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Matching the audit to your organization's aims and the available budget

MATCHING AUDIT TOOLS TO THE INFORMATION YOU NEED

What some people refer to as a communication audit, others might call a needs analysis or a communication effectiveness study. Angela Sinickas explains how to carry out an audit depending on your organization's need and budget, starting with observational metrics before qualitative and quantitative research.

Before launching "audience-invasive" research techniques, it helps to use observational metrics to record all you can about what's actually occurring in your communication environment. Some of these can be quick and easy, while others involve more time and trouble.

Start with an inventory to identify which channels are available and compare their characteristics to see what you have too much or too little of. Then conduct a *visual audit*. This can be as simple checking what managers have posted on manufacturing bulletin boards. It can be as complex as having international communicators grade each vehicle on brand consistency, design elements, writing style and so on, and compare them against professional standards in their home countries.

A *content analysis* can compare the actual amount of coverage you give topics in a publication or on a website against the ideal topics it should cover. It can also be used to assess the themes of employee feedback you're receiving through traditional or social media.

A *reading grade level analysis* can identify how much education it would take to understand your communications, which you can compare to the average education level of your employees.

Online usage statistics of various elements of your intranet, including social media, can tell you who's seeking out different types of information.

Tracking the amount of time spent by communicators or managers in various communication activities, and tracking how the budget is used, can give you great insights into how time and money might need to be reprioritized.

Conducting *pilot/control group studies* can show how different approaches to communication on a topic result in different business outcomes. These results can be used to calculate the ROI for a particular campaign or channel.

Performing an *operational communication flow analysis* can help identify communication breaks in business processes that could revenue increases or cost savings.

Qualitative research

An audit can include open-ended discussions with individuals and groups to identify communication opportunities and problems. Results will help you create the right questions for the survey you'll conduct next.

Executive interviews can determine what your leadership team considers ideal communication and how they evaluate the current system and the people managing it. You can include

very specific types of questions to help diagnose potential problems in communication among leadership team members called a *network analysis* or identify bottle-necks in how decisions are made and communicated.

Employee *focus groups* can also probe ideal and current communications. The groups can include a "*Starch test*" of aided and unaided recall of messages to identify what elements increase or inhibit readership of a recent edition of a main channel you use.

Quantitative research

Surveys quantify many of the issues identified from executive and employee qualitative research so that you can compare results among subgroups, track improvements over time and compare your own results against database norms. Communication elements measured through employee surveys can include levels of interest and information about key topics, actual knowledge of correct answers and current and preferred sources for each topic.

Many audit surveys also probe the effectiveness of communication skills for supervisors/managers and executives, the differences between what executives say and do, and a host of other broad questions about upward communication, credibility, accuracy, timeliness, and so on. A survey can also include questions to identify which pairs of departments or units have communication barriers that prevent them from being as effective as possible.

Conclusion

As you can see, there's no one profile of a communication audit. I've conducted some in just a few weeks; others have taken a year. You'll need to decide for yourself which combination of research tools will give you the information you need to manage your function within the reality of your own organization's needs and your available resources.



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