

Research your employees' preference for different channels before moving to a purely electronic format

DECIDING BETWEEN PRINT OR ONLINE NEWS

Many corporate editors are struggling with the decision of whether to replace a printed publication with an electronic one. But employees are often attached to printed publications, or simply find them easier to access, as revealed by the following analysis of staff surveys and past experience.

Corporate management, and many publication editors, have been rushing to kill their printed publications and make them available only online. The primary drivers for this move are reduced cost and potentially greater timeliness. Yet few companies are studying what happens to the readership of the publications once they migrate into the electronic world or, more importantly, how the change affects the business outcomes that are hoped for when employees read the publications.

What do staff surveys tell us?

A study of surveys conducted in companies with a history of a printed publication¹ reveals that 71 percent of employees want a printed version of the publication available:

- 31 percent prefer to have only a printed version.
- 29 percent prefer to have only an online version.
- 40 percent prefer to have it available in both formats.

In one company with no history of any type of company-wide employee publication, 98 percent wanted an electronic publication and 74 percent said they wanted a printed publication as well. Employees preferred a daily, weekly or monthly e-newsletter, and a

monthly or quarterly printed publication.

Focus groups held at a high-tech company with universal online access found that most employees preferred not to switch to a solely electronic format. They said it was a relief to read something off screen and many said that the printed version made them feel more connected to the company's culture.

Survey data also suggest that access to print tends to be better than for electronic publications:

- 9 percent said they have no access to a printed publication.
- 24 percent said they have no access to an electronically available publication.

Reasons for limited access

Lack of access is not limited to blue-collar employees. At two consulting companies where many employees work at client sites, they had great difficulty accessing the intranet due to firewalls. They accessed the intranet only when they were between assignments and back in a company office. These employees also preferred to have print because they read publications while commuting or flying. They said they were far less likely to read anything on the intranet due to lack of time during the work day.

Call center employees are also often unable to access intranets during the day when they are using customer call-related software and their call times and volume are being carefully monitored. Many of these employees are not allowed to take their breaks at their computers, which means that they have no time at all to access the intranet – even if it would have helped them answer customer questions better and faster.

For those employees who have access to a publication, these are the

channels that provide them with information they need for their jobs or just want to have (see Figure One):

- 54 percent from a column on the intranet homepage.
- 57 percent from a printed company-wide publication.
- 63 percent from an electronic company-wide publication.
- 71 percent from a printed "local" publication in their unit or location.

Should you move news online?

When deciding whether to post news on an intranet's homepage or to "push" information in an e-mailed format linked to the intranet, it's useful to realize how often individual employees look at the intranet and on what basis. On average, 41 percent say they look at the intranet at least once a day, and 32 percent look at it less than daily but at least once a week. That means that one-fourth look at it only a few times a month.

Just over half, 51 percent, say that visiting the intranet is part of their routine, regardless of the frequency of their visits. For example, employees at one company who work two weeks straight at a physically remote facility and then get two weeks off, reported that they regularly check the intranet the day they arrive and the day before they leave the facility.

About 17 percent of employees say they visit the intranet only if an e-mail, voicemail or printed newsletter alerts them to something new they might be interested in.

Over one-fourth, 28 percent, go only to find specific information they are trying to research.

And finally, when we asked employees what role they think the intranet should play in information delivery, this is what they said:

¹Note that the number of companies from which these data have been compiled varies by question. For example, most print publication numbers apply to 16 companies and the electronic newsletter questions apply to six. The range of variations at these companies is quite large depending on the type of company, the content of their publications and their frequency.



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- 53 percent say it's a good channel, but should be part of a mix with other sources.
- 36 percent say they would like most of their information on the intranet.
- 8 percent say they don't want to receive any information through the intranet.

Problems with the intranet

An anecdotal postscript provides another perspective on the figures above. A 2001 survey at one company identified that 39 percent of employees wanted most of their information through the intranet, but just over a year later, only 32 percent still felt that way. In 2001 their employees wanted the intranet to be a bigger source of information for them on 12 out of 14 topics. In response, the communicators started posting more and more information to the intranet.

By 2002, employees' reliance on the intranet matched what they said they had wanted the year before. However, in 2002 people wanted to rely less on the intranet for 9 out of those 14 subjects than they were currently. They also wanted to rely less on supervisors, surprisingly, and much more on higher levels of management and some printed channels. Write-in comments explained that the intranet had become too complex to find anything, and the search function didn't work well.

Impact on business outcomes

About five years ago, a large telecommunications company announced they were eliminating all printed internal publications at their units and sites, to be replaced by electronic channels. They retained only a single issues-oriented, quarterly, global magazine. However, more than two-thirds of

their employees worked in the field without computer access. The company's intention was for these employees' managers to share important information with them by either posting e-mails and e-newsletters on bulletin boards or discussing content in staff meetings.

Two years later, employees' understanding of the company's business strategy seemed to be on a downward trend. A year later, when the company looked at demographic breakdowns, they found the drop in understanding among field employees was more than 20 percent.

An increase in understanding among office employees had obscured the extent of the damage among the majority of their employees. The short-sighted decision to cut printing costs had come at the expense of having employees understand how they could help the company succeed.

Reasons for print preference

At a pharmaceutical company, focus groups identified that moving a highly useful sales newsletter from print to the intranet resulted in the sales staff assuming that the publication had been eliminated. The printed sales newsletter had matched their needs better because sales reps worked out of their homes and spent a great deal of their day sitting in doctors' waiting rooms. They used that time to read printed information they carried with them.

Although they all had intranet and e-mail access at home, they rarely took time to surf the intranet in the evenings when spending time with their families. While the e-newsletter certainly saved a lot of money, it also resulted in lower sales revenue.

What are the implications?

A pilot/control group study, from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign College of Communications, found that people tended to read more stories, and on a wider variety of topics, when they read the information laid out in print, than they did with the identical headlines listed on an electronic news site. This has serious implications for the range and breadth of information employees and customers choose to learn about online versus in print.

Print is certainly no panacea for meeting information needs, but when it's available frequently enough and tailored to provide relevant, actionable information for employees, it has certain advantages such as:

- being available to more people;
- being read more conveniently;
- maximizing employees' exposure to a wider variety of information that might be useful to them.

For now, at least, we can't just post news on the intranet and assume that we've communicated. To make sure messages are getting across, we should also "push" headlines with links to the intranet through e-mail and summarize the key information in print. scm

Figure One: How valuable publications are to employees



■ % of those with access who say this provides information they either want or need for their jobs