

BUSINESSES REPORT THEIR EMPLOYEES ARE MORE ENGAGED AND COLLABORATIVE IN THEIR COMPANIES SINCE THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

April 21, 2020, New York, NY – More than half of communication executives said employee engagement (63%) and collaboration (58%) have increased at their companies since the start of COVID-19, according to a new global survey by the Institute for Public Relations and Peppercomm. Respondents reported employee trust (49%) and satisfaction (32%) increased as well. However, 40% of leaders said productivity declined while 25% said it increased.

The survey of 403 communication executives and senior leaders analyzed how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the workforce including employee satisfaction and productivity; the most trusted go-to sources, topics, and channels; how diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives have changed; and, how companies are preparing for employees' return to the office.

Overall, communication executives reported their function is a critical component of their company's internal crisis response, with only 5% reporting being uninvolved. Overall, nine-out-of-10 communication executives said their company's leadership has handled the COVID-19 crisis effectively.

"With lives at stake, companies had to ramp up their communication efforts significantly and quickly, including being flexible and introducing new tools at a rapid rate for a wide range of employees," said Tina McCorkindale, Ph.D., president and CEO of the Institute for Public Relations. "Companies also appear to be more empathetic toward workers who are stressed, many of whom are living in highly uncertain times while juggling multiple responsibilities."

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 not to do so in the future.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DE&I)

Diversity, equity, and inclusion was not a top priority for some communication executives. Only 19% of companies are communicating information focused on DE&I to their employees.

Some leaders discussed the importance of remaining committed to DE&I, including continuing their efforts with the same investment and resources. Some executives acknowledged that COVID-19 disproportionately impacts minorities, so they are communicating differently to these audiences, including some taking a stand against racism, specifically with Asian-American communities in the U.S. Others said their DE&I efforts were falling behind, they were pausing their efforts, or it was not a focus or important right now.

Work-from-Home (WFH) Efforts

On average, respondents reported 13% of their company's employees worked from home before COVID-19, compared to 77% during COVID-19, and an estimated 23% following COVID-19.

Some leaders noted before the pandemic their companies discouraged WFH and had to quickly change to primarily virtual—a significant shift for them. Some had to issue rush orders for laptops and migrate to internal collaboration tools.

Return-to-Office

Return-to-office preparations were in the early stages as only 10% of communication executives had done extensive planning. Sixty percent of respondents had not started planning for the return or did not know about return-to-office preparations for their employees. Only 42% of respondents have done at least “some” planning. One-quarter (27%) said they are planning for a phased or gradual return of their employees, while 12% said they will return all at once.

Nearly three-quarters (74%) of respondents had not discussed any changes to the physical work environment or were unsure if their organization was going to make any changes. Some noted changes include increasing physical distancing of employees (closing shared spaces, creating physical barriers, adding plexiglass shields, and more contact-less meetings), increasing shared space such as eliminating desk ownership, instituting temperature checks, offering more WFH opportunities, and banning handshakes.

Focus on Mental, Physical, and Emotional Health

Two-thirds of communication leaders said they were sending their employees information about their physical (70%) and mental (65%) health. 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. Companies offered programs to help decrease loneliness and anxiety as well as resources to help working parents.

Most companies are helping external stakeholders affected by COVID-19; 61% engaged employees directly in these initiatives.

How Leaders Are Communicating

Communication executives suggested consistent key messages across functions, and frequently communicating with employees from a consistent source was critical in their efforts.

Three-quarters of respondents said the CEO was “very involved” with internal communication. Personal touchpoints were favored to be the best channels for communicating with employees. 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 noted to be “very effective” channels.

Regarding the sources where communication leaders were referring their stakeholders to for more information, the top three were internal executives (69%), federal agencies (66%), and internal media platforms/sources (64%). Country leaders (13%) and unaffiliated medical practices (2%) were recommended the least.

The top methods communication executives used to track results in their internal communication or to seek employee feedback were informal listening tools and methods (e.g., check-ins, web visits, email open-rates, HR feedback). Nearly one-in-four were not tracking at all and only one-fourth (28%) surveyed their employees.

For more information or to download the report, visit <https://instituteforpr.org/how-companies-are-engaging-employees-during-covid-19/>

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.

About The Institute for Public Relations

Founded in 1956, the Institute for Public Relations is an independent, nonprofit foundation dedicated to the science beneath the art of public relations™. IPR creates, curates, and promotes research and initiatives that empower professionals with actionable insights and intelligence they can put to immediate use. IPR predicts and analyzes global factors transforming the profession, and amplifies and engages the professional globally through thought leadership and programming. All research is available free at www.instituteforpr.org and provides the basis for IPR's professional conferences and events.

About Peppercomm

Peppercomm is an award-winning strategic, integrated communications and marketing agency headquartered in New York City with offices in San Francisco and London. The firm combines 25 award-winning years of expertise serving blue-chip and breakout clients with forward-thinking new service offerings and the freshness of a start-up. This unique mix of experience and energy enables the firm to attract and empower teams with a creative edge, drive and passion for promoting, protecting and connecting clients in a fast-changing marketplace. Founded in 1995, Peppercomm has received numerous accolades, including The Holmes Report's North American Corporate/B2B Agency of the Year and Bulldog Reporter's Mid-sized Agency of the Year. The agency has been listed as one of Fortune's 10 Best Workplaces in Advertising and Marketing, 100 Best Workplaces for Women, 50 Best Small and Medium Workplaces and 50 Best Workplaces for New College Grads. For more information, visit www.peppercomm.com or follow us @Peppercomm.

Media Contacts:

Nikki Kesaris
Communications & Marketing Manager
Institute for Public Relations
Nikki@instituteforpr.org

Paul Merchan
Peppercomm
pmerchan@peppercomm.com
212-931-6172