



SPECIAL REPORT: How Companies Are Engaging Employees During COVID-19

The Institute for Public Relations and Peppercomm surveyed 403 communication executives and senior leaders to find out how their companies are communicating with and engaging their workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic. Key topics include what are the most trusted go-to sources and channels for communicators; how the pandemic has impacted the workforce including employee satisfaction and productivity; what companies are communicating about and how they are tracking it; how diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives have changed; how companies are preparing for the return-to-work; and best practices for internal communication during this crisis. Key findings include:

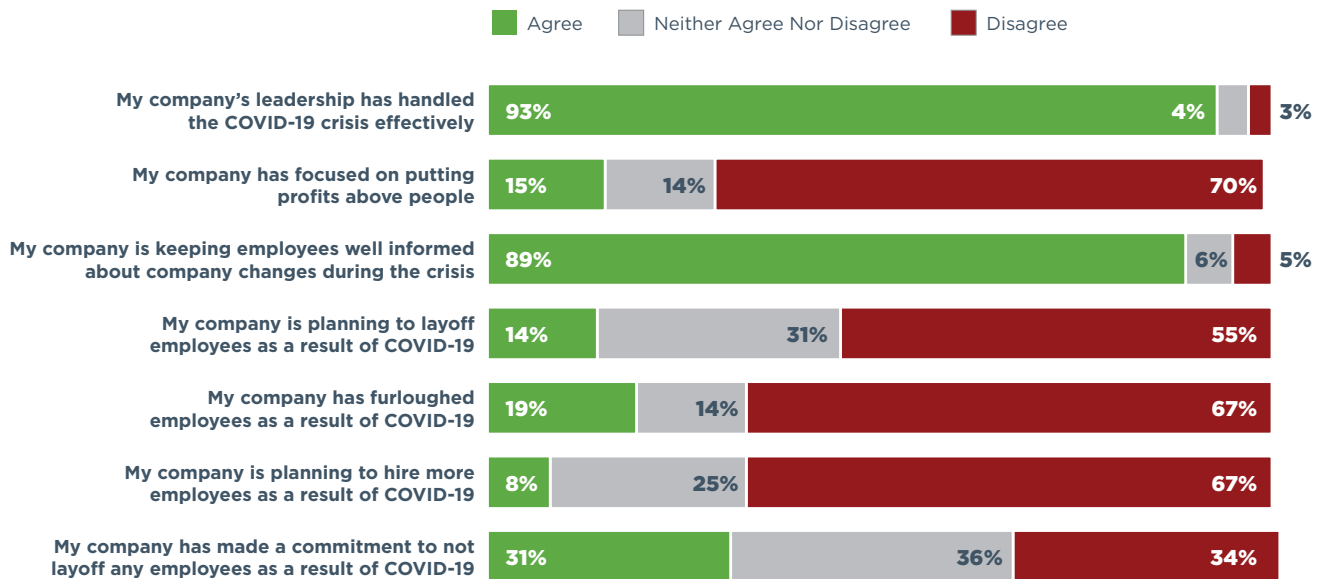
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Communication executives are heavily involved with the COVID-19 crisis response and nearly all (93%) said their company's leadership has done well.
- More than half of communication executives said their company is not planning to layoff (55%) or has not furloughed (67%) employees, but only 31% have made a commitment to not do so.
- Health guidelines and policy changes are the most-communicated topics to employees.
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion information was only communicated by 19% of respondents.
- Personal touchpoints were favored to be the best channels for communicating to employees. Direct communication through supervisors/managers (61%) and one-on-one check-ins (76%) were noted to be "very effective" channels.
- Internal sources and federal agencies were the top sources where communication executives were referring their stakeholders to for more information.
- Informal feedback and listening tools were the top methods communication executives used to track internal communication, but nearly one in four were not tracking at all.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has had positive outcomes on employee engagement, satisfaction, collaboration, and trust in companies, but productivity overall has declined.
- Most companies (61%) are helping external stakeholders affected by COVID-19 and have engaged employees directly in these initiatives.
- More than three-quarters of employees are now working from home and the number of employees who will continue working from home after COVID-19 will increase by 10 percentage points.
- Return-to-work preparations were in the early stages as only 10% of communication executives have done "extensive" planning. Specific changes to the physical work environment are included in this report.

COMMUNICATING TO EMPLOYEES

How is the company handling COVID-19?

Overall, **93%** of respondents said their company was handling the COVID-19 crisis effectively, with 9-out-of-10 reporting (**89%**) their company is keeping employees well informed. More than half said their company was not planning to layoff (**55%**) or has not furloughed (**67%**) employees; nearly one-third (**31%**) said their company made a commitment to not layoff employees due to COVID-19. Only **8%** said their company was hiring more employees as a result of COVID-19.



Note: Percentages in the tables may not add up to 100% due to rounding

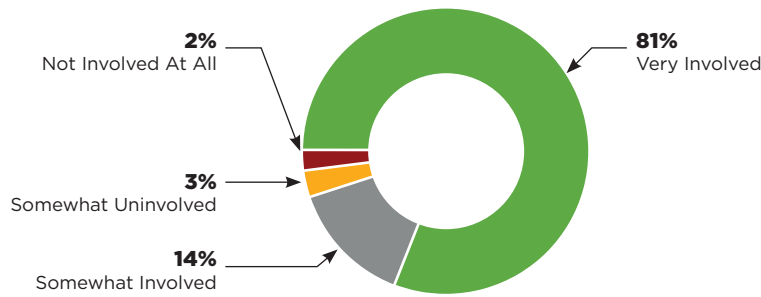
“Our employees are a critical focus for our CEO and the company. This is where I’m spending most of my time and we want to engage our employees as much as possible. Our CEO Marc Lautenbach hosted a global town hall where he talked about what we’re doing at Pitney Bowes followed by a Q&A with employees all around the world.

We recognize our employees are under a lot of stress and pressure and we are very empathetic. Our communication function at Pitney Bowes, even the media relations team, has shifted their efforts to focusing primarily on internal communication on a global basis. Without a doubt, we are also seeing an impact within our function especially in financial communication and government affairs.

This crisis has definitely demonstrated the value communication brings to the business and brand reputation. I’m cautiously optimistic that across our industry people will see the important value that communication brings to companies.”

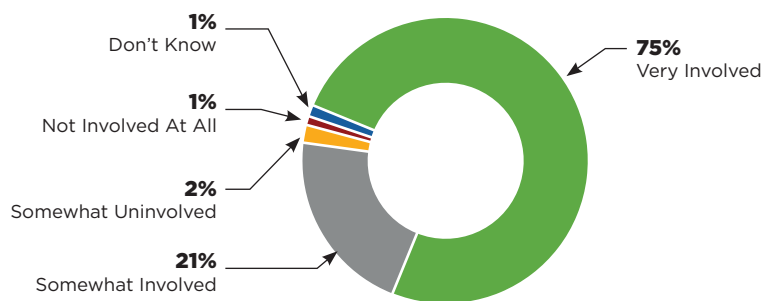
— **Bill Hughes,**
Chief Communications Officer, Pitney Bowes

How involved is the communication function in communicating internally about COVID-19?



81% of respondents said the communication function was **VERY** involved in communicating internally.

To what extent is your company's CEO involved with internal communication?



Three-quarters of respondents (**75%**) said their CEO was “very involved” with internal communication.

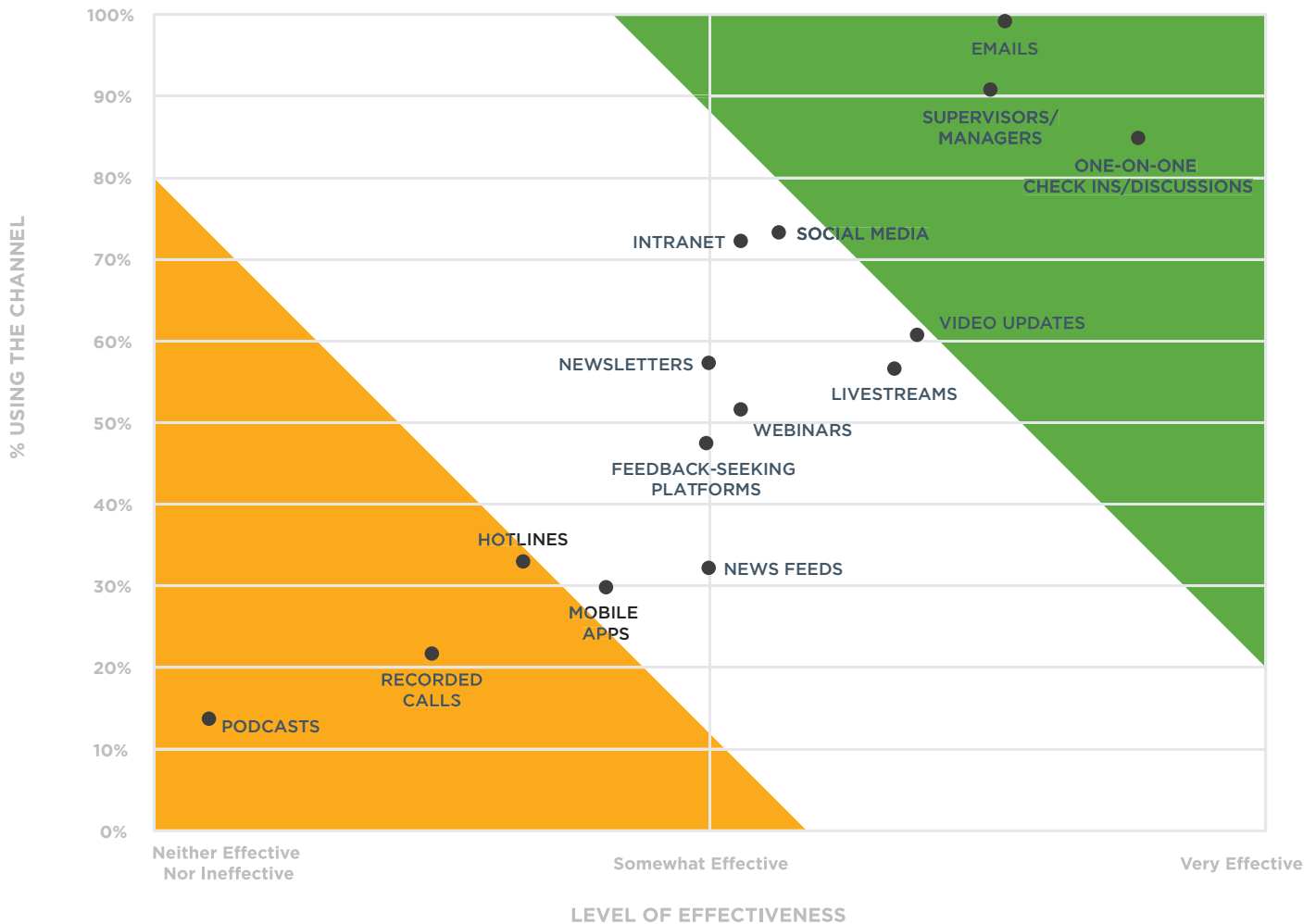
What topics are your communication function communicating to employees about?



Safety guidelines (**84%**), COVID-19 updates (**79%**), and new organizational policies and procedures (**75%**) were the top three topics communicated to employees. Diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts were only communicated by **19%** of respondents. In the “other” category, respondents said they were sharing positive stories (including acknowledgement of front-line workers) and parenting resources.

What internal communication channels is your company using during COVID-19? How effective are these channels?

Nearly all respondents used emails (99%) and supervisors/managers (91%) to communicate internally. One-on-one check-ins (85%) were also frequently used. Direct communication through supervisors/managers (61%) and one-on-one check-ins (76%) were also noted to be “very effective” channels. The least effective channels were recorded calls and podcasts.



“There is no question that the ‘shut-in’ aspect of this crisis makes it very unique. Not only are we grappling with a concerning health threat, we have to do our work differently from remote locations, and we have to adjust frequently. This research underscores the need for decisive executive leadership and transparent, authentic communications that help employees understand what they can be doing to take care of themselves, how the organization will support their continued wellbeing, and when they will hear more about the future.

The study also reminds us of the strategic imperative to monitor and measure employee sentiment. It is critical that we solicit and track employee feedback and design engagements and responses that specifically acknowledge and address their needs. If there is anything positive to come out of such a difficult time, I believe there will be an enhanced appreciation for cultivating meaningful relationships and building purpose-driven cultures, but only if we demonstrate that we actively listen.”

— **Jennifer Temple,**

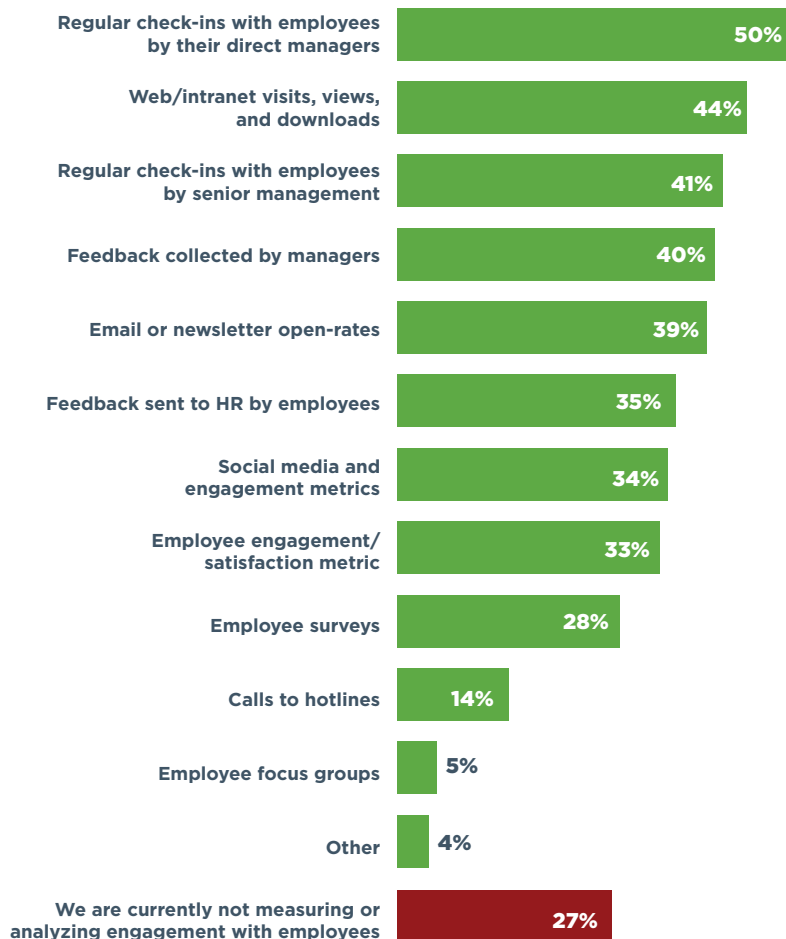
Chief Communications Officer, Hewlett Packard Enterprise

Which of the following sources are you referring your employees to for more information?

Internal Executives	69%
Federal Agencies Within Your Country	66%
(e.g., Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Health Service)	
Internal Media Platform or Source.....	64%
Local County Agencies and Local Public Health Departments	56%
International Health Organizations (e.g., World Health Organization)	42%
Online Health Websites (e.g., WebMD, Medline Plus).....	20%
Social Media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter).....	20%
A Medical Practice Connected to My Organization.....	14%
Mainstream Media Outlets (e.g., <i>The Wall Street Journal</i> , <i>The Financial Times</i>) ...	14%
Country Leaders (e.g., Presidents and Prime Ministers).....	13%
Other	7%
An Unaffiliated Medical Practice.....	2%

Most often, internal sources (internal executives – **69%**; internal media platform/ source – **64%**) and federal agencies (**66%**) were the top sources where communication executives were referring their stakeholders to for more information, by nearly two-thirds of respondents. Country leaders (**13%**) and unaffiliated medical practices (**2%**) were recommended the least.

Which of the following research/measurement/listening activities is your organization doing related to internal communication?

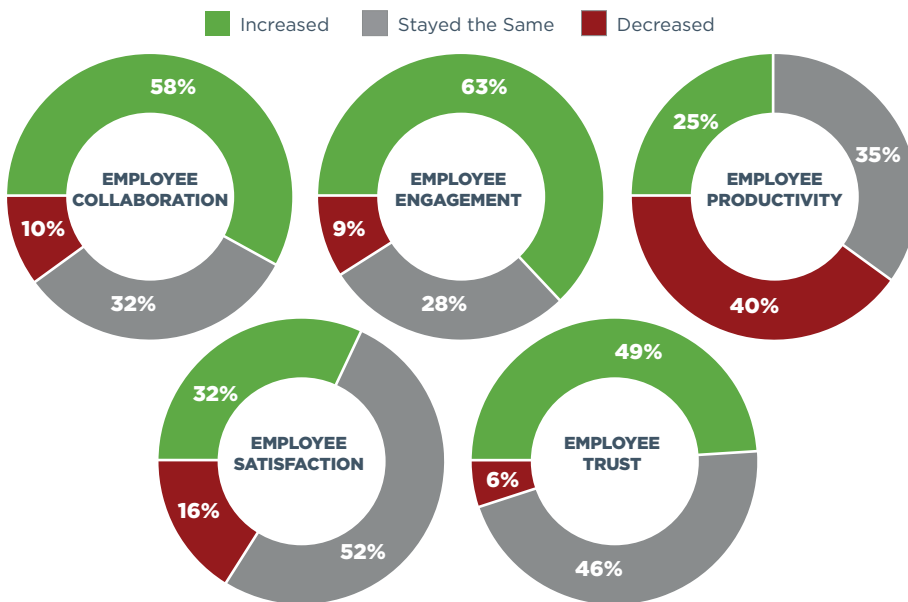


Feedback and listening tools were the top methods communication executives used to track internal communication. Web visits/downloads (**44%**), email/newsletter open rates (**39%**), and social media/engagement metrics (**34%**) were also used by less than half of the respondents. Only slightly more than one-quarter (**28%**) of respondents surveyed their employees. One in four respondents (**27%**) were not using any metrics/listening activities with their employees.

EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION AND ENGAGEMENT

How has the following increased, stayed the same, or decreased since COVID-19?

The COVID-19 pandemic has had positive outcomes for employee engagement satisfaction, collaboration, and trust in companies. Nearly **2-out-of-3** respondents said employee engagement had increased, **60%** said that employee collaboration had increased, and nearly half (**49%**) reported trust had increased. However, overall productivity had decreased **40%**.



Which of the following best characterizes how you are engaging employees to help affected external stakeholders (e.g., customers, the community, etc.)?



Note: Percentages in the tables may not add up to 100% due to rounding



Kay Sargent,
*Director of Global
 Workplace Practice at HOK*

The IPR-Peppercomm study found that while we are seeing increases in perceived employee trust, satisfaction, collaboration, and engagement in times of COVID-19 (even though more people are working-from-home), we are also seeing 40% declines in productivity (but it's also up 25%). Any thoughts about this?

Regarding the increases in trust, collaboration, and engagement, we are in a crisis and most people are trying their hardest to do the right thing. There is also a feeling of comradery, and a sense that 'we are in this together.' Many are also afraid of losing their jobs, so they are working extra hard to be accessible and of value. There is also a massive uptick in online communication and video-sharing so people are connecting in new ways and intentionally reaching out. These scores are likely getting a bump due to the new situation that we are in and will likely drop back down to some degree over time.

With changes to productivity, on average teleworkers tend to work 10 more hours a week than their office-bound colleagues, and for those that don't have to commute and don't have distractions at home - productivity will go up. But, there can also be as many distractions at home as there are at the office - delivery people, laundry, kids, dogs, the TV and working from home can be a struggle. Ordinarily, we wouldn't attempt this during school closings with our stir-crazy children underfoot. Under normal circumstances we wouldn't be taxing the system with everyone trying to access the network remotely at the same time. And we wouldn't have the distraction of watching a worldwide crisis unfold with the constant barrage of updates and alerts.

RETURNING TO WORK

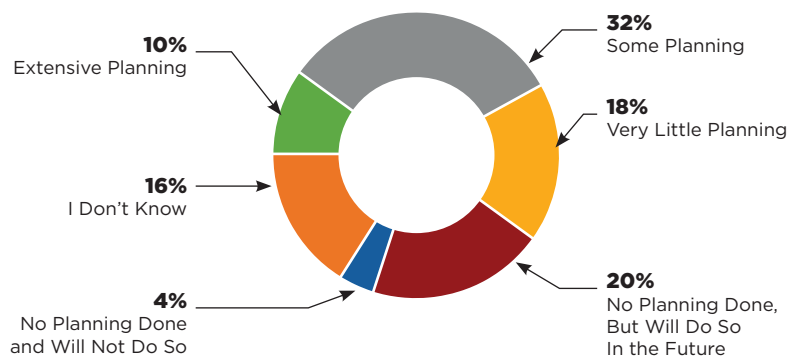
How will the work-from-home (WFH) workforce change due to COVID-19?

Respondents were asked to estimate the percentage of employees who worked from home (WFH) before COVID-19, during COVID-19, and after COVID-19. On average, **13%** of employees WFH before COVID-19, compared to **77%** during COVID-19, and an estimated **23%** following COVID-19.

66% of respondents said that at least three-quarters of their workforce is currently WFH. Following COVID-19, companies will see an increase in the number of employees WFH, partly due to increased physical distancing measures in workplaces. The percent of companies who do not have any employees WFH is estimated to decrease from **32%** before COVID-19 to **19%** following COVID-19, a 40% decrease.

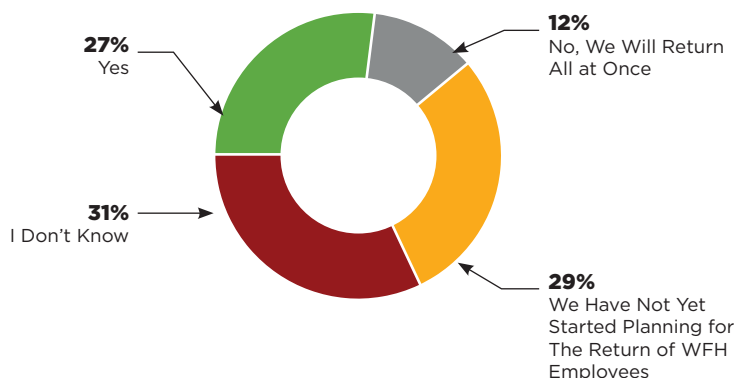
% of workforce that is work from home (WFH)	Before COVID-19	Now	After COVID-19
None	32%	1%	19%
1% to 25%	56%	9%	51%
26% to 50%	6%	16%	20%
51% to 75%	1%	8%	5%
76% to 100%	6%	66%	6%

To what extent have you been planning your employees' return to the office after working-from-home (WFH) once restrictions are lifted?



Only **42%** of respondents have done at least "some" planning for when WFH employees return to the office.

Are you planning a phased or gradual return of your WFH employees?



One-quarter (**27%**) of respondents said they are planning for a phased or gradual return of their employees, while **12%** said they will return all at once. **60%** of respondents had not started planning for the return or did not know.

What changes are you anticipating to the physical work environment?

Forty three respondents reported their companies were changing the physical workspaces. Interestingly, some of the results were mixed. While some said they were instituting more shared spaces and decreasing desk ownership, others were expanding their physical footprint by adding more walls, private spaces, and distancing measures. Changes include:

- More work-from-home opportunities and flexibility
- Increasing physical distancing of employees
- More shared space, consolidation, or eliminating desk ownership so team workers can work more often from home
- Closing shared spaces, creating physical barriers, adding plexiglass shields, more spaced-out seating, and adding longer communal tables
- More contact-less meetings
- Decluttering spaces
- Providing policies outlining the maximum number of people that can be in rooms/shared spaces at one time
- Banning handshakes
- Automatic-opening doors to ensure no-touch access
- Conducting on-site temperature checks
- Less business travel



Betsy Nurse,
Director of Interiors—Atlanta, HOK

Will social distancing make way for workplace distancing?

With an eye on the health, safety and welfare of their teams, and the need for distancing in mind, many businesses are likely to rethink their real estate and workplace strategies. At the same time, it's important to understand the realities of the situation and the viable actions we can take now to ensure the workplace is productive and safe.

Alongside a strategic exercise, here are several workplace remedies that can be implemented now:

- Transition to unassigned seating that allows employees to establish their own boundaries and pick a seat that enables distancing.
- Consider going to a four-day work week and staggering teams across five days to reduce density by up to 20 percent on any given day.
- Reorient work points so individuals do not directly face each other.
- Remove seats at communal tables and in conference rooms to give people additional personal space. Or transition these rooms into scrum spaces by removing the table entirely to give people more space and eliminate touchpoints.
- Install voice activation or hands-free controls that reduce the need to contact commonly touched items.
- Create clean desk policies that allow surfaces to be properly cleaned daily and update facility maintenance contracts to ensure these steps are taken.
- Switch to VOIP communication technology instead of phone handsets and eliminate shared keyboard trays.
- Assign lockers, file drawers or storage cabinets to individuals to separate personal items.
- Remove trash cans from individual desks and replace them with a communal location that consolidates sanitation.
- Establish screening protocols and fever checks for everyone entering the workplace.
- Increase humidity levels to 40 to 60 percent to reduce infection. Use portable humidifiers if the HVAC system does not allow for this.
- Work with building management to improve air circulation, filtration and ventilation and confirm cleaning protocols.

OPEN-ENDED RESPONSES

How are you ensuring Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion remain a priority?

DE&I responses were mixed.

Responses were mixed with how the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) efforts of companies are progressing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some leaders discussed the importance of remaining committed to DE&I, including continuing their efforts with the same investment and resources. Others noted that DE&I is embedded in everything they do. Some respondents gave specific steps about how committed they are to DE&I, including proceeding with scheduled planned activities/events, working with their employee resource groups, or ensuring all materials were in multiple languages. Companies distributed more devices to front-line employees; one respondent noted there is a class divide between who stays home and who does not, exposing a “significant equity” issue.

Some executives acknowledged that COVID-19 disproportionately impacts minorities, so messaging is different for these audiences. Others had taken a stand against racism toward the Asian-American community in the U.S. and held training/educational programs to combat it. Webinars, virtual events, and training related to DE&I for some organizations continued. Taking care of the “most vulnerable” employees were mentioned by several executives. One respondent said:

“We have a strong sustainability and diversity program in place and this has stayed on track. We have been very conscious of our most vulnerable staff and have extra care in place for them.”

Others said their DE&I efforts were falling behind, they were pausing their efforts, or it was not a focus. Some leaders referred to diverse activities as not under the traditional lens of diversity, such as different departments within the company. One comment about DE&I included:

“[We are] continuing to highlight stories of team members - from production to working from home to executive leadership - we try to keep a balanced reporting structure.”

Some communication executives said, “employees are employees,” and all are treated “equally.” Multiple respondents said DE&I efforts are “not important right now,” or DE&I efforts do not apply because the company is on a hiring freeze. Some of the comments included:

“The diversity and inclusion message is largely taking a back-seat to concerns about COVID-19 and safety measures we’re putting in place. We will resume these efforts once the pandemic has passed.”

“We are in crisis response mode; diversity efforts aren’t on our radar. We are just trying not to lay off people.”

“It’s not a priority. Making sure that everyone stays safe is priority No. 1. Serving our clients in No. 2. Saving the business is No. 3. And everyone understands that No. 3 is dependent on Nos. 1 and 2.”

“No idea. Not sure this has even been considered. Doesn’t feel like a priority right now, but that doesn’t mean that we are being deliberately un-inclusive, you know?”

ON DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION



Carmella Glover,
Executive Director, PRSA Foundation

It’s disheartening to see that so few comms leaders are doing much-needed DEI communication during COVID-19. The importance of DEI is amplified during a crisis of this magnitude. Yes, companies are dealing with financial instability and lay-offs, and are rightfully concerned about business continuity and the wellbeing of all stakeholders, but without DEI-centric strategy and messaging, diversity challenges in the workplace will be exacerbated. Organizations exercising a tone-deaf crisis response, will dismantle or significantly set back any work that has been done to build a more diverse and inclusive culture. More now than ever, diverse groups need equity, not just equality. What is reassuring is that many leaders recognize the sudden or continued dearth of DEI specific messaging and are working on it because it’s critical to the health of the business – but for the vast majority, we are just not there yet.

Especially in a time of crisis, we recognize that different audiences require varied communications approaches for the key message to resonate and to maintain trust. The companies that are getting it right are proof that it can be done. Those missing the mark and unaware of the impacts make it evident that coalitions like the [Diversity Action Alliance](#) are needed to: 1) drive accountability at the top and 2) stress the importance of and share the best in equitable and inclusive practices.

How are you engaging your workforce, including your work from home (WFH) or furloughed employees?

Ensuring a positive transition to virtual work.

Some respondents noted that their companies before the pandemic had discouraged WFH and then had to quickly change to solely virtual—a significant shift for them. Some had to issue rush orders for laptops and migrate to internal collaboration tools. Other companies instituted mandatory video calls. Companies had to provide timely information and guidance to employees through their managers and be flexible with their employees' hours.

Team meetings, one-on-one check-ins, daily CEO letters and videos, were some of the mentioned new connections.

Companies also offered supplies to their employees. One respondent said they instituted a drive-by pick-up program where employees can pick up office supplies (pens, paper, hand sanitizer, etc.) as well as protective equipment. Another organization gave each employee a \$1,000 stipend to ensure all employees have adequate food, medicine, and shelter.

Focusing on mental, physical, and emotional health.

The mental, physical, and emotional health of employees was mentioned frequently by respondents, including being more understanding and more empathic to employees. One company instituted a staff morale committee. Virtual happy hours, wellness programs, mindfulness apps and resources, and even digital hubs with interest/support groups were all mentioned. Others said they encouraged more light-hearted content for employees such as spotlighting employees or personal, fun, non-work-related topics. Companies also offered resources to working parents and offered programs to help decrease loneliness and anxiety.

Offering professional development opportunities.

Some respondents said they have increased their professional development and distance learning activities, including online resource learning centers.

Taking care of furloughed employees.

Some companies offered voluntary furlough to their employees. A few noted that state guidelines mandated furloughed employees cannot be asked to participate in business activities (emails, meetings, etc.), but their managers were still checking in with them. Some said they are working very hard to not furlough employees or were being strategic. One respondent said:

"We have been intentional about how we furlough employees. By creating a rotational cadence and communicating it weeks in advance, our team has had the opportunity to prepare both financially and mentally. We've shared the furlough between production team members who work in our facilities with our office team members working from home. To engage our working from home team, we've created special channels to share productivity tips and tricks and connect them to the greater group working from home."

Keeping current employees informed about changes.

Communication executives suggested consistent key messages across functions, and frequently communicating with employees from a consistent source, especially the CEO, was a top priority. Also, sharing information immediately and being accountable were both critically important. Acknowledging the challenges the organization is facing or acknowledging what they do not know was also mentioned.

To help manage the financial and emotional impact on current employees, respondents outlined some of their company's programs. Several noted that salaries, especially at the executive level, had been reduced. One company stopped matching 401(k) contributions. One HR function asked employees to donate vacation days to those who cannot work remotely and another said employees could use sick time to "flex" personal needs. Another said they offered short-term voluntary, part-time programs to full-time employees while preserving their benefits. Donor-funded employee assistance programs for health and childcare were also noted.

Tailoring messages to specific stakeholders.

Some leaders discussed tailoring their communication to specific internal stakeholders. Different categories of employees addressed include racial and ethnically diverse employees, parents, employees with mental health challenges, caregivers, front-line employees, employees who live alone, different generations, low-income, and those who lack technological resources. A few said they are working on better targeting their communication, while others said they are not segmenting, but they probably should.

What will your company do differently following COVID-19?

Place a stronger importance on internal communication.

Many respondents said that this crisis has demonstrated the value of internal communication (and even the communication function in general), especially to the C-suite. Respondents talked about increasing strategic plans related to internal communication and improving the infrastructure. Some noted the importance of partnership and integration with the HR department as well as collaboration across other functions. Others realized they need to do a better job of communicating with their prior WFH employees, their regional leaders, and their non-virtually connected employees. Respondents also noted they would institute more internal surveys and trackers. One leader said:

"I think this has been a real moment for the internal communication function and I believe we will see greater investment in this area as a result of COVID-19."

Improve communication in general.

Respondents said they will continue or increase their leader-driven communications. They reported their need to be nimble and flexible with communication, including rapidly adopting beneficial technologies and channels. Video communication was frequently mentioned as an added value. Some reported having stronger relationships with key internal stakeholders during this pandemic. Others noted the use of channel is critical and they have new technologies available; some said their company is willing to invest more in virtual platforms. One communication executive said:

"We will facilitate and host more live-stream events both internally and externally. This tech was not available to us pre-COVID-19 no matter how much we lobbied for it. Now it's here and everyone sees the value."

Increase focus on mental and emotional well-being.

Leaders noted the importance of the "human" components of work. The value of in-person time, a greater focus on the people, and better employee engagement were all mentioned.

Offer more WFH and flex opportunities.

Several respondents said they will work with leaders to see if their organizations can implement more flexible WFH options. Some noted that their employees will continue to WFH full time, or even more frequently.

Prepare more for crises.

Some communication executives said they hope to be better prepared for future crises, especially concerning issues management and pandemics. Multiple respondents noted they will practice and test their crisis plan more often, as well as be better equipped.

VOICE OF THE CCO

Our Top Priority is the Safety and Well-Being of Our People

Stacey Jones, *Head of Corporate Communications, Accenture*

With more than 500,000 people serving clients around the world, everyone was affected by the pandemic, and everyone needed to be reached. With local conditions varying significantly and changing quickly, urgency was a constant and required 24/7 decision making and communications.

To provide extra support for our people, we developed “More Together Now,” which features online resources, including mental wellness, meditation practices, ways to run virtual meetings to promote inclusion, and chats and support groups to help people feel better connected despite being physically apart.

Our Global CEO Julie Sweet has regularly communicated important informational updates and provided reassurance. This included live town hall broadcasts with an “Ask Me Anything” segment to field questions about challenges and convey plans for moving forward. These efforts have been replicated by our local business leaders around the world.

Although Accenture people have a long history of working virtually, we quickly jumped in to help our clients adapt to what, for many of them, was a new situation. As one of the largest users of Microsoft Teams globally, we’re also working closely with Microsoft to help other organizations ramp up their use of the tool, and we recently launched a [Microsoft Teams Rapid Resource Center](#) on Accenture.com to help organizations at no cost train their people to put Teams to work quickly.

As we were moving the vast majority of our workforce to remote working, we started talking about what will be needed for a smooth return to the office. Because we’re global, it’s a complex, multi-step transition, which will involve direction from various governments and health authorities in the more than 120 countries where we serve clients. Something we’ve said in almost every communication from day one, and I think it’s really anchored us, is that the safety and well-being of our people is and will remain our top priority.

Managing COVID-19 in Asia-Pacific

Stephen Thomas, *Head of Group Brand and Communications, AIA Group*

Different countries around the Asia-Pacific region are at different stages of the pandemic and at a corporate level, this is requiring a proactive, targeted and multi-dimensional internal communications effort.

On an overarching basis, our people want to be reassured that their health and safety is paramount and that the company is taking all actions necessary in order to ensure this is the case. They want to know their efforts to serve our customers during this time are valued and appreciated. And they want to know that we will emerge from this most difficult of times with a united, positive and energized mindset.

On a practical level, many of our people around the region are working from home. This has seen a significant focus placed on how to work effectively on a remote basis, including how to utilize technology to best effect. The lock down combined with travel bans has seen an enormous and spontaneous increase in the use of Microsoft Teams, and this method of communicating internally looks here to stay.

For those countries that are not in full lock down, there has been an emphasis on communicating the safeguards in place to ensure a safe office environment, which has encompassed wide-ranging topics from temperature checks to policies regarding masks in the office to scenario planning for what to do if someone in the office building was to test positive to Covid-19.

We have deployed a ranged of tools to communicate to colleagues, including microsites, videos, virtual townhalls and messages from the CEO and senior leaders. The communications effort has required a high level of collaboration with a range of functions at the company, including Risk, Human Resources, Corporate Facilities, Technology & Operations and Corporate Security.

The crisis has firmly placed a spotlight on the role of internal communications and this will continue to be the case as we remain in the midst of the pandemic and then when it is time to emerge the other side of it.

“For the past five weeks, Mubadala has been coordinating a comprehensive response across our portfolio under the umbrella of #WeAreDedicated, using our partner companies around the world and in the United Arab Emirates to show our unity in helping communities across the globe as we all work together to keep safe and look to the future.”

— **Brian Lott,**
Chief Communications Officer, Mubadala Investment Company

Methodology

The Institute for Public Relations and Peppercomm conducted a global online survey of 403 communication executives and senior leaders from April 6-12, 2020, to determine how companies are communicating with and engaging their workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic. The margin of error based on the sample size is +/- 5%, but please note this is not a random sample.

To give context to the survey, as of April 14, there were 609,531 confirmed cases and 26,057 deaths in the U.S. Globally, more than 2 million people have been infected with 130,000 deaths.

The Institute for Public Relations and Peppercomm would like to thank the following industry partners for their support with this survey:



To see the full report, visit the webpage:
<https://instituteforpr.org/how-companies-are-engaging-employees-during-covid-19/>

