The size of the organization affects how employees like to receive messages

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HOW PREFERENCE FOR INFO CHANNELS VARIES BY COMPANY

In last month's issue Angela Sinickas shared findings from her survey database that supervisors are now a distant third preferred information source behind intranets and publications. This issue, she breaks out the data based on different types of organizations. For more foot-noted details about the database used for this research, please refer to the previous article.

In the last issue, this column analyzed how preferences for different types of information channels, and supervisors specifically, have changed since 2004 versus the six years before that. This time we'll look at other factors that influence employees' preferences for where to learn about the 16 topics covered by this analysis of my survey database.

It's important to note, though, that all these numbers are averages from 37 organizations, with any one company's numbers often quite different from the average. While this article can help point communicators in the right direction, tailored research with their own employees is the only way to be sure communicators get the right "maps" to reach their own specific destinations.

Figure One: Small organizations prefer supervisors more than intranets and about the same as publications
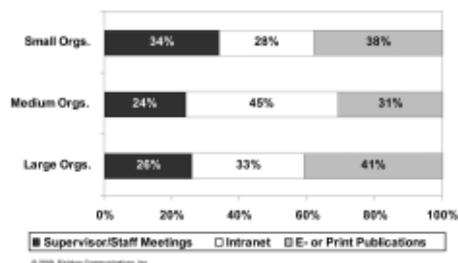
Company size makes a small difference
The numbers used in this column were not weighted by the size of the organizations, so each organization counted as much as every other one. This was done so we could make comparisons by company size.[1]

Face-to-face channels overall are the most preferred type of communication at organizations with less than 5,000 employees (by 43 percent), and electronic channels are preferred more at medium and large companies (42 percent and 43 percent), perhaps because there's enough critical mass to warrant the investment.

Supervisors are preferred as a source more often at small organizations, though even there employees prefer their publications a little more often than their supervisors. Employees at smaller and very large organizations (20,000 employees or more) prefer publications more than intranets, but employees at middle-sized organizations prefer their intranets more than publications and supervisors. (See Figure One.)

Online access makes a bigger difference
Not surprisingly, when more people have access to online sources, they're more likely to prefer them as primary sources. Face-to-face sources are preferred far less in organizations with close to universal online access (preferred by 31 percent) than in those where some or

many employees don't use computers as part of their daily work (between 40 percent and 43 percent).

Supervisors are preferred on a few more topics in organizations with low access to electronic channels, but they're still either behind or tied with publications as a preferred choice.

However, even in organizations where few employees have regular online access all day to intranets and email (manufacturing, utilities, hospitals, retail), publications are preferred more than supervisors as an information source. (See Figure Two.) Publications are least preferred when virtually all employees have online access. However, at most of these organizations, their intranets included a news page that was updated daily (which counted as an intranet preference since it wasn't "pushed" to employees like a publication).

Organizations' geographic scope matters
There's virtually no difference in the preference for face-to-face sources overall among companies with employees in many countries versus those whose entire population is within North America (preferred by 38 percent and 39 percent). However, supervisors and staff meetings specifically are more popular there than elsewhere around the world, where higher-level management sources are more often preferred. (See Figure Three.)

Printed materials and publications of all types are more preferred by employees in organizations entirely within the US and Canada. But, when looking at numbers for individual global companies, there are significant differences in preferences by country, with some countries preferring print or supervisors far more than the averages described here.

The profit motive
Because only six of the organizations in this database are non-profit or government entities (with all but one surveyed since 2004), comparison with the 31 for-profit organizations could be misleading. Generally, non-profits seem to prefer electronic sources more, especially intranets, and rely less on publications of any kind. Preference for face to face overall, and supervisors specifically, seems no different from the way it is in the for-profit world, though intranets are more preferred by non-profits. (See Figure Three.)

The good news for communicators

The good news for communicators is that even though employee preferences have changed over time, and vary quite a bit by the type of organization they work for, we communicators seem to have been doing a good job keeping up. In the last six years, employees have been far more satisfied with the volume of information they're receiving through different types of channels than they were in the previous six years. (See Figure Four.)

Some of this may be due to a change in employees' perceived need for some types of communication, but the rest occurs because we're more often using their preferred channels – without going overboard. There has been virtually no change in how many people say they receive too much information through these channels.

Worth noting is that about half of employees say they want more face-to-face communication than they're getting. Consider that finding in perspective with the research highlighted in last month's column showing that employees want their supervisors to be one of their top-two information sources on only two of the 16 topics asked about in this study – their business unit goals and how their jobs help contribute to reaching organizational goals.

This validates what Roger D'Aprix has often said.[2] Employees want their supervisors to provide context for the information they often prefer to learn first from other – more timely and consistent – sources. They want supervisors to explain how the information affects them and how they should be doing their jobs.

They want their supervisors to be interpreters, not broadcasters. We need to be sure we support supervisors in that role, and stop expecting them to "cascade" new information. We need to make sure employees without good access to electronic sources are receiving timely, consistent information through other channels they do have access to – print publications and bulletin boards, for example – instead of expecting their over-worked and under-resourced supervisors to tell them everything.

We need to help supervisors better interpret how big-picture company issues relate to their employees through training that helps them think through implications and anticipate questions.

We need to provide opportunities for supervisors to discuss strategy with senior leaders so they can become champions of company direction.

Print and electronic news sources are great for transmitting knowledge, but people sources are the only ones that can significantly shape employee attitudes about that information. We need to use the right mix of these channels strategically so supervisors aren't broadcasters and mass media don't sound like propaganda.

1. Number of organizations represented in each data slice. As the table below shows, there was an appropriate balance in the number of organizations within each breakdown, except for the too-small segment of non-profits.

2. See Roger D'Aprix's column on page 13 of this issue for more on this topic.

	'98-'03	'04-'09	EMPLOYEES
Small (<5k)	4	7	18,000
Medium	8	6	157,000
Large (>20k)	6	6	509,000
Few are online	**7**	**6**	**242,000**
Most are online	**7**	**4**	**234,000**
All are online	**4**	**9**	**207,000**
US/Canada only	10	11	412,000
Global	8	8	272,000
Non-profit	**1**	**5**	**40,000**
For-profit	**17**	**14**	**643,000**

Figure Two: Supervisors are preferred less than publications, even at organizations where few have online access
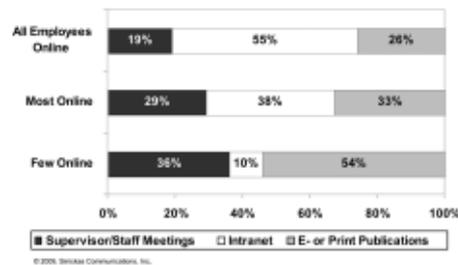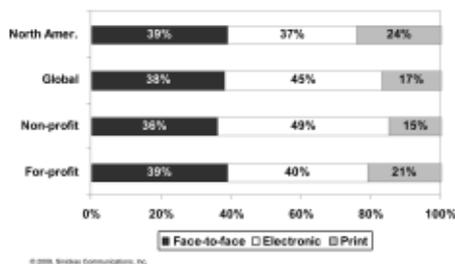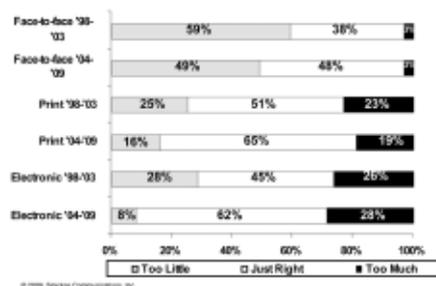

Figure Three: Supervisors are preferred less outside North America; publications are preferred to intranets more in the US/Canada and in for-profits

Figure Four: More employees are satisfied with the volume of communication than before 2004, including face to face and electronic

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