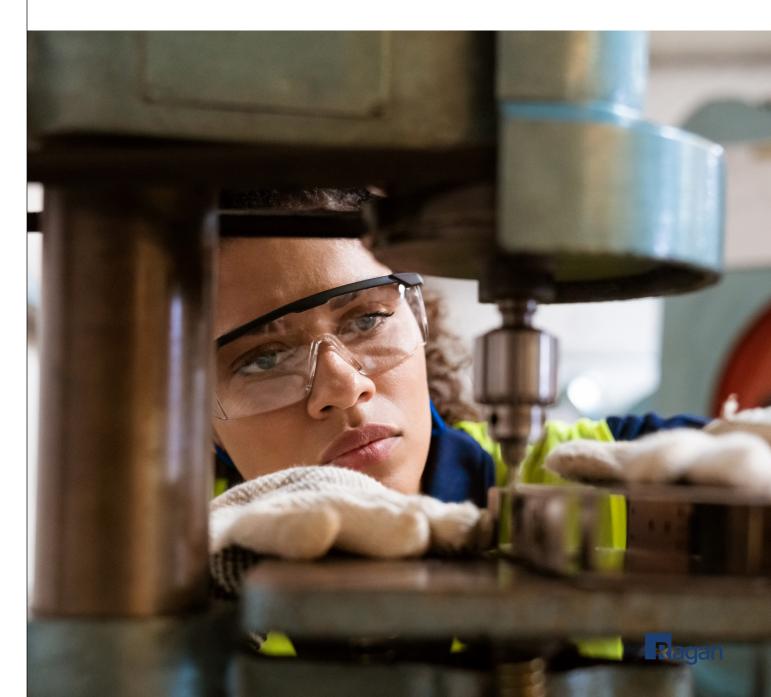# Reaching the Frontline: Overcoming Communication Challenges and Breaking Through
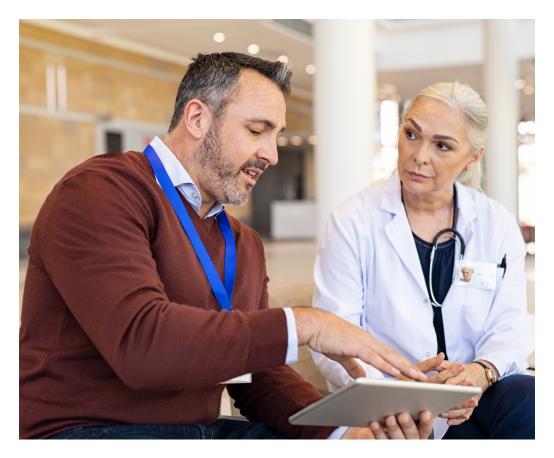
Ragan

Introduction

Often, internal communications boil down to sending a flood of emails, posting on the intranet or hosting virtual town halls.

These tactics often ignore a vital worker population: those who don't spend their days working in front of a computer (or maybe don't even have a computer).

These workers are medical professionals, manufacturing workers, retail staff or working in hundreds of other "desk-less" professions, and they need the same level of engagement and communications as other, deskbound workers. But they don't always get it.

According to a 2022 survey from MSL, 37% of U.S. workers fall into the deskless worker category — and 41% of that group say internal communications have no impact on how they perceive their employer.

That should be a warning sign: traditional methods of reaching these workers aren't effective. In a tight labor market, that can lead to lower productivity and higher turnover.

The challenges of reaching workers

Often in a deskless environment, managers become the default method of communicating with workers. From the C-suite down to in-store workers, the message travels from one person to another, often morphing and changing along the way.

That can cause big problems, according to Robbie Willis, CTO of T-Mobile retailer Connectivity Source. Most of their team work in retail locations, helping folks get the cellphones and related services they need. That means these employees aren't usually sitting at a desk waiting for their email to refresh.

"Generally, what we found is that the message changed over time as it kind of moved through (the manager cascade)," Willis said in an interview. "And that resulted in misinformation. And then, generally a lack of consistency with the narrative as it was delivered and received in different ways."

Willis also said that the lack of metrics and measurement has made it difficult to know what messages were truly delivered, how they were received and how to hold managers accountable for sharing information with their direct reports.

Additionally, the nature of Connectivity Source's commission structure caused additional challenges.

"We found frontline workers, especially because they're motivated by selling, obviously, because they're earning commission on their sales ... They're interacting constantly with customers. They're not really looking at emails, and when they do, it's generally at the beginning and end of the month and (they) didn't have a constant connection," Willis explained.

Amanda Berry is now corporate communications manager at Simpplr, but she previously worked for a company where 85% of the staff were frontline workers — mostly in roles like maintenance, housekeeping or property management. That brought its own unique challenges.

"When you have a whole set of employees who can't be communicated to, they feel left out, they feel unimportant," Berry said. "They feel there are the haves and the have nots; that nobody cares about their needs, and that no one is trying to meet their needs."

That can lead to real consequences, ranging from higher turnover and missing business goals, or even health and safety problems. Berry said communicating policies around personal protection equipment and cleaning protocols during COVID was a challenge for this group of workers, even though it was incredibly vital.

Language barriers can also pose an issue for deskless workers. Imagine trying to scramble during an emergency to send a text message to workers' personal cell phones to warn them and needing to translate it into any number of other languages on the fly.

It's a safety hazard and a logistical nightmare. Even in a non-emergency situation, getting posters, digital signage or other communications translated and printed in multiple languages and placed in the right locations can be a time-consuming and costly endeavor, Berry pointed out.

"It's so set-in-stone that if there are any changes, you have to start over. There's not a lot of that on-the-fly flexibility," she added.

But not everything is hopeless. With patience, the right mindset and tools, we can overcome the deskless divide and communicate in a way that meets everyone's needs.

Develop empathy for the day-to-day

As communications professionals, most of us probably spend much of our day sitting in front of our computer, endlessly typing and replying to emails.

How can we understand the needs and pain points of deskless workers?

Julie* , a vice president of corporate affairs at a food service company spoke about the need for empathy and understanding for deskless workers — and walking a mile in their shoes.

She recommends spending time in the field, seeing what these workers go through and speaking with them directly about their days and overall process.

"Learn more about how they like to get information," she advised. "How much time are they spending, whether it's a team meeting, or maybe pre-shifts, or how else are they learning about what's going on at the company? What do they want to learn and how would they like to be communicated to?"

For many, the answer for communicating with these frontline workers is a central intranet where all the information a worker needs can be found in one location: a single source of truth. Before going too far down that path, however, consider how your workers will access this information. Some may want access through a computer; others may prefer a mobile app. A one-size-fits-all approach may not be the best way to drive adoption.

*Not her real name, as she is not authorized to speak publicly on this topic.

"Making it flexible to them is really important," Julie said. "Something that's available to those who are interested in downloading an app and using it to do that, as well as making it available so that there's a desktop version and a central location where somebody can check a desktop file within a location if there's someone who's not interested in using a personal device to do that."

The next step is to consider what your intranet is going to look like. These internal websites or apps are that central repository.

Connectivity Source chose Simpplr as its intranet and has seen positive results and high engagement.

"We've seen that employees now have sort of a single source of truth for all the relevant information that they need," Willis said. "And that can be sort of a targeted message that comes from the top down. We've seen increased alignment. And it's given employees more security. It's improved company culture because they feel more involved. We've seen incredible amounts of engagement, because now we can actually see that and measure it."

Indeed, that measurement has shown engagement rates of more than 98% on the Simpplr platform.

Julie also has found success at her company with an intranet. Beyond simply being a source for information, she finds it's also a source for building community.

"We have employees share content, share photos, share stories, posts, about what's taking place in terms of safety practices or other business activities and celebrations, but also on things like National Pet Day and giving people the opportunity to share photos of their pet, so all those things together make it fun in addition to informative."

Berry points out that Simpplr can help bridge some of the language barriers she struggled with at her previous job.

"Users can go in and set their preference and then receive a translation, so that it's not reliant on company leaders or internal comms," she said. "It's built into this system. They see it when it's published, in the language of their choice."

This can deliver significant cost savings for organizations that previously needed to pay for t ranslation services into multiple languages — and time savings too.

What Willis and Connectivity Source appreciate most is the way it gathered all the disparate communications together in one place, accessible through cellphones.

"I can't emphasize enough, but the biggest element behind the strategy of releasing a mobile application, that sort of a centralized resource, is doing it in such a way that you're removing the disparate systems and the noise, and you're bringing it into a unified approach," he explained.

How to launch an intranet for deskless workers

Where do you begin? How do you communicate to deskless workers about this great communications tool?

"If you're changing the way that things have been done, make sure you bring everyone along on the journey," Simpplr's Berry said. "Managers are a critical component when you're communicating with frontline staff. Because you need their buy-in, you need to make them feel comfortable, and you need their feedback as well."

When the food services VP launched their intranet, a toolkit was sent to each branch location with posters featuring QR codes for easy app download and FAQs for team members. The company also hosted webinars with managers to help them explain and roll out the tools.

"The other thing we did was track adoption across the different locations and shared information out just to give visibility into each of the leaders so that they would know who had joined to get more people on board," she said. "We did not make it mandatory because we wanted it to be something that people wanted to participate in and get excited about."

Prizes were offered for the locations with the most joins and the most content read on the intranet to further encourage a reward-based approach to adoption. Willis measured the success of Connectivity Source's intranet launch through a variety of metrics, including improved retention.

Simpplr also proved to be an invaluable tool for guiding Connectivity Source through its merger and acquisitions — especially compared to how they used to do things.

"When you integrate employees from different environments, without a platform like Simpplr and an ability to communicate effectively with the frontline, not only does it take longer, but it makes it very hard to integrate cultures and to create cohesion. When you do an acquisition with it, it's a whole different ball game. It speeds everything up, makes everything more efficient. It's incredible," Willis said.

Conclusion

Berry often looks back on her former employer and the challenges she faced reaching deskless workers. When asked what she'd tell her past self, she turns reflective.

"I would probably say, hey, look. You understand the core principles of internal communications, and you're probably really good at it," she said. "But you really need the right tools. If you have a tool belt, you need the right tools to be successful. And if your company doesn't allow you to have the tools, then they're setting you up for failure. So be particular and push for what you need."

And for many who work with frontline workers, an intranet is a vital tool.

"Instead of having to move through the hierarchy to get answers, they have everything at their fingertips," Willis said. "So, it frees up all this time for productivity."

About Simpplr

Simpplr is the leading AI-powered employee experience platform. Organizations use our forward-looking, adaptable products to deliver personalized experiences that inspire and engage their employees. Wherever people work, Simpplr enables them to flourish.Trusted by more than 500+ leading brands, including Zoom, Snowflake, Moderna, Eurostar, and AAA, our customers are achieving measurable productivity gains, increased employee engagement, and accelerated business performance.Simpplr is headquartered in Silicon Valley, CA with offices in the UK, Canada, and India, and is backed by Norwest Venture Partners, Salesforce Ventures, and Tola Capital. Learn more at simpplr.com

About Ragan

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Its daily news sites — PRDaily.com and Ragan.com — are read by more than 600,000 internal and external communicators monthly. Its Communications Leadership Council is one of the fastest-growing membership groups for communications executives and its conferences, webinars and workshops are attended by more than 5,000 communicators a year. Ragan Training is the leading learning portal among communicators and its PR Daily Pro and Writing Center offer ongoing professional development. Ragan is also the producer of Communications Week, which is held each November. Ragan is headquartered in Chicago, with team members spanning the country and loyal customers worldwide. Visit us www.ragan.com.