

HOW TO CHOOSE THE RIGHT EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION CHANNELS



INTRODUCTION

Are you using a multi-channel strategy for your employee communications? If the answer is no, or you're not sure what a "channel" is, keep reading.

You may already know that employee attention spans have shrunk in recent years, and that effective communications need to mimic the experience employees have as consumers: simple and short is the name of the game.

But creating short, appealing content is only one piece of the puzzle; you also need to ensure that content reaches the eyes of your employees. That means the methods you use to disseminate your information, otherwise known as communication channels, need to be a key part of your employee communication strategy. If you fail to consider communication channels, you'll struggle to get the results you're looking for.

And, if you're like many employers, chances are your message isn't reaching many of your employees. In a recent survey conducted by IDG Research, only 39% of employees reported that their organization's communications are easy to access. In another survey, a third of employees reported that they weren't included in internal communications – it's likely that many of those employees were included in messages that didn't reach them.¹

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(IDG Research)

1. Survata, 2017



WHAT IS A COMMUNICATION CHANNEL?

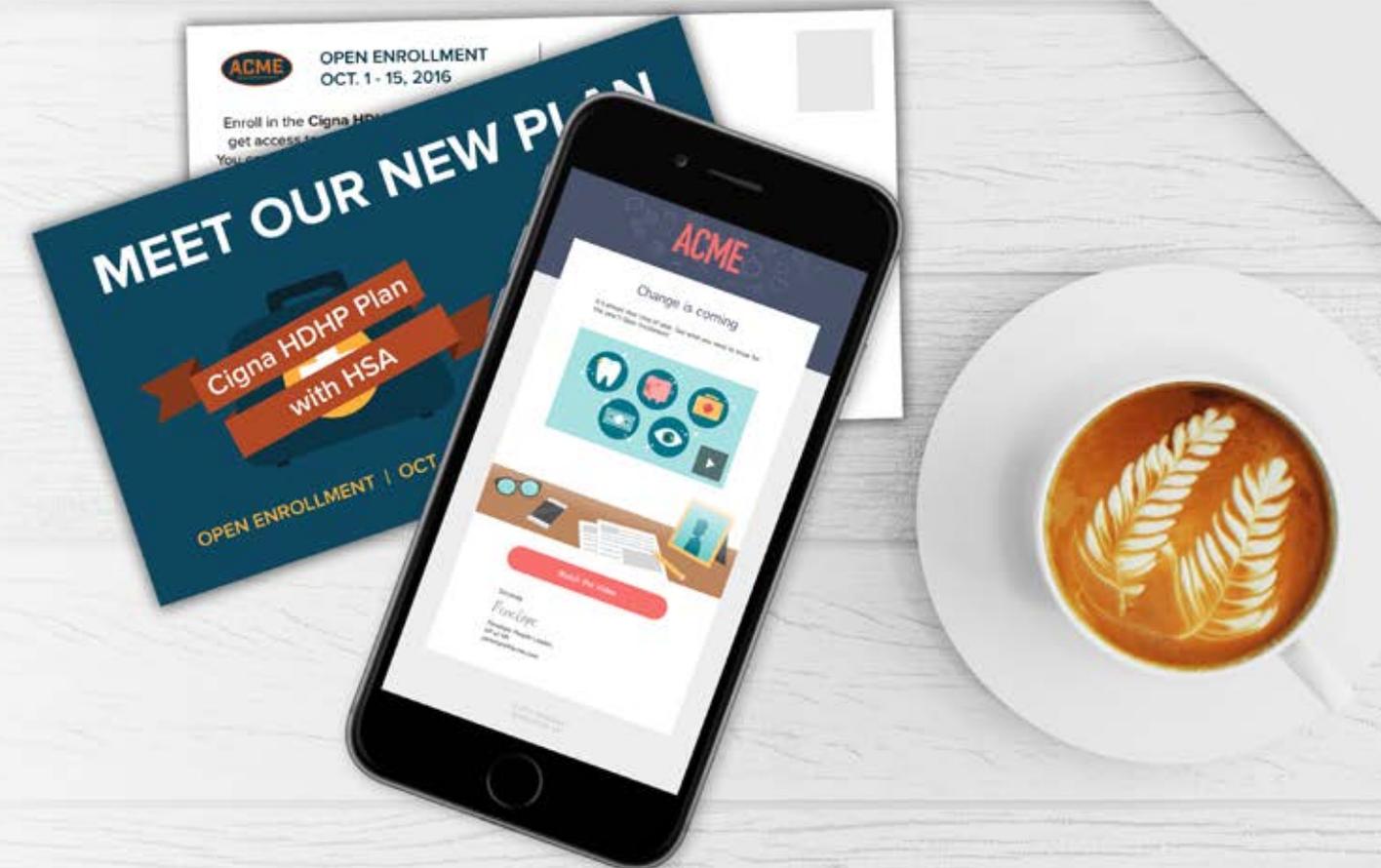
There are many communication channels that you can use within your organization. Email is one of the most preferred, by employees and employers alike, but others to consider include SMS messaging, print materials (like postcards and posters), mobile and web applications, and even people, like field managers and HR Business Partners.

Channels are not the same as the content that actually contains all of the information you want to distribute. That content may take the form of a video, a document, or an interactive web experience. A communication channel is the tool you use to bring employees to your content.

The most successful communicators use multiple channels. This strategy is known as a “multi-channel” approach by your colleagues in marketing. Yet many HR teams have yet to adopt this practice for internal communications. Nearly half of HR leaders report that they use an one-sized-fits-all approach to employee communications, which may explain why only half of employees rate their organization’s HR communications highly.² Each organization needs to use a different mix of communication channels, to reflect the makeup of their employee population and ensure they are reaching their entire workforce.

Wondering how to determine the best mix of channels for your organization? The following five steps will get you on your way.

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2. IDG, 2017

STEP 1: TAKE STOCK OF YOUR ORGANIZATION

You'll want to start by considering what you know about your employees and your company. The key elements that will impact your selection of channels are:

- Your employee demographics, and especially age
- Your employees' typical worksites, meaning where they work and what technology they can access in and outside of the workplace, and
- Your organization's communication policies

Once you've gathered this information, you can start to make some inferences. For example, if your workforce is made up primarily of younger employees, you'll want to lean heavily on digital and mobile channels, like internal social media and SMS messaging. Even older workers are well connected – 73% of people in their 50s own a smartphone!³ —but you will want to mix in some traditional channels, like postcards, for these employees.

Worksite environments matter too. If you have mostly desk workers, e-mail can be very effective. In fact, in a recent survey by IDG, 72% of employees rated email as the most effective tool for communicating HR-related information. For employees that don't sit at a desk, or who don't have company e-mail addresses, you'll need other channels. Posters in break rooms can be effective, especially if you include a simple code that the employees can text to receive information on their mobile devices. And don't forget about your managers. If you have a distributed workforce, line managers in field offices and retail stores should be a key part of your strategy. Leverage them to get employees to important information (even if that information is stored online).

Also consider your company's communication policies. To be effective, you need to reach employees multiple times. If your organization puts strict limits on the number of messages HR can send through e-mail, it's even more important to use additional channels to beef up your game. Don't be afraid to get creative: you can use flyers or trinkets left on desks, posters in the elevators, or even messages within programs (like Slack or Chatter) that your employees use frequently.

3. AARP, 2016

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STEP 2: CONSIDER THE TOPIC

Once you've got a handle on the profile of your employees and your company, spend some time thinking through the topic you're planning to communicate, which can have a big influence on the communication channels you should choose.

For some topics, like benefits, your audience may include your employees and their spouses, and you may want to reach employees outside the workplace. For many of your employees, spouses may be decision makers when it comes to benefits selections. And your employees may not always remember to share e-mails with their spouses. So complementing e-mail and other internal channels with postcards to the home can ensure that your message reaches all the people it needs to.

For other topics, like performance management, your audience is limited to your employees, so channels like postcards may not be as necessary. For topics like this, it can make sense to focus on channels that will reach employees in their regular workflows: think e-mail, internal social media, and your intranet. Be sure that employees can access at least some of the messages outside of work, though, as they may want to review material outside the hustle and bustle of the workday.



STEP 3: TALK TO YOUR EMPLOYEES

This step is critical: you've got to talk to your employees. The information you've pieced together in steps one and two will get you well on your way to a good mix of channels, but you need to take it one step further and engage directly with your employees to learn about their preferences. Often those preferences will align with demographic trends, but sometimes they don't. For example, you may find that even though your workforce tends to be a bit older, they still prefer to get information digitally.

This step will not only improve the effectiveness of your employee communications; it will also build trust with your employees, as they see that you are taking an employee-centric approach to your communications.

And, since employee preferences are continually changing alongside advances in technology, this can't be a one-and-done exercise. Connecting with employees quarterly, or at least semi-annually, will help you adapt to changes in your workforce.

Some companies gather employee input through surveys, while others will organize focus groups or brown-bag lunch events, or even informal polls in team meetings. There's no right or wrong way to do it, but be sure to include a broad range of employees from different worksites or roles and demographic profiles. In other words, you can't simply poll the HR team or the staff at headquarters and apply the findings to your entire workforce.



STEP 4: LOOK AT YOUR HISTORY

Next, take a minute to look backward, at the channels you've used in the past, and consider any learnings from those experiences. If you already have access to data that tells you how many employees opened your emails or logged into the company intranet, great!

Without precise data, look for clues about the effectiveness of the channels you've used. For example, did you get a lot of responses to an e-mail you sent out? Or did you have to send out multiple reminders, and still find yourself with people unaware of what was happening? Did you get a lot of returned postcards because addresses were out of date?

And if you *aren't* already capturing data on the effectiveness of your communication channels, you should start right away. Technology solutions, like GuideSpark Communicate Cloud, which measures the performance of communication channels, can make this process effortless.

Set aside time, perhaps monthly or even weekly, to review the results of your efforts, and tweak your approach if you're seeing that employees are not responding to certain channels, or that you're getting a lot of questions from a particular segment of your employees.

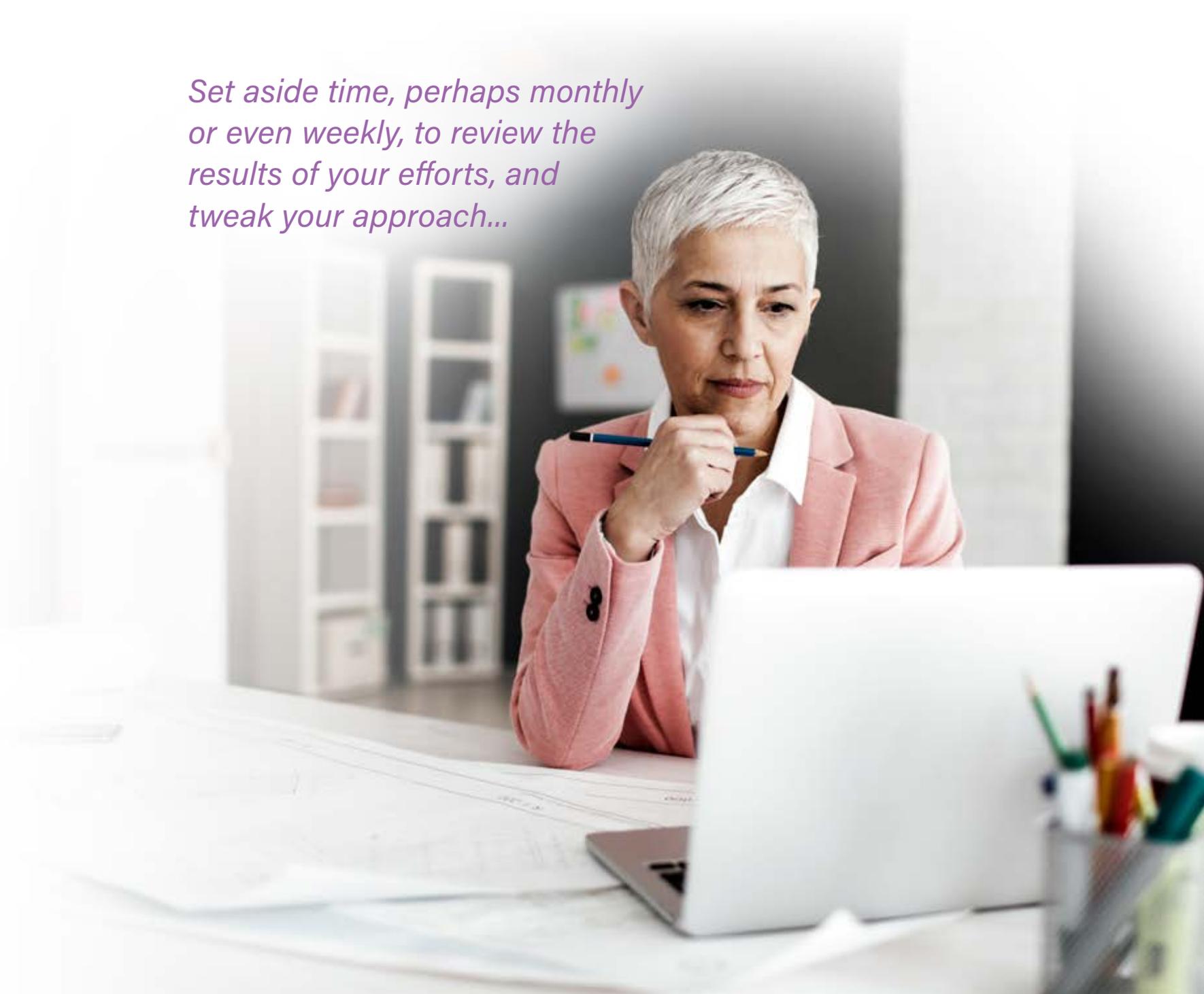
STEP 5: CREATE A PLAN, AND START COMMUNICATING

The final step is creating a plan. Don't worry about getting it perfect. You can always update and tweak it, especially if you're not seeing the results you want. Here are some final things you'll want to keep in mind as you draft your plan:

- Frequency: how often will you use each channel?
- Quantity: roughly how many messages will you send, total?
- Distribution: what percentage of your messages will be sent through each channel?

Once you've got a plan, all that's left is to put it into motion.

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

If you want to deliver effective employee communications, a multi-channel approach needs to be a key part of your strategy. Choosing the right mix of channels will take a bit of legwork, but as you see the engagement with your communications rise, you'll find that it's worth the effort.

GuideSpark Communicate Cloud empowers HR teams to engage employees with consumer-grade content experiences and communication campaigns that match the effectiveness of marketing initiatives. GuideSpark Communicate Cloud SaaS solutions combine content, technology, and consultant-like expertise to drive employee adoption of Benefits, Performance Management, and Compensation/Equity programs. With GuideSpark, HR can effectively capture employee attention, simplify complex information, and effectively convey program value.



ABOUT GUIDESPARK

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