

From reactive to responsive: IC trends in 2021

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Adopt, adapt or pivot? We share some of the top trends taking internal communications from reactive to responsive in 2021.



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A deadly virus, lockdowns, social distancing, global riots; 2020 came at us with all the silence and subtlety of a full-scale earthquake. And it's continued to shake and shift the ground beneath our feet, every day since.

But we know better now.

In 2020, internal communicators the world over were found reeling and reacting to an unfolding crisis of unprecedented proportions in an effort to keep their employees safe, informed and productive. And then we learned to pivot, stay flexible and constantly adapt.

In 2021, internal communicators will need to continue the shift from reactive to responsive by leveraging technology, driving human connection and keeping on top of the changing employee experience.

The tech touch

Technology tops the list as it continues to bridge the great divide created by the remote and decentralised workforce in the era of Covid-19 distancing. To be fair, Covid-19 didn't start this trend, it just accelerated it and brought in a few of its own T&Cs attached.

Secure chat: WhatsApp with that?

WhatsApp may have cleared up some of the controversy surrounding changes to its privacy policy (but not before Elon Musk encouraged his 42 million followers to move to Signal and 500 million people signed up to Telegram), but data control and privacy remains a critical company issue that needs to be urgently addressed, pandemic or not.

How much control does a company really have on any of these public platforms? What about employees who leave the company but never exit the company groups? Are companies leaving themselves exposed to insider trading? Fraud?

Identity theft? A disgruntled employee does not a good brand ambassador make. Using any public platforms, even those not affiliated with the likes of Facebook, could potentially leave a company wide open and vulnerable.

The only way to assure your employees their chats are safe is through a 'secure chat' functionality on company-owned platforms, like Employee Apps. These enable companies to set up different user groups, with all the features of WhatsApp but where the data, privacy and control remains 100% in the company's hands. Plus, employees get to keep their personal chats separate from their work chats, which is not only good for business but also their mental health.

Keeping a finger on the EX pulse

With remote working a reality and home office isolation a concern, keeping on top of how your employees are doing is more important than ever. The problem is that everyone is having a very different experience. Some employees will find working from home more productive, others might feel demotivated and isolated. How will you know what support they need if you don't check in from time to time?

Employee experience (EX) and pulse surveys go hand in hand. Without regular surveys and check-ins, companies are left blind to the changing needs of their employees. It's a case of pulse then pivot, pulse then pivot. Employee surveys and or polls offer insights that help you tailor EX initiatives in a way that is both more meaningful and beneficial to diverse employee groups. In 2021, your EX needs to be targeted and tailored in a way that not only helps retain existing employees but attract new ones.

Employee apps lead digital comms

Employee apps are a big trend that will continue to tick a lot of boxes – security, privacy and instant access. While the first two are important, Covid-19 proved just how important instant access to critical information and feedback channels really is. More than ever, employees need a 'go-to' place where they can access the latest company alerts, information and directives anytime, anywhere. An employee app not only allows for this kind of instant access to vital (possibly life-saving) information, it also empowers and enables employees to stay connected to each other through chat groups and discussion forums. And all in one place.

It's a win-win for business and employee engagement alike. Plus, being able to reach employees instantly and wherever they're working is crucial to ensure dispersed employees feel connected and stay engaged. Whatever your 2021 internal communications strategy is, make sure it includes delivering a platform that gives your employees instant access to all the information they need to stay connected, informed and engaged, anywhere, anytime.

The human connection

What does 'human connection' even mean in the keep-your-distance age of 'no mask, no entry'? If 2020 proved to be a humanitarian crisis that isolated us, it united us around the need for empathy, kindness and compassion in the workplace. From how we show up as leaders to how we communicate information and even the language we use, people priorities have become bottom line priorities.

Visible, authentic leadership

One of the comms coups that came out of lockdown was the way leaders started communicating with their employees openly, often daily, from their kitchens and countertops, bringing a human (often humorous) experience to a very real and frightening crisis. And we can't go back now.

Controlled perfectionism is out. Visible, approachable leadership is in.

Gone are the days when leaders can hide behind the numbers and make cameo appearances at the annual roadshow. People need their leaders to show up, speak with honesty, from a place of truth and authenticity. Of course, not all leaders are comfortable with this kind of direct, conversational style form of communication. That's where internal communicators

become an essential partner and advisor, making sure to choose a medium and message that will enable their leaders to show up as their true selves. Authenticity remains key.

A bigger focus on employee health and wellbeing

Prioritising employee wellbeing means being truly flexible while embracing mental health and personal safety as the cornerstones of wellbeing. But it also means that companies need to revise how they view and pursue employee benefits, incentives, engagement, and wellness matters.

Beyond the obvious (home office technology investments and consistent mental health check-ins), companies need to be finding ways to enable and support resilient cultures that can adapt and grow with change, not in spite of it. To do this, companies will need to reach far and wide, redefining employee wellness while drawing on the behavioural sciences like psychology, behavioural economics, sociology, etc to create strategies that are as holistic in their understanding as they are supportive in their solutions.

Diversity and inclusion

In good times people focus on similarities, in bad they dwell on differences. Now, more than ever, we need to be using the communications channels and choices at our disposal to promote diversity, inclusion and tolerance in the workplace.

It's not about showcasing benefits. We all know that a diverse and inclusive work environment leads to better performance. We all know that diversity is not so much a moral obligation as a business imperative to legally, socially and creatively reflect the society we serve and service. But diversity doesn't just start with hiring and end with onboarding. Diversity and inclusion need consistent and ongoing reinforcement at all levels of the workplace. This is especially true and even more challenging given our remote locations and the need to ensure that all employees understand, embrace and practice positive behaviors and inclusive values at all times.

Here you will want to promote not police. Reward not punish. To do this means communicating consistently and through the right channels. Channels like [screensavers](#) and digital signage that remind employees what the company values most. Staff quizzes and competitions can also be used to promote diversity in a fun and rewarding way. The key is to be persistent and consistent. Being quiet is akin to being silent on this important issue.

What to implement?

It's not so much what can you afford to do, but what can you afford not to do? Changes can be small but significant. Whatever you do, just make sure that connection, engagement and inclusion drive your agenda and enable you to be responsive and adaptive to the challenges and changes that will inevitably come. Because they will. Of that we are all Covid-2021 positive.

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