



IS
ANY

Where are we eating?

LISTEN

idk... did you finish
the project assets?



ONE NING?

angela, stop bringing
your dog 🙄



Workplace communication
is deteriorating. Are open floor
plans and instant messaging
to blame? **By Meghan Walsh**

Abe Winter gets as much work as possible done between 7 and 10 a.m., while his colleagues are just getting out of bed or otherwise occupied in spin classes. It's a race against time. Once his co-workers begin logging onto their computers from the train and strolling into the office, Winter, who works for an app developer in New York, knows his window of productivity is closing. The gurgling pings emanating from his devices, sporadic at first before turning into a ceaseless bombardment, serve as a final countdown.



+ add another task

The 34-year-old still has to put in a full day during normal business hours, but his role unofficially morphs from programmer to communicator as he spends his time responding to Slack messages with incomplete phrases and emojis rather than composing complex symphonies of code. “I’ve given up on being 100 percent productive,” Winter says. “Engagement has become the primary goal.”

Recent years have seen a number of workplace innovations meant to open the channels of communication and collaboration, allowing ideas to flow more freely and information to be on demand. Open floor plans and digital messaging platforms were meant to bring employees closer together. As it turns out, many experts fear these modern adaptations often have the opposite effect, carrying us farther apart. Indeed, in one of the greater workplace ironies, studies now suggest that today’s well-intentioned forms of communication are driving some workers to the brink of quitting.

The reasons for all this, of course, are wide ranging, but experts think the problem

Study: Face-to-face interactions fall 73 percent when employees move from individual cubicles to an open floor plan.



may center around the very foundation that communications is built on: empathy. With so much noise around us and rapid-fire message apps on continuously, we are less likely to see a colleague’s point of view and more apt to be judgmental and impulsive. Rather than considering whether someone might be in a workflow before asking a question, we ping without pause—and expect an immediate response. Instead of engaging meaningfully, we isolate behind headphones and keyboards. We work from home. We check out.

Bob Sutton, a professor of organizational behavior at Stanford University and most recently the author of a book on how to deal with difficult colleagues, is unequivocal in his analysis: “Workplace communication is more toxic than ever.”



When it comes to corporate communications, there are three main forms:

1) company to employees, 2) employees to company, and 3) employees to employees. These days, workers message one another by text or other messaging services, management is making important announcements via the intranet, and employees give feedback through surveys.

Certainly, with the help of technology, a lot of these communications are far faster and more efficient than in the past. But critics say most firms employ a one-size-fits-all approach that doesn't take into account a person's role and duties. And the more ways to communicate there are, the more the workplace can seem



this year's was titled, "The Crumbling State of Employee Communication." Data shows 33 percent of employees are so frustrated with poor communication that they want to quit. And an About.com survey found the top three reasons people don't like their jobs are related to communication.

"Companies are starting to acknowledge that communication is critical, but it doesn't always get credit for top- and bottom-line

impact," Hannah says. And while companies may be coming to terms with the importance of internal communication—many are raising the prominence of chief communication officers—the next step is translating that awareness into design-oriented, research-driven best practices.

“Companies are starting to acknowledge that communication is critical, but it doesn't always get credit for top- and bottom-line impact.”



fragmented. "Employees feel like there are so many channels and they don't know where to get answers," says Robyn Hannah, senior director of global communication at Dynamic Signal, a Silicon Valley-based company that offers mobile enterprise platforms. "We're forgetting different employees work differently. We need to modernize and streamline how we communicate with employees, so they feel informed, prioritized, and connected." But not overwhelmed.

Dynamic Signal releases an annual analysis;

Open floor plans. Employees loathe them.

Initially seen as a cost saver, executive planners continue to be drawn to the unburdened architectural aesthetic and idealistic claims that they foster creative collaboration. But the downside has been well documented: a published Harvard Business School study, for instance, found that when employees moved from individual cubicles to an open floor plan, face-to-face interactions decreased 73 percent,





Finding Your Voice

One of the buzzy business trends today revolves around “employee voice”—empowering workers to share their ideas and making sure they feel heard. “If you’re a leader and you’re not tapping into employee voice, you’re not tapping into employee potential,” says Peter Cardon, professor of clinical business communications at University of Southern California.

Effective workplace communications is important for this, but so are other steps. Richard Marshall, global managing director of Korn Ferry’s Corporate Communications practice, suggests:

1 Face to face whenever possible.

Creates context, avoids misinterpretations, and builds more authentic relationships. In the electronic age, this can have a disproportionately positive impact.

2 Townhalls.

Ideal for communicating big news as well as regular updates, helping employees feel more connected.

3 Address the talker and listener.

Employees need clear guidelines on the types of feedback and ideas managers want, while bosses must demonstrate that the input is valuable.

4 Open-door meetings with leaders.

If held regularly, keeps leaders in touch with the staff pulse, helps defuse issues before they balloon, and gives employees more access to the top.

5 Employee networks and affinity groups.

Helps various populations share common experiences and be a collective voice to leadership on key issues.

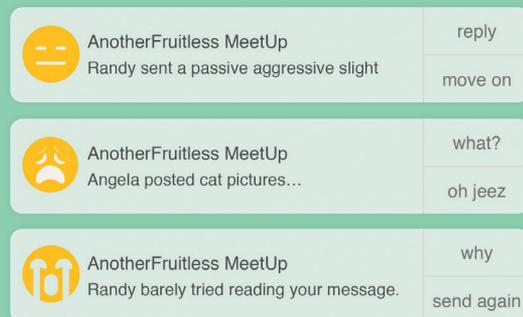
6 Making sure everyone has equal chance to voice ideas.

Avoids any person or gender speaking up more than others and fosters a culture of respect.

and employees spent 67 percent more time on email and 75 percent more time on instant messaging apps. “You end up sitting in the staircase” just to find quiet, says Jose Feroso, who has worked at several Silicon Valley tech and media companies and experienced the shift away from cubicles.

Messaging apps like Slack are the virtual equivalent of the open floor plan. They allow employees to have real-time conversations both one-on-one or in group channels. “At first, it helped us feel like we were in the same room,” says Derrick Reimer, co-founder of Drip, a Minneapolis-based marketing automation and email platform, referring to his team of five who relied on Slack because they worked remotely in 2014. Flash-forward two years later, and the company, after being acquired, has 150 people, with numerous Slack channels. “I would turn off all notifications for a few hours, come back, and find 10 channels with unread notifications. Every message carries urgency, but, at the same time, important ones were getting lost.”

The problems are not necessarily in the platforms but in the ways they are used. (Slack, for instance, allows users to control notifications and set their status to away.) As a manager, Reimer says, it’s his job to be interrupted. But when Reimer’s in maker mode it can take 20 minutes to get back into the flow once it is broken. Users dash off questions and unleash emotions the moment they arise, forgetting that on the other end is a colleague, not a bot.



Digital natives entering the workforce today are used to having near-constant access to a virtual microphone with

which to broadcast their thoughts anytime, anywhere—something they view as an inalienable right. Within modern communication constructs, the loudest too easily silences the best. A false sense of intimacy is created, while meaningful collaboration is replaced by the adrenaline rush of quick hits.

“Leveraging digital tools and platforms needs to operate in service of authentic human connections, not in place of them,” Hannah says. “The rise of technology and democracy of communication requires us to train people differently.”

Open-concept offices likely aren’t going anywhere. That isn’t the point. The point is to recognize how open-concept spaces, whether physical or virtual, influence communication. Acknowledge how today’s workforce operates and design communication norms that aid productivity and nurture real relationships. If we accept that more people are going to work remotely, whether that be several blocks or continents away, then the question, as Hannah suggests, becomes: What does it look like when technology is leveraged in service of humanity? Plenty of successful globally distributed firms have answered this question.

Sam Yen spent 13 years at SAP, a software company based in Germany, before going to work for JPMorgan Chase earlier this year. As



Is Anyone Listening?

“The real problem is, I don’t think managers understand how employees get work done.”

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chief design officer, it was his responsibility to weave an innovation mindset into the company culture. Often that meant working with teams spread out across the world from Palo Alto to Bulgaria, Dublin to China, Israel to India. Even in situations with globally diverse teams, Yen cautions against an over-reliance on technology.

“It always comes down to empathy,” Yen says, “making sure you’re taking time to listen and understand where people are coming from.” Get people together in a social context before they actually work together, and create opportunities for employees to see one another as people, each with a backstory and a future, advises Yen. Opt for the silent brainstorm then give everyone an equal amount of time to share their ideas,

so one voice doesn’t drown out the rest. Make sure immediate teams are on the same rhythm. Spend time designing the most effective workflow: When is it necessary to Slack someone? Or would an email, phone call, or video conference be more appropriate? If employees will be working remotely, invest in dependable telepresence.

Then again, Sutton also points out that many successful companies keep their employees congregated on one campus: Pixar, Apple, Facebook. So maybe the answer to our communication woes is to put the cubicle wall back up, get rid of instant messaging, and go back to in-person meetings. “The real problem is, I don’t think managers understand how employees get work done,” Winter says. ▀

