirely.

The decentralized nature of the schools and colleges contributes to the complexities of the issue, as does the diversity of audiences and communication tools available to those audiences. Access to and cost to use certain communication vehicles are also contributing factors.

Although a variety of communication vehicles are employed across campus, there is no single communications method that serves all audiences. For example:

- Mass emails to faculty and staff are costly, as much as several hundred dollars per message, and they are often overlooked simply because of the volume of email a typical employee receives in a day.
- Mass emails can become an irritant or are ignored if they are sent too frequently, or if the receiver is not the intended recipient.
- Campus news to faculty/staff delivered via Inside UW-Madison or posted on the home page of wisc.edu is generally focused on non-administrative news.
- Websites are dependent on employees seeking out the information rather than being recipients of a “pushed” message.
- Not all employees have access to computers and email.
- Employees work different shifts across campus.

The goal of this project is to present to the Executive Sponsors a proposed set of improvements that will create dependable avenues for university faculty and staff to post, receive and retrieve work-related information.
Project methodology

The team used the first four steps of the Lean Six Sigma DMAIC methodology (define, measure, analyze, improve) to guide its work and activities throughout the lifecycle of the project. The traditional fifth step known as “control” was not applied since the final project deliverables did not include the implementation of recommendations, making it impossible to apply the customary tools of the “control” phase.

Visual Representation of the Project Methodology:

![Diagram](image)

The team began its process by identifying a variety of stakeholders in the internal communications process, and determined that the two primary customer groups were the message originators and the communications recipients.

A third group was identified as those who serve as point people for their units in disseminating information to broader groups. This created a point of confusion for the team, as there is no clear label for this group in the communications process. For the purpose of establishing core recommendations for internal communications, the team focused on making the strongest connections between the originators and recipients, hoping to reduce any filtering and/or repackaging of messages within units.

Following the stakeholder analysis, and to ensure that employee needs and preferences regarding internal communications were well understood prior to recommendation development, team members planned and executed a thoughtful campus engagement plan. At the core of this plan was the collection of “voice of the customer” (VOC) data gathered through a variety of methods. Engagements with campus customers and stakeholders included the following:
• Distributed a campuswide opinion poll through an electronic issue of Inside UW–Madison, which resulted in over 400 respondents
• Created and led five focus groups with the recipients of campus communications, defined broadly as UW-Madison employees that receive and/or seek internal communications specific to their role on campus as university employees. Each focus group was developed to collect input from employees that would have likely been under-represented through the other primary means of data collection, including employees with limited computer access and employees that work second and third shift
• Conducted 39 personal interviews with communication recipients. Interview participants were selected in as inclusive a manner as possible to ensure that team members understood the needs and preferences of a highly diverse mix of campus faculty and staff. A complete list of interview participants can be found in the appendix
• Over five sessions with communication “content owners” groups, defined as UW-Madison employees and employee groups with a need to broadly communicate with campus employees. These sessions included conversations with representatives from the Administrative Council (AC), the Classified Staff Executive Committee (CSEC), the Academic Staff Executive Committee (ASEC), the distributed human resources network, and the University Committee

After data collection activities were completed, team members analyzed what they learned to identify themes regarding employee needs and preferences through a process called “critical to quality” (CTQ) analysis. The team then used what they learned to inform all subsequent activities, including process benchmarking, solution brainstorming and narrowing, and refining final recommendations.
Benchmarking

The benchmarking sub team surveyed two groups: peer institutions and private industry. Each of the targeted organizations was similar in size to UW-Madison. A Qualtrics survey was created to gather information on best practices related to internal communications and was sent to participants via email.

Fourteen peer institutions responded. Many of them faced the same issues that the work group has identified as challenges on campus. According to the information received from the survey: the majority of communication is done electronically in the form of campuswide e-news, email and e-newsletters. Peer institutions also posted paper copies to bulletin boards and near time clocks and sent printed newsletters to faculty and staff.

Seven private businesses responded to our survey. The majority of these businesses rely on their intranet to deliver information, followed by email, e-newsletters and staff meetings.

One member of the sub team attended a PRSA (Public Relations Society of America) conference in Chicago, focusing on internal/employee communications. At that conference, it became evident that the challenges that were identified by the work group are the same as those that are faced by public and private organizations of all sizes.

Some items of note from the conference:

- All of the organizations in attendance had staff dedicated to internal/employee communications
- The internal brand should meet the external brand, or, the internal culture is essential to the external brand
- Organizations need to help their managers communicate more effectively (arm and enable)
- Messages to staff should include words and pictures to be most effective
Findings and Conclusions

1. The survey data suggests that in some areas there is a good match between the ways in which employees currently receive information and their preferred ways of receiving information. The critical gaps identified, however, include insufficient means for employees to select or subscribe to their topics of interest, and the lack of a sufficiently robust employee intranet or portal.

- When asked to identify up to three primary sources from which they currently get information regarding campus policies, systems, administrative processes or campus initiatives, the top five responses from employees were Inside UW-Madison (61%), email from campus leadership (49%), department emails/e-newsletter (35%), staff meetings (29%) and my supervisor (28%)

- When asked to select the top three ways they preferred to be informed about campuswide information for employees, the top five selected (tie for 5th place) were e-news or other aggregated formats like Inside UW-Madison (64%), email from campus leadership (46%), a UW-Madison Web page or portal dedicated to this information (38%), email, but only on topics I select (31%), from my supervisor (27%) and staff meetings (27%)

2. The survey data shows that the information content employees are most interested in falls under the categories of human resources, policy and policy changes, and administrative news. We need to improve the balance between internal communication content that employees “need” to hear with what they “want” to hear. The table below shows a ranked list of the topics that employees indicated as most relevant and important to them:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank in mean order</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Total Scored 0-3</th>
<th>Total Scored 8-10</th>
<th>Mean Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Policies and policy changes affecting all employees</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>354</td>
<td>9.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Employment benefits</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>346</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Payroll information</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>306</td>
<td>9.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Professional development opportunities</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Campuswide administrative tools (new IT systems, etc.)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>8.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Parking and transportation</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>8.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Campus leadership changes</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>7.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Messages from campus leadership</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>7.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Campuswide initiatives</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>7.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Campuswide events (forums, etc.)</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>7.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Employee support services</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>7.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Retirement services</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>7.43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Other key data points learned from employees:
   - It’s hard to target the right audience/cannot secure accurate lists
   - Don’t assume everyone has email
   - There are too many emails from too many different sources
   - “Trickle down” of information does not work/people do not receive information that is supposed to be passed on
   - There should be a way for people to identify the topics they want to see
   - Campus communications should have a central resource/management

4. Findings from message originators:
   - It’s difficult to target the right audience, even via purchased lists
   - Numerous databases/email lists are maintained across campus; use is not coordinated among senders; lists are updated infrequently
   - One centralized place where employees are trained/instructed to go would build confidence that messages are being delivered
   - Currently, messages often need to be “repackaged” into stories to match the format of the vehicle; other delivery options could allow for more concise, timely and targeted delivery
   - Resources are limited for reaching faculty and staff that are not heavy computer users: translation services, paper postings, mailings, etc.
   - A centralized coordinator/expert would be helpful in determining the best vehicle to fit the message and communication goals
Recommendations

The team recommends the following actions and guidelines:

1. **Campus commitment**: Campus leadership should establish, and communicate with campus, the base level of commitment to robust internal communication:
   a. The university has no current statement of values around internal communication and we recommend one be created and shared to campus by senior leadership after being vetted through shared governance.
   b. We recommend the university’s senior leadership make a commitment of resources to allow employees a designated amount of time, across all classes and shifts, to receive and review information.
   c. We recommend the university’s senior leadership make a commitment of resources to ensure that information is accessible to employees across all classes and shifts, including appropriate tools, communication vehicles and language translation resources.
   d. Schools, colleges and units should expect employees to avail themselves of information resources and promote the expectations into new employee orientation and position listings.
   e. Members of distributed networks (e.g., human resources and information technology) should be expected to pass along campus-level information to their audiences without filtering. This uniform distribution will ensure that all employees and stakeholders have access to the same level of information around key institutional topics. Although distributed networks provide value in customizing information to their audiences, the team does not recommend that campus rely on them for vital information. It should strive to create vehicles that allow direct communication with every employee.

2. **Employee information hub**: Create an employee intranet with an authentication portal and customization capability to tailor communications to each employee’s preferences. Among other features, the site should include the following:
   a. A central repository for all employee-related news and links.
   b. A central location at which employees would be able to select areas of interest to activate notifications for customized communications.
   c. To allow for more customized communication, the appearance and content of the intranet site should be determined by the NetID the employee used to authenticate. Despite the authentication, it should be noted that all information provided to employees should be considered public information.
   d. As appropriate, campus communicators should have the ability to submit items to the site through a clearly defined process.
   e. To reduce the need to duplicate or repackage campus-level information, the site should feature a “widget” or similar technical mechanism that enables individual departments.
and units to “paste” content from the campus intranet site to their own internal web sites (and vice versa).

3. **Best practices around Email**: Email continues to be a core vehicle for campuswide information. As such, we recommend improving access to email distribution lists for campuswide announcements. Currently, most campuswide emails are subject to a charge from the Division of Information Technology for email distribution through its mass email service.
   a. Establish guidelines to provide free access to email lists for campuswide communications; good business practice and additional communications vehicles should help avoid overuse of email, rather than using cost as a barrier.
   b. To facilitate the process for campus communicators, create a user-friendly email distribution list menu from which a communicator can select from smaller lists and add them to their "shopping cart."
   c. Task an individual to serve in the role of gatekeeper with responsibility for reviewing messages and deciding whether they are appropriate for a campuswide audience
   d. Establish campus policy or guidelines on how, and how often, email distribution lists should be maintained and updated.

4. **Aggregated news products**: To alleviate email “fatigue,” the team recommends the use of messaging tools that aggregate a number of news items in a digest format, whenever possible.
   a. Additional email products should be developed to complement Inside UW-Madison; as an alternative, space should be consistently dedicated for this purpose in Inside UW-Madison.
   b. Consideration should be given to flexibility in “packaging,” allowing for news and employee information in a variety of sizes and formats and making any additional products accessible via mail, intranet link, print, etc.
   c. Content within aggregated news products should include a thoughtful balance between news stories and administrative information for employees; content that employees “need” (e.g., policy changes) and what they “want” (e.g., indicated in the results in an employee opinion poll distributed by the team).
   d. Direct supervisors should be instructed to give their employees ample time and access for these products.
   e. For content or announcements that are particularly important, supervisors should be given guidance and expectations regarding their role in sharing the information with their employees (e.g., review during a staff meeting to reinforce importance, clarify content, answer questions, etc.)
   f. Special attention should be paid to disseminating messages to employees who do not have access to computers or do not speak English as their first language. One possibility is making material available to all staff via a dial-in phone service with multiple language selections.
g. Visual communications should also be considered, via large-screen monitors with touchscreen features in campus buildings. The implementation team will need to research this communication method to determine the specific characteristics that would make this communication channel most effective.

5. **Staffing:** Create a dedicated Internal Communications coordinator role within University Communications. This position would work with communicators across campus to ensure that important internal messages are directed to the correct channels and audiences. Among other responsibilities, the person in this role would work with campus leadership to thoughtfully develop a campuswide internal communications strategy.

6. **Education and training:** Develop resources and training materials that inform campus communicators how to best publish news items of campus interest to the appropriate communication channels.
   a. An online guide should be created to include guidelines on the best use of campus communication channels, as well as best practices on effective content arrangement, such as tips for writing effective headlines, writing concisely, and presenting content such that it generates the intended level of interest.
   b. Internal communications training from an employee perspective (as opposed to that of a campus communicator) should be incorporated into the new employee on-boarding process.
   c. Consideration should be given to two-way communication, wherever appropriate, in the form of feedback loops, comments, questions or other forms of two-way communications.

7. **Technology:** Identify best practices regarding the use of available technologies such as phone message texting and social media. This multimodal means of distribution is consistent with the university’s approach to messaging around emergencies, and results in the widest possible audience having access to information.
Next Steps

Following Executive Sponsor approval of this team’s recommendations, we propose that an additional team be chartered to begin implementation as appropriate. We recognize that some of the recommendations may require staff and/or financial resources to implement. For continuity within the overall project, several team members have volunteered to serve on an implementation team.

In addition to formation of the implementation team(s), the following matters should be addressed going forward:

- A strong connection should be established between internal communications efforts and the work of the MyUW Portal Redesign team. MyUW is being positioned as the central resource for on-campus information, and may be appropriate as part of the Internal Communications solutions. To date, however, the potential intersections for serving campus audiences have not been incorporated into the redesign project.

- In the course of this project, a number of campus governance committees, staff teams and other groups were briefed and/or interviewed. Follow-up with these groups and with campus overall (specifically the campus opinion poll results) is appropriate. The team suggests establishing follow-up assignments to complete the communications cycle.

- The implementation team(s) should consider how to manage a balance of news stories and employee information, both in how messages are packaged by communicators and how they are delivered to campus.
Appendices

Background:
- Project Charter
- High-Level Project Scope

Customer Needs Assessment
- Campus Engagement Schedule
- Voice of the Customer Interview Schedule
- Campus Opinion Poll Results

Benchmarking
- Survey Results – Private Industry
- Survey Results – Peer Institutions