IOSH publishes a range of free technical guidance. Our guidance literature is designed to support and inform members and motivate and influence safety and health stakeholders.

**Getting the message? – guidance on communication**

The aim of this guide is to provide occupational safety and health (OSH) practitioners with a basic understanding of the importance of clear communication within organisations. The guide will also be of interest to managers, directors, HR personnel and others with an interest in intra-organisational communication.

Starting with a brief introduction to the subject, the guide covers:
- communication methods – the main types, including their pros and cons
- how to plan a communication strategy – including setting objectives, targeting your audience and evaluating success
- the types of communication flow
- barriers to communication and how to overcome them
- communicating safety and health messages
- auditing your communications strategy.

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What is communication?

There are numerous definitions of communication within an organisation or workplace. In this guide we use the following:

‘Communication is not simply the transmission of messages; rather, it is the mutual exchange of understanding and shared meaning leading to co-operation and better practices.’

Communication is a key element in the success of any workplace vision, policy or programme. It’s an interactive process of exchanging ideas and information. It’s the heartbeat of an organisation and its management functions, such as planning, organising, directing, managing, staffing, assessing and controlling.

For an organisation to survive and function effectively, there must be a constant flow of operational, strategic and corporate communication to inform, instruct and motivate target audiences, including owners, management, workforce, clients and contractors.

Effective communication is the blood flow that keeps the organisation alive. It also allows growth and development, and helps with anticipating, and responding to, changes in the external environment.

Communication models

Harold Lasswell,¹ the US political scientist, stated that a convenient way to describe an act of communication is to answer the following questions:

- Who?
- Says what?
- In which channel?
- To whom?
- With what effect?

Lasswell’s model (see Figure 1) met with some criticism for being a one-way linear observation from the communicator towards the audience, lacking the element of feedback, although not all communication requires a response.

The journalist, writer and academic, Wilbur Schramm, often referred to as the ‘father of communication studies’, proposed a model in which people interact in a constant, cyclical fashion (see Figure 2).²

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¹ Overview

![Figure 1: Lasswell's model of communication](image1)

![Figure 2: Schramm's model of communication](image2)
Simplistically viewed, communication is a process that takes place between a sender ("transmitter") and a receiver, involving a message and a channel through which the message can be transmitted. The receiver should have a method of sending feedback, to confirm that the message has been correctly received and understood, and to respond (see Figure 3).

However, noise and interference will affect both the ability of the message to get through and the content of the message. Noise is anything that interrupts or interferes in the communication process and can happen at any point to blot out part of, or the entire, message.

There are four kinds of noise:
- **physiological** – distraction caused by hunger, fatigue, headaches, medication, and other factors that affect how we feel and think
- **physical** – interference in our immediate environment, such as noises made by others, overly dim or bright lights, spam and pop-up ads, extreme temperatures, crowded conditions and so on
- **psychological** – certain mental states affect how we communicate and interpret others. For example, if you’re preoccupied with a problem, you may be inattentive at a team meeting. Likewise, prejudice and defensive feelings can interfere with communication
- **semantic** – this kind of noise occurs when words aren’t mutually understood, often because of the use of jargon or technical language.

Figure 3: Simplified process of communication
The role of communication
Effective communication is a prerequisite for good safety and health practice. It’s essential for key target audiences to be:
- informed – to ensure they ‘get the message’
- involved – to encourage important feedback opportunities
- listened to – to strengthen morale.

This guide aims to help an organisation make its safety and health communications more effective.

Communication that works
Communication in an organisation works most effectively when employees are informed and encouraged to engage, rather than being repeatedly instructed. Building a strong rapport with audiences is a key factor in obtaining loyalty, trust and co-operation.

Clarity of purpose
- Before issuing any communication, management should always have a clear idea of the information they want to disseminate or request
- Communication-related activity must always be consistent to ensure that communication and strategic business goals are met

Simplicity of content
- It may sound obvious, but over-complicated content can lead to mistrust and apathy, and a failure to secure co-operation from audiences at all levels
- Successful communication can be maximised by employing the acronym KISS (keep it simple, stupid!)

Importance of co-operation
- By creating open, two-way communication channels, both management and employees can better understand, and actively address, important issues and directives
- The importance of encouraging open communication cannot be emphasised enough; it enables employees to ‘buy into’ the organisation’s business philosophy, while recognising and even suggesting areas to improve services or procedures

Value of respect
- Respectful rather than officious communication gives employees factual information and inspires them with confidence to contribute, which in turn gives management the opportunity to create a positive, safe and productive working environment
- Mutual workplace respect through communication that works can also result in a speedier and less confrontational resolution of conflicts or difficulties

Case study 1 – E.ON’s occupational health strategy
Gas and electricity company, E.ON, has more than 50,000 employees at over 50 UK sites. In a determined strategy to address the increase in occupational health issues, estimated to be costing around £30m a year, an occupational health team was set up. The team’s communication strategy was literally to go desk-to-desk, talking to thousands of staff about health issues. Online self-help support materials were then developed to tackle stress and other mental health issues, and resulted in over 7,000 hits.

The number of new cases and days lost were reduced by 25 per cent. The programme was delivered to a diverse range of employees, including office workers, remote lone workers and engineers in power stations. E.ON’s innovative communication strategy won the Mental Health and Stress Management award in the Occupational Health Awards 2010. The company estimates the programme saved around £11.8m a year.
The seven Cs of effective communication

According to Herta A Murphy, Herbt W Hildebrandt and Jane P Thomas, authors and editors of *Effective business communications*, using ‘the seven Cs’ helps managers and workers to become better communicators by selecting the message content and style that best suits the purpose and recipient of a message (see Figure 4).

The seven Cs are applicable to both written and verbal messages. The sender (speaker or author) should plan and prepare to ensure that each communication is:

- **Complete**
  A complete safety and health communication should answer six questions:
  - Who?
  - What?
  - When?
  - Where?
  - Why?
  - How?

  It should include all the facts the target audience needs to fully understand and, if necessary, respond. It should aim to leave no questions in the mind of the receiver. As a result it:
  - aids better decision-making, as the recipients gets all the desired and critical information that’s relevant to them
  - saves the time and costs of additional ‘fill in’ communication
  - develops and enhances the reputation of the sender/department/organisation
  - ensures shared meaning.

- **Concise**
  Each message should communicate relevant information to the receiver clearly, without unnecessary wordiness, ambiguity or irrelevant detail. Concise information:
  - focuses on the key message(s)
  - is more appealing and comprehensible to the audience.

- **Clear**
  Don’t use technical or business jargon unless you’re confident that your audience is familiar with the terms. A clear communication focuses on a specific message or goal, rather than trying to achieve too much at once. For clarity, use exact and appropriate language. Clear communication:
  - enables audiences to understand a message effortlessly
  - enhances the meaning of the message.

- **Correct**
  All information in a communication should be checked for accuracy. Correctness also refers to the use of proper punctuation, grammar and spelling. Correct communication:
  - has a greater impact on the audience
  - increases confidence levels in the communicator.

- **Concrete**
  Supporting a message with concrete facts and figures as appropriate makes the communication more solid and convincing. A concrete message:
  - strengthens confidence in the overall message
  - minimises the potential for misinterpretation.

- **Considerate**
  Effective communication should consider the target audience. Strive to empathise with the audience’s viewpoints, background, mindset and comprehension levels, and make your messages personal. Emphasise what’s possible rather than what’s impossible. By showing an interest and fostering mutual respect, communication becomes more valuable. Consideration:
  - stimulates a positive reaction from the audience
  - conveys optimism.

- **Courteous**
  Courteous communication is where the message sender is sincere, polite, judicious, reflective and enthusiastic. Courteous communication:
  - takes other viewpoints into consideration
  - is positive and audience-focused
  - is unbiased.

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**Figure 4: The seven Cs of effective business communication**
Communication within an organisation typically comprises five crucial and interrelated types:
- written
- verbal
- visual
- non-verbal (body language)
- grapevine.

Written communication
An organisation cannot survive without written communication as its core method – though increasingly this is transmitted electronically rather than as hard copy. Clarity and understanding comes from accurate communication across all parts of the organisation and is essential for constructive workplace interaction. For example, these include: management setting and monitoring strategic targets; a summary of regular team meetings.

Different situations and messages require different forms of communication.

Types
- Memos, letters, reports, newsletters, annual reports, procedures, posters, handouts, email, intranet and social media

Cons
- A lack of immediate or direct feedback can result in time-critical problems or in assumed acceptance when this is not the case
- A lack of feedback can also be linked to human failings, such as forgetfulness, indifference or laziness.
- A delay in feedback can also result in not always finding out in time if written messages have been misinterpreted
- Can take many drafts to compose, costing time and money.
- Badly composed messages can distort meaning

Electronic written communication
Within the written communication section, it’s worth expanding a little on electronic methods of email and intranet as communication tools.

Email
Email is an excellent way of sending concise, timely information to a lot of people.

While sending emails is both easy and cheap, it’s a mistaken belief that it’s cheaper to send information electronically (often in the form of lengthy attachments) to avoid printing costs. In fact, the cost of printing tens or hundreds of individual copies on laser printers can be higher than the cost of photocopying and distributing the document.

Pros
- A consistent message about an issue can be quickly shared with many staff
- Fast and inexpensive
- The message can be prepared in advance and scheduled for delivery at a later time or date
- Attachments can be included or links provided to additional online information
- Recipients can respond to the message (this can be turned off as circumstances warrant)
- Voting options can simplify responses

Cons
- Can be perceived as ‘too much information’ or corporate spam
- Not always appropriate for the audience
- Benefits only staff who work in close proximity to a computer
- Even using the immediacy of email, other personal or work-related priorities may delay or limit feedback

Intranet
An intranet is a website available to staff that’s generally available only in the office behind a firewall. Intranets, like anything Internet-related, are constantly evolving. Early intranets tended to be glorified online newsletters. Today, intranets should be key business tools and staff should use them in this way. Use the intranet to put forward salient points, and provide references to more complete information that staff can access online or in print, or tell them how or when they’ll receive more information.

A good practice is to designate that the intranet homepage be the default start page when staff start their browsers.
Pros
- Provides consistent, up-to-date information in an appealing visual format
- Provides information that serves as a jumping-off point for further discussion.
- Can be an information resource, where common notices, policies and so on, are kept, reducing the need for online storage because one copy serves many people
- The perfect place to post weekly reports, memos and targets to make information available to all
- An advantage over email is potential interactivity, eg employees can work on shared files
- An inexpensive medium

Cons
- Staff must seek out the information; it’s not delivered, as with an email
- Misses hard-to-reach staff who don’t have easy access to a computer
- Usually requires some technical ability to prepare content, although some software is very user-friendly
- If information isn’t current, staff won’t feel compelled to use it, and its effectiveness as a communication tool wanes

Verbal communication
Effective verbal communication comes from analysing what an individual or audience needs to know, followed by conveying and/or reinforcing that message through the spoken word clearly and concisely.

Also, by seeking and using verbal and non-verbal feedback on how a message is received, the speaker increases the likelihood of successful communication.

Whenever possible, when the subject matter is short-term or when a direct response is required, face-to-face communication is best. It’s also the quickest way to check understanding.

Verbal communication is also valuable as part of an overall plan when rolling-out a new policy, strategy or operational system, as it is proactive, ie it does rely on others receiving and reading a written communication.

A recorded verbal presentation can also be the basis for a supporting information cascade to those not present at an initial presentation.

The most effective use of verbal communication is when participants can interactively formulate and brainstorm ideas, develop, comment on and approve plans, discuss changes and agree implementation steps.

Types
- Meetings, presentations, lectures, workshops, informal/formal conversations (face-to-face, phone/videoconference/Skype/intranet/extranet)

Pros
- Face-to-face communication builds rapport and trust
- Generates high levels of understanding and transparency
- Not rigid – flexibility enables changes to previous decisions
- Rapid feedback facilitates quick decisions
- Essential for teamwork and group synergy
- Best for performance management
- Excellent method for conveying private, confidential and sensitive information in one-to-one situations

Cons
- Can’t be relied on for most critical health, safety and environmental communications (although it can be within highly trained teams, eg emergency responders, air traffic controllers)
- Without written back-up, no proof of a conversation can lead to ‘your word against mine’ disputes. When agreement is important, verbal communication should always be followed up by written confirmation or meeting minutes
- Requires greater levels of attention and receptiveness from the listener(s)
- Misunderstandings can occur (eg the case in the First World War of a message being verbally passed down the trenches, starting out as ‘Send reinforcements we’re going to advance’ and becoming distorted into ‘Send three and fourpence [3s/4d] we’re going to a dance’)
Visual communication
Advances in technology have resulted in an increasing use of images, icons, infographics, video and applications as part of both personal and corporate communications. For corporate communication, visual elements should be used for internal as well as external uses. For example, standard pictograms are widely used to communicate key safety and health messages, but a visual element in other key safety communications is much rarer, eg in policy, procedures, risk assessments, routine reports and so on. The presentation of complex information in a quick-to-digest visual format is an asset to effective communication:

Types
- Charts, diagrams, drawings, tables, graphs, displays, videos, cartoons, electronic images, photographs, pictograms, infographics, ‘dashboards’ summarising key data

Pros
- Strong relevant imagery is a powerful communication tool and has been since primitive times – a single, well-chosen image can convey multiple nuances of meaning better than a single word
- A combination of words and images has greater impact than words alone
- Images can be standardised to create a specific ‘language’ for a particular application, eg in a process system P&ID or an FMEA. Once the ‘language’ is learned, a great deal of key information can be communicated in a single diagram
- Meaningful visual aids in presentations result in greater attention to, and retention of, information
- Information in a table, chart or graph increases audience understanding and encourages participant questions

Cons
- Bad design/presentation detracts from the message leading to communication breakdown
- Not all topics can be presented visually, eg policy

The Tamdown Group, a construction contractor with 600 employees, introduced a new work safety strategy to motivate the workforce to improve standards in an industry that claims the life of roughly one worker a week and seriously injures 27. The visually based communication programme majored around PowerPoint presentations, supported by interactive technical sessions, workshops, and daily 10-minute forum-style worker engagement sessions on every operational site. Group Health and Safety Manager, Andrew Denby said: ‘Successful communication is about getting people to take key messages on board. There’s a lot more trust and co-operation, and workers are far more open and likely to come up with suggestions for change.’ Crucially, the Tamdown Group saw employers’ liability insurance premiums cut by £50,000 a year. Accident rates dropped from eight in a typical year to just one. The drop in accidents has also resulted in further savings of between £14,000–£25,000 a year based on reduced investigation costs and replacement labour charges alone.

Case study 2 – Tamdown Group’s safety campaign
Non-verbal communication/body language

An important aspect of face-to-face and one-to-one communication involves non-verbal elements, often referred to as ‘body language’. Being aware of what to look for in others, while making sure your own body language gives the right signals, is a major factor in managing workplace situations. Body language can back up the words you use and how you say those words, but can also betray your true feelings if you’re uncomfortable in a conversation. It can be difficult to reverse the ‘first impressions’ others feel if you display negative body language early in a relationship – in work situations as well as life in general.

Experts believe that upwards of 75 per cent of all human communication is non-verbal. So, while body language statistics vary according to each situation, it’s generally accepted that non-verbal communication is crucial to how we understand, or fail to understand, each other, especially when communication involves emotional or attitudinal aspects.

Key body language characteristics to look for are:
- posture
- gestures
- eye movement/contact
- facial expressions
- mirroring.

Posture
How you sit or stand during a conversation is important. Your posture should be open, with your body turned to face the other person whenever possible. Leaning forward slightly conveys attentiveness and interest.

Gestures
Simple gestures, such as nodding your head and opening your palms, can have a positive effect on a conversation. Animated hands convey commitment and enthusiasm, though be careful not to overdo it.

Negative body language that is likely to impede progress includes: glancing at your watch, playing with your pen or doodling; using your mobile device in a meeting. Such actions are likely to be seen as evidence of disinterest or a lack of co-operation and could result in communication faltering or breaking down altogether.

Other negative gestures include clenched fists, folded arms, rolling eyes, shrugs, shuffling and finger pointing.

Eye movement/contact
Maintaining eye contact is a key to communication success. Looking someone in the eye when talking or listening demonstrates interest. It also conveys confidence, which is important in work situations. Not looking someone in the eye gives the opposite messages, ie lack of interest or nervousness.

Facial expressions
Faces are by nature expressive and can give away our emotions before we have a chance to say what we feel. It’s important to keep your facial expressions positive during a typical work-related conversation.

It may be obvious, but smiling is very important and helps the other party to relax during a discussion. Even in negative situations, it’s best to avoid negative facial expressions, such as frowning, scowling, glaring, blankness or sneering.

Mirroring
When positive body language is mirrored or synchronised between people, it indicates a shared feeling of rapport, empathy and trust. Matching body language can also extend to verbal signals – notably speech pace, and the pitch and tone of voice.

However, when body language signals differ, or negative or aggressive body language occurs, engagement is less comfortable and less productive. Avoid saying something you don’t mean because your body language can give you away and cause feelings of discord, discomfort or even rejection.
Grapevine communication

The ‘grapevine’ is an informal channel of business communication, so called because it extends throughout an organisation in all directions, regardless of authority levels. Typically, it’s more significant at lower levels and/or remote parts of an organisation, as employees use the grapevine when other communication channels are weak or non-existent.

The grapevine tends to thrive on ‘bad news’, rather than good. Rumours and untruths can travel quickly and it’s often difficult to trace the source. Smart communicators are aware of the grapevine but rely on ‘official’ communication channels in their plans – intentionally using the grapevine will undermine other channels in the longer term and potentially have a negative impact.

Types
- Rumour, assumptions, guesswork, misinformation, factual (the grapevine can be accurate)

Pros
- Grapevine channels can carry and spread information rapidly
- Feedback to management can be quick compared to formal channels of communication
- Creates a sense of unity among employees and helps group cohesiveness
- Can be used as an add-on technique where formal communication fails

Cons
- Grapevine channels carry and spread misinformation rapidly, typically emphasising ‘bad news’ in preference to ‘good’
- Can spread misinformation based on rumour not fact
- Untrustworthy, as it doesn’t follow official accepted communication paths
- Productivity can be hampered, as employees spend more time ‘gossiping’ than working
- Can lead to mistrust, even hostility, towards management

Communicating with hard-to-reach groups
In today’s hi-tech work environment, communication activity is heavily focused online.

Many employers have large proportions of their workforce who don’t use, or aren’t allowed to use, email or online communication tools, such as social media, during work hours.

For organisations with non-wired employees, such as those on the factory floor, in the warehouse, or on the construction site, effective communication requires careful planning based on analysing both channels and resources.

There’s an irony that certain hard-to-reach groups are best reached by using some of the ‘old ways’ of communicating, such as:
- pay packet communication to carry important bulletins
- information/posters at ‘stop points’, such as ‘clocking in/out’ machines, coffee machines, locker rooms, canteens/rest rooms
- establishing when, where and what to communicate on a face-to-face basis for weekly/monthly briefings/team meetings to help improve employees’ understanding and commitment.

However, once out of the work environment, the majority of hard-to-reach employees are tech-savvy people who spend their personal time flitting between Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, and so can be reached with planned online initiatives, such as e-bulletins, without appearing to encroach on their free time.

Choosing the appropriate communication channel
In today’s fast-paced work environments, management depends on technology to communicate. Yet most organisations fail to provide training on how to choose the most appropriate and productive communication channel.

The more complicated the message is, the more personal and interactive the channel should be to allow for human elements such as voice tone, facial expression and physical presence. For example, bad (and good) news is better delivered in face-to-face or one-to-one situations, depending on the group or individual content. Routine, easy-to-understand messages, on the other hand, can be presented via a more ‘static’ channel.
The flowchart in Figure 5 provides a guide for choosing the best communication method.

The communication channel you choose will depend on what you want to achieve from your communication and the audience you need to reach. The right channels for raising awareness would very probably be the wrong channels for gaining ownership and commitment. Similarly the needs of a manager working in head office will be very different from an engineer working in the field.

As a general guide, consider selecting channels in the following order, from active to passive:
- team meetings/open forums (face-to-face group/one-to-one individual)
- site visits
- video conference (internal and external participants)
- webcast/teleconference (internal and external participants)
- email
- voicemail
- intranet
- letter/report
- events/seminars/roadshows.

Use a quick reference chart, such as the one in Figure 6, to identify the purpose of your communication and to select the appropriate channel(s) before you send it. Better still, standardise the communication functions of your team by creating a custom chart to suit the unique circumstances of your organisation that the workforce/team can agree to follow.

**Figure 5: Flowchart for choosing the best communication method**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Communication channels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiations/policy discussions</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good/band news</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project implementation</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project updates</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documents for review/response</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detailed information</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quick updates</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard copy required</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urgent message</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 6: Reference chart for identifying the purpose of communication and appropriate medium(s)**
Keep these important principles in mind when making your choice of channel(s) before communicating:

- call a face-to-face meeting only when physical presence is required
- if the meeting does not require problem-solving, brainstorming, or input from employees, use an alternative way to share or distribute information.
- when the information distributed is merely FYI, consider sending out a group voicemail, an email, or a memo
- talk voice-to-voice when a message is potentially confusing or emotional
- don’t use voicemail as a way to avoid conflict.

The following is a summary of the key channels mentioned above.

**Team meetings/open forums**

**Pros**
- Can make communication personal and relevant to the team involved
- Opportunity for discussion, feedback, questioning and ideas
- Genuine open dialogue
- Competent line manager can facilitate a lively and interactive session
- Can help build understanding and involvement
- People feel heard

**Cons**
- Success depends on the skill of the leader
- Time commitment for both manager and audience
- Beware of content overload where other channels are more effective for information delivery
- Dismissive or aggressive responses can close down dialogue
- Line managers can feel disempowered if their decisions are overruled or contradicted

**Think about...**
- Making the best possible use of this time – it’s valuable
- Making sure you uphold meeting discipline
- Issuing agenda/summary of discussion
- Raising difficult issues or asking for questions to prompt real debate

**Site visits**

**Pros**
- Shows leaders are listening and want to see what the real issues are
- Keeps management in touch with the real issues
- Promotes dialogue and understanding

**Cons**
- Leaders won’t experience the real issues if treated as ‘royal visits’
- May do more harm than good if management show they are out of touch by what they say
- Time-consuming for senior management to visit multiple sites

**Think about...**
- Including a period of shadowing/listening alongside organised forums
- Briefing leaders on site issues prior to visit
- Tracking issues raised and reporting back on actions

**Video conference, webcast and teleconference**

**Pros**
- Opportunity for senior managers to reach mass audiences
- Enables consistent messages in real time
- Can involve Q&As

**Cons**
- May be expensive
- The right technology needs to be in place
- May be difficult for all staff to be available at the same time

**Think about...**
- Researching new technology that’s emerging in this area

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**Case study 3 – Message management**

A leading manufacturer of ‘kettle’ or ‘boiling water’ taps received a complaint that a child required a visit to A&E after being badly scalded after apparently bypassing the approved tap safety device. The company responded initially by pointing out the positive facts that the tap had an exemplary safety record, exceeded all safety regulations, and came with a concise safety instruction leaflet. They then addressed the negative aspects, voicing concern and regret at the incident, while pointing out the safety hazards, particularly to children, of other long-established household items such as kettles, cookers and fires – before finally making the positive statement that a technician would call to check the tap was installed and working correctly and to rectify free-of-charge if not.
Email

Pros
- Can reach mass audience fast
- Cost-effective and simple to use
- Consistent and controlled message
- Reaches the recipient directly
- Good for information/awareness/instruction

Cons
- Not everyone has access
- Impersonal and open to misinterpretation
- Can result in information overload
- Can’t always tell if messages have been read
- Easy to send to wrong circulation list

Think about...
- Using the ‘Subject’ box to emphasise the key message
- Keeping it short and simple
- Using headings and bullet points for key messages to break up the text

Intranet

Pros
- Fast and consistent
- Can be entertaining and visually ‘snappy’
- Good for information store, reference and awareness-raising
- Info shares and bulletin boards are good for involvement and discussion
- Webstats show who is reading

Cons
- Not everyone has access
- Relies on people seeking out information
- Difficult to police
- Can become unwieldy, hard to navigate and full of outdated information

Think about...
- Including ‘killer content’ to draw people in

Events/roadshows

Pros
- Opportunity for key people to reach mass audience face-to-face.
- Flexible and responsive
- Can include Q&A sessions and break-out groups to involve people
- Can build team spirit and motivate
- Can be used to address controversial issues

Cons
- Agenda set by management may not be what audience wants or needs
- May be expensive
- Time consuming for organisers, presenters and audience

Think about...
- Involving staff in setting the agenda and format
- Involving staff as hosts or facilitators

Voicemail

Pros
- Helpful for remote workers
- Opportunity to hear about issues from senior leaders

Cons
- People will tune out/hang up if the message is too long

Think about...
- Using a text message to alert remote workers to an urgent voicemail announcement

Letter

Pros
- Ability to draft and re-draft to satisfaction, as doesn’t have the immediacy requirement of email
- Has credibility and authority when used as a formal communication
- Formality focuses the mind on better construction
- Provides a permanent record for later reference

Cons
- Can’t tell if communication has been read
- Lack of immediate feedback can result in assumed acceptance when this might not be the case
- Can be seen by recipients as a way of prolonging or avoiding difficult situations

Think about...
- Making the final paragraph of a formal letter state what action you expect the recipient to take
Whether the need is to communicate general day-to-day information or news about major changes in the organisation or work practices, the best communication starts with thorough planning. At the outset, it’s a good idea to set out your plan in writing (see the template in Figure 6).

**Situation analysis**
As part of the planning process, consider how your organisation’s safety and health mission statement can underpin your communication strategy. A mission statement’s purpose is to get employees to comprehend what the organisation stands for, its purpose, and how they can work towards common strategic goals. This important objective is not always easy to achieve.

Typically, a safety and health mission statement attempts to cover all facets and might read:
- Our policy is to provide a safe and healthy work environment for all employees and others affected by our work activities, to promote occupational and environmental safety and to minimise the likelihood and the effects of work-related injuries and illnesses.

A more concise declaration could be, as in the case of the IOSH mission statement:
- A world of work which is safe, healthy and sustainable.

Whatever the approach, mission statements can be perceived as bland and boring:
- Simply repeating the same ‘blurb’ until it becomes meaningless might damage the effectiveness of both your mission statement and your communication strategy.

However, if approached correctly, ‘familiarity breeds favourability’ and ‘familiarity is the bedrock of reputation’, according to the Ipsos MORI report ‘Can you hear me?’.

A good communication tactic is to include varied short phrases or paragraphs in every communication, emphasising aspects of the safety and health mission statement. This could be in the form of a memo, a notice, a report or leaflet. For example:
- include ‘Providing a safe environment for all’ in the sign-off statement of an email
- create a fixed message template for notice board postings saying ‘minimising risk makes sense’.

**What do you want to happen? (objectives/aims)**
Be clear about your overall communication objectives. Begin by seeing the end. What do you want to achieve, why and by when? Carefully address:
- your target audience and what that person or group wants or expects from you
- the message(s) you need to convey
- the communication channel(s) and method(s) to be used
- the timescale – overall and for each step
- any internal or external constraints on budget or resources
- potential language barriers
- those in the target audience who have special requirements, eg personnel with disabilities.

The subject matter to communicate may be simple, but the process can be complex. To begin changing behaviours and attitudes directly can be extremely challenging. Your communication should aim to inform and persuade your audience, while giving them a sense of control in any decision process. It’s much better to target behaviour – attitudinal changes may follow if your communication is successful.

### Communication plan for: [ ]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall communication objective:</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Audience</strong></td>
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Figure 7: Communication plan template
Don’t forget to incorporate any relevant legislative, regulatory, technological or organisational requirements as part of communication management. Bear in mind, though, that the ‘threat’ of legislation as the primary reason for any safety and health communication should be carefully considered to avoid audience switch-off. Try to identify good internal business reasons for your proposed changes, rather than implying ‘we have to because a third party says so’. Care must also be taken to keep communication ‘document control’ up to date in this scenario.

**Who do you need to influence?**

Your target audience will be defined by the nature and structure of your organisation and the message(s) to be conveyed. For example, is your audience on-site office or warehouse employees directly affected by an internal construction project, or off-site managers supervising a construction project?

Understanding what each audience needs and expects, and adapting your messages accordingly, greatly enhances your chances of communicating successfully. Audiences may also comprise more people than you first imagine. So, your communication technique needs to project beyond the initial audience to others who may well receive the message via a subsequent ‘cascade’.

For example, your ‘initial audience’ may be the line management who will take a decision to act on your message and communicate to the ‘secondary audience’, the frontline workers, especially if you wish to receive feedback. In this case, make sure that your message contains ‘trickle-down’ content to be disseminated in a suitable format to avoid problems of miscommunication and misinterpretation. Technology has aided huge advances in the global market and cultural differences must be considered when communicating.

Prepare your audience to be receptive. It might sound obvious but it’s essential to understand your audience so you can focus communication content on their needs and goals using their language and using their preferred communication methods and channels. By determining what your audience knows, needs to know, wants to know, and expects, communications can be designed to suit their specific needs rather than employing a scattergun or one-size-fits-all approach.

An audience will respond either consciously or routinely if:
- the message is in their self-interest
- they trust and believe the person delivering the message
- they like or identify with the message itself.

So how can you organise your message to have the best chance of connecting positively? First, identify the critical core of what you want to say before you begin writing or talking. Then ‘be the audience’ you’re addressing – and by empathising you should be able to tailor the information, supporting evidence or reasoning, expected outcomes and so on for your specific audience(s).

**What do you want to communicate?**

Develop key messages to meet both your objectives and the different communication needs of each target audience. Be concise and don’t overload each message with irrelevant material or detail. Structure when and how to disseminate key messages as part of your communication plan.

To avoid information overload or confusion, keep the number of key messages to a minimum, ideally between three and five per communication.

If a communication is purely informational, then one key message would suffice. For example:
- ‘The office will be closed only on Christmas Day and Boxing Day’.
The introduction of a new work procedure will require more key messages. For example:

- ‘After the consultation process, new circuit assembly equipment will be installed’
- ‘This will further increase employee safety and improve profitability’
- ‘There will be no layoffs or changes to basic work procedures’.

Build on success

- When developing or reviewing a communications strategy, consider existing methods that already work or have worked – and use them
- Using proven existing channels with the right message at the right time is an effective and familiar way to reach your audience
- Be creative with message presentation to stimulate and avoid audience fatigue
- Use practical examples and peer group dialogue to ensure the credibility of the message sender (eg plumbers listen to plumbers)

Horses for courses

Remember that the same key message may need to be reworked into a different tone and style when addressing a different audience.

How to maximise the impacts(s) of your message

Good communication is like good marketing: your message (product) must be ‘sold’ to your audience (customers). The message must be ‘packaged’ so that your audience understands and pays attention to it. To engage your audience, focus on benefits, not features, to help ensure the perceived advantages for the receiver outweigh any downsides or additional demands on their time/effort.

As part of your overall strategy, following your communication (promotion), find ways to measure its effectiveness, ie how well the message was ‘bought’ by your audience. Then, include what you learn in your future communication plans.

News/message management

Truth vs. spin

In work environments, ‘spin’ techniques (ie not presenting a balanced message) rarely result in long-term benefit for either the organisations or the communicator. In all your communications, concentrate on facts conveyed in balanced, straightforward language.

If faced with a negative situation, to help avoid rumour and exaggeration, communicate the relevant available facts and issues clearly, quickly and consistently.

Sandwich method

You can reduce the scope for misinterpretation by presenting a negative message, or bad news, in a way that starts and ends with positive statements.

The ‘sandwich’ method should:
- identify the good news before the negative event
- clearly state the bad news
- conclude by outlining a future positive outcome/benefit.

For example:

‘I’m pleased to report that our new workplace safety procedures have improved accident rates by 8 per cent over the past six months. We did have one incident in the last quarter which, regrettably, involved a serious injury, but on a more positive note this incident resulted in the equipment upgrade originally planned for next year being brought forward, with resulting benefits for both operator safety and team productivity.’

So, present the facts. Don’t make excuses or try to shirk corporate or personal responsibility. Yes it happened and it wasn’t good, but here’s what we’ve done about it. Don’t fall into the trap of trying to cover up – and don’t finger-point or allocate blame. Focus on the behaviour or circumstances rather than the individual. Rather than demonstrating a blame culture, show you’re a problem solver.

Managing expectation

All communication should be structured to raise expectation, not lower it. If employees expect a positive and desirable outcome, they’ll typically perform at the level expected of them.

In his 1964 book Work and motivation, Victor Vroom argues that the strength of your motivation to act in a certain way depends on the strength of your expectation that:
- a given level of activity will result in a defined outcome
- if a high level of activity is required, this outcome will be attractive.

To manage expectation effectively, you need to understand exactly what is expected of you, your team and the wider workforce. Expectations are linked to initial objectives, realistic priorities and timeframes, and performance projections. By providing clear and direct expectations, you’ll help employees focus their performance on what’s important and what will lead to the desired outcomes.

As well as being aware of the preferred channels of your target audience, help them by clearly summarising your communication plan and methods. Inform them of how you expect them to communicate key issues in turn, so they don’t become obstacles to the success of the project.
Continual dialogue with your audience during a task makes it easier to measure progress, assess risks and adjust actions.

Another crucial aspect of managing expectation is to speak up and make adjustments when initial expectations become unrealistic, or unexpected changes jeopardise a project. When faced with challenging situations, make sure you create an environment of trust in which employees feel comfortable to share their concerns and raise issues.

Ensure your plan includes likely contingencies. To do this, assess the potential risks and identify options to avoid being caught out by surprise. Ask yourself what could put your key objectives at risk. What could you do to minimise these risks? Are there alternatives? And what additional support or resources would you need?

Managing expectation proactively increases your chances of success, and aids effective planning and communication.

**Tone and style, grammar, editing and proofing**

**Tone and style**
Business writing should be convincing, informational, influential and professional. Use plain business-like language without being stuffy or full of jargon. Abbreviations and acronyms should be avoided unless they’re familiar to the target audience.

Use words and expressions your readers will understand. What makes sense to one group may be gibberish to others. Information must be clear to all audiences. You can vary your style, sentence structure and vocabulary to sound forceful or objective, personal or formal. The right choice depends on the nature of your message and your relationship with the reader/audience.

For most business communication use a ‘conversational tone’ for readability wherever possible. This creates synergy between you and the recipient and increases understanding.

Be accurate, non-discriminatory and include examples and visual aids when appropriate. Use facts and research to back-up claims and arguments.

Persuasive writing must be clear and concise, enabling the reader to follow the logic and be encouraged to agree with the content and its conclusions.

An ‘informal tone’ is often best for communications with close colleagues or friends, while a ‘formal tone’ may be important for communicating official messages (eg where legal compliance of an internal or external communication is important).

**Grammar**
Written communication should balance the needs and expectations of your target audience and the general culture in your organisation – while expressing your own personality. You can do this by varying grammar, word choices, sentence structure and style. Poor grammar, spelling mistakes and inaccuracies will typically distract the recipient from the core message by making the communication harder to understand.

**Plain English**
Try to use plain English, avoiding buzzwords, jargon and slang. Plain English means writing in a way that’s easy to understand at first reading. It doesn’t mean using simple words at the expense of more accurate ones.

To make plain writing effective, plan your piece before you write it. Consider your audience and what they will expect to get from it. Organise your material in a way that helps readers to grasp the important information quickly and to navigate through the document easily.

Remember:
- shorter sentences are more effective
- use lists and headings to break up text
- use familiar words and replace jargon with plainer alternatives
- use only the words you really need
- wordiness often comes from trying to make a simple procedure sound impressive
- spell out initials and acronyms on first use, eg high-definition multimedia interface (HDMI).

**Edit, edit, edit**
Make every effort to trim unnecessary words, phrases or sentences. But remember: the best rose bushes are pruned to perfection, not to extinction.

**Proofing**
Proofreading is a necessary evil to eliminate typos and grammatical errors.
- Make sure you proofread with a fresh mind, otherwise you’ll read what you want to read, not what’s actually there
- Reading the document out loud can help you pick up mistakes
- As back-up, ask another person to proofread your document
Evaluating success
At the outset of any communication strategy, inform senior management, the CEO and relevant Board members how you intend to measure the success of your strategy, and:
- set realistic, achievable objectives that can be measured and evaluated
- spend time on your plan and get the whole team involved
- remember that a professional communication strategy will improve the reputation and standing of an individual, team or department – it may also help protect or improve budgets.

To measure recipient responses and take-up, methods of evaluating communication campaigns typically include:
- surveys
- interviews
- questionnaires
- reviews
- audits.

Remember, you may need to collect some ‘baseline data’ before beginning your communication strategy, or you won’t be able to measure what’s changed.

Most business communication aims to change personal behaviours and individual attitudes, or to effect changes in practices and/or procedures. The aim of evaluation is not simply to prove that communication efforts caused change, but to assess the quality of those efforts.

Some evaluation focuses solely on the ‘Outputs’ (the end result of the activities) – but it’s also important to evaluate the full range of:
- ‘inputs’ – what resources went into the programme
- ‘activities’ – what materials/training and so on went into the programme
- ‘outcomes/impacts’ – the changes and/or benefits that resulted from the strategy.

In other words, which of the communication activities were most effective in causing any opinion and/or behaviour changes among the target audience?

Evaluations add little value unless there are also follow-up plans and procedures to make sure that suitable actions are taken and lessons learned from their findings.

Case study 4 – NG Bailey’s poster campaign
A UK-based engineering and facilities services firm, NG Bailey, saw an 18 per cent year-on-year reduction in safety and health incidents following a hard-hitting visual safety campaign. The poster campaign was based around key dates in the year that staff could identify with – a child’s birthday, a summer holiday, Mother’s Day and Christmas. It used shock statistics and graphic images to communicate safety messages to its 3,000 staff and teams of subcontractors nationwide. The approach was designed to be topical, eye-catching, thought-provoking and – above all – memorable, to guard against complacency and avoid being hackneyed and tired.

Stuart Mortimer, the firm’s director of safety, health, environment and quality, said: ‘After a lot of hard work, we’re seeing a consistent decline in the number of workplace accidents. However, the communication challenge is to ensure important safety messages stay at the forefront of everyone’s mind, and to explore new ideas for achieving this.’
Regular, reliable and consistent communication is needed in any organisation. Regular and efficient workplace communication practices help to achieve the desired outcomes for both the employee and the organisation. All messages, internal and external, must be integrated.

Typical communication flows are:
- **Top-down/downward** (management output)
- **bottom-up/upward** (employee input, management as recipients)
- **lateral/horizontal** (between peers)
- **diagonal** (to other ‘departments’ or groups)
- **external** (to outside groups/suppliers/contractors).

**Bottom-up**
It’s important for management to listen to and acknowledge bottom-up communication, as it can be an effective means of providing information about employees’ needs, values, perceptions and opinions. This can help an organisation – through its management teams – to select and tailor programmes and policies to meet the specific needs of its employees.

**Lateral**
Lateral communication is between similar levels of the hierarchy in an organisation. It’s a way of sharing information and resolving differences or communication gaps between and within departments or groups.

**Diagonal**
Diagonal communication is between, say, a manager of one department and employees of another. For instance, a safety and health manager, in order to design and implement an effective new practice or training module, may need to interact with operations personnel to discover how they perform their task.

**External**
External communication is between an organisation or manager and external groups and stakeholders, such as suppliers, customers and financial institutions.
Communication is productive only if the message sent is received with the intended meaning.

Communication barriers result in messages becoming lost or distorted.

In a successful organisation, employees at all levels strive to avoid communication barriers and gaps. Note that barriers may result from the actions or inactions of the sender, the recipient, or both.

Typical barriers include:
- poor quality communication tools, eg unreliable phone, IT or postal systems; meetings at inconvenient times or locations
- using a lack of time as an excuse
- using ambiguity and jargon
- ‘Chinese whispers’, or person-to-person miscommunication or chain distortion – where recipients prefer to listen to and believe unofficial rather than official communications
- not tailoring the message for the planned recipients, eg too much detail in some areas, not enough in others
- not seeking or giving feedback to ensure accurate understanding – this can be particularly vital in emergency response.

Barrier-free safety and health communication reduces misunderstandings, improves efficiency, prevents injury and illness and thus improves both organisational effectiveness and the bottom line.

Reasons for communication barriers
- Leadership under pressure and/or with heavy workloads can result in communication being rushed, ignored or forgotten
- Too many, or repetitive, messages can have a negative effect and be ignored
- Tight deadlines shorten communication timescales, so messages and/or the time available for clarification is limited
- Complex organisational structures hinder communication cascades
- Managers not taking ownership of communication
- Incorrect use of communication methods results in communication gaps
- Messages are not relevant to the audience/receiver

Avoiding communication breakdown
- It’s essential to manage information flow, to avoid misinterpretation or omissions
- Use simple and clear language – avoid ambiguity and jargon
- Allocate sufficient time for effective communication, including to respond to queries
- Listen attentively and carefully – there’s a difference between ‘listening’ and ‘hearing’
- Never assume – if in doubt, always ask questions to increase understanding (this applies to both the communicator and the recipient)
- The simpler the organisational structure, the more effective the communication
- Deliver and receive negative feedback constructively and maintain dialogue to avoid a communication collapse
- Simple messages can be conveyed orally through one-to-one interaction or at group meetings – complex messages need supporting documents, and significant messages may need reminders, eg a memo

There is greater credibility for messages delivered using a range of communication channels (ie ‘blended communications’).
A vibrant safety and health culture should be at the heart of every organisation and, when investing in a new initiative, integrated internal (and external) communication is vital.

Communicating relevance
Communicating key aspects of safety and health in the workplace (hazards, risks and controls, responsibilities, sources of expertise, questions about all of these) is a skill needed by employers, employees and their representatives and, of course, occupational safety and health professionals.

Therefore:
- a line manager’s quality of communication on safety and health issues is critical to employee engagement
- key messages must be presented to employees in such a way that they understand, co-operate, adopt and feed back.

Communication plan checklist
When developing a new practice, procedure or complete safety and health programme, the communication plan should be inclusive and interactive. Typically, this plan should include the following elements:

- cascaded information sessions should be held with employees to inform them of the new programme/practice – sessions should be led by line personnel, so that they can demonstrate their commitment and support
- briefing packs, with FAQs, should be given to those leading the sessions – these might include a standard visual presentation (eg PowerPoint) or questions for group discussion
- programme information packs should be provided to all those affected, with additional information packs available on request
- organisational newsletters should be sent to all employees
- visual materials should be posted in high-traffic or activity-relevant site areas, for a defined period
- postings should be made on the organisation’s website or intranet
- the topic should be covered in new starter inductions
- emails should be sent to all employees
- targeted emails should be sent to specific employees
- materials should be sent through the internal mail.

Unclear, inaccurate or inconsistent communication wastes valuable time and resources, alienates employees and damages goodwill within the organisation and for its overall objectives/strategies.

Grabbing attention
To grab attention, you must also capture the imagination. It’s then easier to achieve the behavioural change(s) required when introducing new safety and health practices. A communication strategy that uses attention-grabbing content to engage an audience immediately is likely to be more effective.

To persuade, you need to appeal to both emotion and logic. Create a ‘hook’ as an attention-getter. This can be serious, humorous or dramatic, but it must capture attention. Be positive, explicit and precise with your choice of words.

Intrigue, like a cork, always bobs up to the top of our attention, so don’t be afraid to startle with details and take a hard-hitting approach when communicating to an audience numbed by traditional safety campaigns.

At the outset of an internal communication audit, it should be made clear that the purpose is to improve the effectiveness of communication and not to evaluate personnel.
When carrying out an audit, a number of stages is required.

**Stage one: Preparation**
- When considering an audit, it’s always necessary to prepare the ground to ‘sell’ the concept of good internal communication
- It’s essential that the idea of a communication audit is ‘bought at all levels’ of an organisation to ensure co-operation

**Stage two: Investigation and diagnosis**
Initially, to:
- assess the quality of information/communication
- determine the impact of key messages
- assess the quality of relationships
- determine potential bottlenecks
- identify problems and obstacles
- identify networks
- describe communications behaviour
- identify good practice.

Then, to:
- develop communication standards and monitor against them
- develop skills, capabilities and competencies
- change attitudes and behaviour, and manage change effectively
- evaluate current communication policy/strategy.

Areas to investigate:
- methods used
- methods preferred
- main communication needs
- understanding of goals/objectives
- feedback on performance
- knowledge about other parts of the organisation
- readership of key internal/external publications
- views about training, appraisal and induction
- meetings practice
- views on management’s communication style
- quantity of information
- experience of communication problems
- networks of communication
- suggested improvements.

Other information needed:
- frequency of communications
- content of communications
- frequency of meetings
- types of meeting
- number of contacts
- distribution of information
- website/intranet hits.

**Stage three: Key areas of the audit**
First:
- downward communication
- upward communication
- horizontal communication
- internal/external communication
- factors affecting communication.

Second:
- the wider environment:
  - organisation
  - department
  - team level
  - individual task level.

- Communication methods, such as:
  - team briefings
  - one-to-ones
  - video conferencing
  - video
  - email
  - intranet and Internet
- teleconferencing, phone and fax
- meetings and minutes of meetings
- conferences
- workshops, seminars and events
- reports, memos and circulars
- newsletters and posters
- grapevine.

- Internal audiences, such as:
  - organisational hierarchy
  - manager/non-manager
  - professional/occupational groups
  - department/service-specific
  - trade unions/staff associations
  - full-time/part-time staff
  - blue-collar/white-collar staff
  - those affected by a particular policy, strategy or programme.

**Stage four: Audit report**
Based on the investigation, the audit report should be presented to the decision-makers in the organisation and contain full details of:
- the process
- analysis
- key problems
- needs
- priorities.

Recommendations, implications and guidelines should also be included.

Feedback to participants may be circulated in a separate report and should contain an acknowledgment of their contribution, an open summary of the findings, and an outline of what will happen next.
Engagement through communication is a constantly evolving process. In this guide, we’ve explored the components, methods and strategies that can lead to making internal communication more engaging, while offering advice on good practice to help you achieve successful communication within your organisation.

By understanding the challenges you face as a communicator, adopting good practice principles and evaluating your results, you can make informed choices to improve internal communication performance – choices that will ultimately deliver better results, more engaged employees, and a demonstrable return on the investment in safety and health.
References


Further reading


Quirke B. Making the connections: using internal communication to turn strategy into action. Aldershot: Gower, 2000.


IOSH is the Chartered body for health and safety professionals. With more than 44,000 members in over 120 countries, we’re the world’s largest professional health and safety organisation.

We set standards, and support, develop and connect our members with resources, guidance, events and training. We’re the voice of the profession, and campaign on issues that affect millions of working people.

IOSH was founded in 1945 and is a registered charity with international NGO status.