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Why face to face
isn't the preferred
information source
after all

EMPLOYEES PREFER INTRANETS TO SUPERVISORS 2 TO 1

In 1992 and 2004, Angela Sinickas wrote articles refuting the common misperception – based on well publicized but highly flawed research design – that supervisors are employees' preferred source of information on all business topics.¹ A look at her survey database showing results for the last five years shows that supervisors are now a distant third choice behind intranets and publications. In our next issue, she'll break out the data based on organizations of different sizes and with different percentages of employees having good online access.

Supervisors really are not employees' preferred information source on most business topics. Even in the "glory days" of face-to-face communication, before widespread availability of email and intranets, supervisors were among the top two preferred sources on only about 40 percent of typical topics communicated in organizations (see Figure One).²

Looking specifically at the subjects included in the research for this article³, they were the most preferred source on only seven of the 16 topics – less than half (see Figure Two). Department heads, HR staff, site managers and senior leaders were more highly preferred than supervisors on many of the topics where face to face was preferred over other types of communication.

Based on communication survey results since 1998⁴, in the last six years employees' preferences have moved even further away from supervisors and other face-to-face channels. Here's what we found when we let employees choose their two most preferred information sources subject by subject.

All face-to-face is losing ground

Before 2004, nearly half of all the top-two preferred sources selected were people (see Figure Three). Face-to-face

communication was the most preferred source (or tied for first) on 75 percent of the 16 surveyed subjects (see Figure Four).

Starting in 2004, nearly half the preferred sources chosen have been electronic (including intranets, e-publications and mass emails). E-communication was the single most preferred source (or tied for first) on 88 percent of the 16 surveyed subjects.

Print has remained steady over time, accounting for about one-fifth of the preferred sources selected, though it has never been the single most preferred type of source on any of the 16 surveyed topics.

The increased preference for electronic choices has not diminished the preference for print, as many people assume, but has instead eroded the preference for face to face. (Since our surveys have always limited employees to no more than two preferred sources per topic, they're forced to "give up" some old preference if they want to choose a new one.)

Supervisors trail publications and intranets

Three of the most commonly used internal communication tools are intranets, publications (either electronic or printed) and supervisors. Searching

the database for the relative preference for just these three channels, supervisors are the least preferred of the three – even including the numbers for "staff meetings" in with those for supervisors, though many team meetings are actually led by department heads.

Since 2004, supervisors are preferred less than half as much as they used to be between 1998 and 2003 – 17 percent now versus 40 percent then. Since 2003 there are only two subjects where supervisors are more preferred as sources than publications and intranets – the topics of business unit goals and how employees can help the organization reach its goals.

Employees prefer publications (electronic and/or print, depending on what's available where they work) more than they used to – 43 percent in the last six years compared to 29 percent in the previous six years (see Figure One). This is likely to be influenced by the greater frequency now possible with electronic publications so that they can actually provide news employees may not have heard of yet.

Why so many believe supervisors are preferred

In the early 1980s, IABC and the consulting firm of Towers Perrin conducted a series of research studies to measure the effectiveness of internal communication. While most of the questionnaire was highly useful, the section asking for current and preferred sources of information overall – not by topic – was fatally flawed. Unfortunately, the PR campaign promoting the faulty findings was profoundly successful.

Here's the flaw. The survey lists a series of information sources, including a variety of print, electronic, audiovisual and human channels. Then the employee is asked two questions:

- Which *one* of these sources is *currently* your primary source for important company information?
- Which *one* of these sources is your *preferred* primary source for important company information?

The answer to the first question is almost always "rumors from other employees". The answer to the second is usually "my supervisor". That's what all the "research says" data have been based on. It looks reasonable. It seems to make sense. There are statistically significant percentages to back up the findings.

But those are the wrong questions because they're based on an illogical premise. Do you actually want to get all your work-related information from just one source? Of course not. We all prefer different sources for different types of information. But if you force people to make one selection on a survey, they will. We just have to be sure not to build our communication strategies around this result.

So what does this all mean?

I had Jeffrey Brooke, MS Organization Development from Johns Hopkins, review the database numbers for both accuracy and implications. Jeffrey has been an award-winning communication practitioner for 20 years, and he's a colleague of mine as a part-time lecturer for Northeastern University's graduate program in organizational communication.

"This is consistent with what I've been observing," Jeffrey says. "Employees are certainly more comfortable accessing information electronically, but more interestingly, they've learned to trust it. If the medium is the message, electronic means timely. What's timely is more useful and therefore trusted. Employees still rely on their managers for direction and interpretation, but the intranets are displacing managers' role as human filing cabinets.

"When you ask employees about their preferred information sources on a topic, they will point to the sources that have worked for them in the recent past. They're not envisioning what-ifs. To me, the huge increase in preference for the intranet and other electronic channels indicates that internal communicators are getting it right. The profession's size and role have grown over the period covered by this data. More organizations have an internal communication function and the function's role has become more strategic. The data seem to point to a logical evolution of organizations toward specialization of function around communication."

How the data may affect communication strategies

I absolutely believe that supervisors and other managers can and should play a critical role in employee communication. What the data show, however, is that supervisors should generally not be used as the broadcasters of new information.

Not only are they not among most employees' top preferred sources for new information, but using a face-to-face cascade is inherently flawed because as soon as the first supervisor tells staff about something new, most other employees will hear the news first from colleagues who attended a meeting before they did. In other words, using a cascade is what actually creates rumors.⁵

Based on survey results and other client research, I believe the internal communicator's role is more critical than ever before for getting consistent and timely information to employees through mass communication channels. We also need to then help supervisors interpret what the generic information means to their own work groups—to provide context and define what actions employees should take because of the news.

Figure One: Publications and intranets are preferred more often than supervisors over all topics surveyed

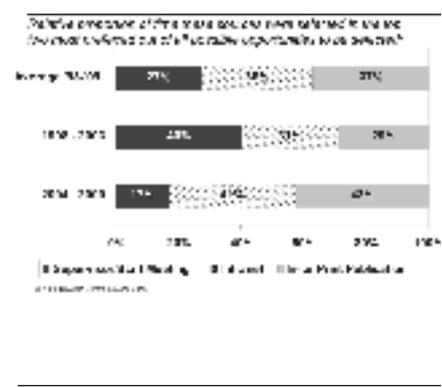
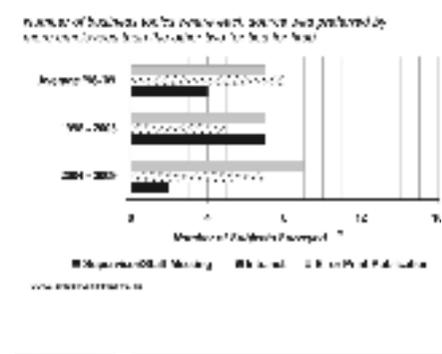


Figure Two: Intranets and publications are the single most preferred source on more topics than supervisors.



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1. You can read her 2004 Melcrum article on this topic at www.sinicom.com/Sub%20Pages/pubs/articles/article60.pdf.
2. Some topics were asked at nearly all companies, like preferred sources about "Company goals and plans". Three topics were surveyed at only 6-9 organizations. These charts are calculated based on all the times employees could choose preferred sources on all 37 surveys combined (37 organizations had a total of 308 possible questions where supervisors or other sources could have been selected as one of employees' top two preferred information sources. That averages about 8-9 subjects per organization).
3. The 16 surveyed subjects included in this study: benefits, business unit goals, career development, company financials, company goals, company news, compensation, competitive information, customer satisfaction, ethics/compliance, how I can help reach company goals, local news, mission/vision/values, products/services, recognition and social responsibility.
4. The research for this article is based on surveys conducted at 37 organizations, with more than 680,000 employees, where we asked respondents for their top two preferred sources on up to 16 business topics. The organizations range from having 600 employees to over 80,000. Some are corporations; others are government units or NGOs. The number of companies reflected in the later and more recent time periods are 18 and 19. More detail about the participating organizations will be covered in the next column.
5. For data supporting this position, see her 2006 Melcrum article on this topic at www.sinicom.com/Sub%20Pages/pubs/articles/article81.pdf

Figure Three: Electronic sources overall are now far more preferred than face-to-face ones.

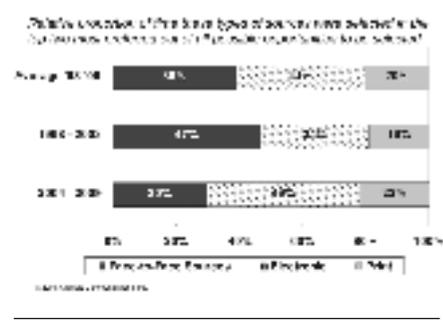


Figure Four: Electronic sources have become the most preferred on far more topics than face-to-face ones

