

New electronic channels do not always eliminate the need for existing sources of information

THE ROLE OF E-COMMUNICATION IN THE MIX

Recently Angela Sinickas analyzed her employee communication survey database to see how the availability of electronic channels has affected employees' preferred information sources. Some of what she discovered is contrary to conventional wisdom and may have significant implications for your company.

When it comes to choosing the right mix of communication channels, there's no one-size-fits-all solution. To find the right combinations for each company, our surveys ask employees to select up to two preferred information sources (such as an intranet, a printed publication, or their supervisor) for each key business topic. We then total the individual sources in a category like "print" or "electronic" to equalize for various numbers of channels at different companies. A recent analysis of our database found some surprising patterns.

Adding an intranet or electronic newsletter to the mix of communication channels reduces employees' preference for face-to-face sources more than for print sources. In fact, in companies where electronic channels were available to most employees, their preference for face-to-face channels was lower than in companies without wide access to e-channels. Print preferences were lower by only three percent, while face-to-face preferences were lower by 11 percent on average for the eight subjects we examined, and as much as 20 percent lower on the topic of "Company Goals" alone. (Note that whatever level of face-to-face



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sources are currently available, most companies' employees want more than they're getting.)

The overall preference for electronic channels increases as a company adds more types of electronic channels. Preference for a new e-channel doesn't replace preference for existing electronic channels. The more electronic channels a company offers, the greater the preference for all electronic channels (see diagram). So, offering an e-newsletter in addition to your intranet, for example, doesn't reduce reliance on the intranet or on mass e-mails.

Implications for your company

These results came from employee surveys administered at 15 organizations. The data applies to about 400,000 employees worldwide, most of whom work in large organizations, including an even balance among companies where most employees work in an office environment, where a large percentage work in manufacturing, and where a large percentage work in the field. However, while these results reflect averages of preferences among the companies, the range of responses from individual companies was often quite large. For example, employees at one company were eight times as likely as those at another to prefer electronic sources on the topic of "Company Goals." Making changes to your own communication program based on averages could result in absolutely the wrong mix for your own employees.

Also, the averages are based on the availability and quality of the existing communication programs at the surveyed companies. Your own print channels might be more effective, or

your intranet could be less content-rich. The best way to decide what changes to make in your own program is to conduct research with your own employees.

But these findings do have serious implications for how we manage our communication channels:

Adding electronic channels should not automatically result in eliminating print, which serves an entirely different purpose. Searching for information on an intranet is much more like asking a question of a supervisor than it is to looking up information in back copies of periodicals. In fact, we find that over two-thirds of employees want to retain a printed publication, whether it is available only in print or in addition to an online version.

Managers who discourage employees from spending time on the intranet, due to a misguided belief it reduces their productivity, may actually be making their own jobs harder. If a company's intranet is designed to offer answers to the types of questions employees typically ask their supervisors, employees and supervisors may find their productivity increases, and their satisfaction with the timeliness and availability of the answers improves as well.

Preferred sources, on average for 8 topics

