Trends in the Communications Function

Engagement and Turnover
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Overview

In a 2018 Gartner survey, communications was identified as having the lowest levels of employee engagement against all 17 other business functions. Understanding the employee value proposition (EVP) drivers that have the biggest impact on improving discretionary effort and intent to stay provides corporate communications leaders with a roadmap for improving employee engagement.

Key findings

- The communications function scores the lowest of all functions in the two measures of engagement, discretionary effort and intent to stay.
- A well-managed EVP improves corporate communications leaders’ ability to drive employee commitment and retention.
- The EVP attributes with the highest impact on communicators’ discretionary effort are collegial work environment, informal work environment, co-worker’s quality and technology level. With each category representing an 18%-23% potential margin of improvement to discretionary effort.

Recommendations

To improve engagement in the communications function, corporate communications leaders should work to increase employee perceptions of four EVP attributes (collegial work environment, informal work environment, co-worker’s quality and technology level) by:

- Promoting open dialogue and improving interpersonal risk taking to create a more collegial and informal work environment.
- Focusing on an upskill approach will help workers function more effectively and improve their perceptions of co-worker quality.
- Tailoring digital business training to build capacity over buy-in and develop skills that promote digital dexterity to improve perceptions of the organization’s technology level.
State of Employee Engagement in Communications

The communicators function faces significant disruptions in how it delivers value as organizations become more complex. With the rise of digital technology shifting how information flows across an organization, heightened competition for audience attention due to information overload and increasingly unclear delineation of responsibilities with other functions, communicators are experiencing an increase in the demands placed on their team. Corporate communication leaders have long benefited from teams with high levels of tenure and low levels of turnover. Recent Gartner research, however, shows that all is not well under the surface and functional leaders must act quickly to drive engagement and performance on their teams.

Our research shows engagement is the measure of two discrete behaviors - discretionary effort and intent to stay:

- **Discretionary Effort** is the level of effort employees provide above and beyond the required minimum.
- **Intent to Stay** is the degree to which employees seek to continue their present employment relationship with an organization on a long-term basis. Behaviors such as active or passive job searching lower this measure.

When compared to other functions, communications ranks second lowest in intent to stay, only reporting higher levels than the IT function (see Figure 1). Additionally, communications reports the lowest levels of discretionary effort, as compared to all 17 other business functions. Between these two measures, the communications function has the lowest levels of engagement of any business function.

![Figure 1: Percentage of Employees With High Discretionary Effort and Intent to Stay by Function (2018)](chart.png)
Unfortunately, these low levels of engagement are not an artefact of the times but are instead part of a trend of decreasing engagement over the past few years. Between 2016 and 2018, discretionary effort by communicators dropped by 4.9 percentage points year over year and intent to stay dropped by 3.7 percentage points.[1]

There are several reasons we may be seeing this decrease in engagement. Functional disruptions and budget decreases add strain to existing team members. Additionally, as organizations grow more complex, it can be increasingly challenging for communicators to see what impact their work has on business outcomes. In a recent survey, nearly half of communicators reported they see little impact in their role.[2]

Communicators must address declining employee engagement now or risk seeing worsening trends in employee retention, productivity and recruitment. Some of these adverse effects have already been realized by communications teams. From 2016 to 2018, the communications function reported a 4.7% increase in median voluntary turnover, compared to global median voluntary turnover which saw a 0.3% decrease. Additionally, communicators reported a 6.1% increase in job seeking activity compared to other functional areas coming into 4Q18.[1]

**Leveraging Employee Value Proposition to Improve Engagement**

As corporate communications leaders consider different options to re-engage their teams, it is important to understand how different attributes of a role affect employee engagement. The Employee Value Proposition (EVP) is defined as the mix of 38 attributes that labor markets and employees perceive as the value gained through employment with a team and organization.[3]

The attributes are split into five categories representing a complete EVP: rewards, opportunity, organization, work and people (see Figure 2 on next page). The extent to which an organization values and manages their EVP dictates the day-to-day experience of employees and will ultimately drive or discourage employee engagement. This makes EVP an effective tool for understanding the ways an organization can drive engagement.
Progressive organizational leaders understand that not all EVP attributes are managed at the same level; some, such as rewards, diversity and market position, are managed at the organizational level. Others, specifically within the opportunity, work and people sections — can be directly affected by managers in order to improve team engagement. In a recent survey, we tested the EVP attributes corporate communications leaders could directly affect to see what had a significant impact on improving engagement. Four attributes were determined to have a significant positive impact on discretionary effort: collegial work environment, informal environment, co-worker quality and technology level (see Figure 3 on next page).
Improving Perceptions of Collegial and Informal Work Environments Using Psychological Safety

For many managers, an informal and collegial work environment can conjure up images of staff in jeans or offices filled with ping pong tables. However, when employees talk about informal and collegial work environments, the language they use focuses on whether the work environment is team-oriented and collaborative. In interviews with communications teams, one common barrier to collaboration is the high level of independent work done by team members. For communications teams, for which work is largely done independently, communications leaders must take extra steps to cultivate a sense of camaraderie among team members. These leaders can create a collegial environment by implementing the following steps:

- **Maintain Visibility Into Workflow** — Independent teams don’t have the same visibility into what is going on within the team and organization as interdependent teams do. Therefore, Communications managers need to ensure clear visibility into team members’ workflow.

- **Build Trust Through Employee Connections** — Independent workers may feel isolated from their teams, so managers and team members alike need to try to get to know one another. Foster a sense of team and promote trust by making actions as transparent as possible and gathering team members face-to-face as much as possible.
Use a Range of Communications Channels — Communicators are no strangers to leveraging multiple channels to ensure team members can quickly get up to speed on the goings-on of the full team and find opportunities to share best practices.

Some communications teams may be in an environment where work is done interdependently, but work structures alone do not fix all collaboration challenges. For those teams, communications leaders will need to implement initiatives that support team building and trust among staff. One approach is to increase the level of psychological safety on the team. Psychological safety is defined as a shared belief that team members feel comfortable taking interpersonal risks and believe individual differences and perspectives are respected. Psychological safety can be challenging to cultivate because individuals are naturally averse to taking on interpersonal risk. No one wants to seem ignorant, incompetent, or feel excluded for sharing their views. As such, establishing team norms designed to promote dialogue by teaching effective listening and sharing can help reduce individual risk and create common ground for team members to openly express themselves. Additionally, research indicates employees who work in a psychologically safe environment can improve discretionary effort by up to 24%.[4]

Leaders can promote psychological safety by promoting places of common ground on a team and helping team members express themselves, with the following advice:

Create Common Ground for Team Members — To create common ground, leaders should take the time to learn co-worker work streams and find opportunities to share best practices across the team. Create a common set of team goals, values and norms that all team members can support. This will provide team leaders a point of reference that reinforce common ground while in team meetings and one-on-ones. It is important that these goals/values/norms are universal to the team and resonate with individual members in order to ensure they are effective tools for creating common ground.

Ensure Employees Can Express Themselves — For employees to feel confident in openly expressing themselves, your team must start from a place of dignity and respect. Leaders should communicate and emphasize the importance of inclusion to team performance, making explicit the rationale for having team members surface their perspectives. Leaders and managers should model an active listening and curiosity approach to dialogue to create psychological safety.

Corporate communications leaders and managers should actively create a team culture in which goals are clearly articulated and perspectives are welcomed and respected in order to foster higher levels of psychological safety in the function.
Improving Co-Worker Quality Using an Upskill Approach

Making a work environment more informal and collegial does not require significant cultural changes on a team and likewise, improving co-worker quality does not necessarily require major personnel changes. Instead, communicators should help employees foster and develop skills essential to the function to improve employee performance and overall perceptions of co-worker quality.

The problem for communicators is real: our 2019 survey indicates only 8% of communicators feel confident in their ability to address the mismatch of communications staff skill set and organizational demands. In order to remedy this skills mismatch, communications leaders should take a thorough and proactive approach to understanding the skill strengths and gaps on their teams, then formulate a strategy to close those gaps as quickly as possible. Our recent research indicates there are 13 skills split across four core competencies that are critical to sustained performance in the communications function. However, research also indicates that communications managers and their teams are not always aligned about the relative importance individual skills.

Communications managers tend to prioritize critical thinking and interpersonal influence as key skills important to the future, whereas communications team members tend to prioritize audience understanding, dialogue enablement and channel management. Communications managers and their teams recognize measurement and business acumen are the top skills required for future success (see Figure 4).

Communications Skills Priority Rankings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority Ranking</th>
<th>Manager</th>
<th>Individual</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Measurement</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Acumen</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes Focus</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking and Presentation</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Coaching and Teaching</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Thinking</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Influence</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Planning</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience Understanding</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message Creation</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active Listening</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogue Enablement</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Channel Management</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
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</table>

N = 5,104 (individual responses); 1,003 (manager downward assessments)
Source: 2018 Gartner Labor Market Survey
Communicators point to measurement and business acumen skills as the most desired competencies, as individuals who are strong in these areas are more effective at connecting functional activities to business outcomes. Corporate communications leaders, therefore, should identify and cultivate opportunities to help their teams practice these skills in a safe but relevant environment.

Beyond initiating dedicated learning programs, corporate communications leaders should additionally implement the following steps to upskill their teams in relevant skills such as measurement and business acumen:

- **Understand and Identify Skills Gaps on Your Team** — Align employees on which skills they should develop and cascade how the organization defines each skill. Corporate communications leaders should ensure consistency when defining team skills and emphasize the importance of addressing skills gaps across key competencies.

- **Help Contextualize Skills and Day-to-Day Work** — Nearly half of communicators report they see little impact in their role. Corporate communications leaders must therefore help their teams realize how key skills contribute not only to their day-to-day performance but also to the organization at large.

### Improving Technology Level Using Digital Dexterity

Business technologies, such as the Internet of Things, artificial intelligence and machine learning analytics, are evolving at breakneck speeds. As a result, in 2020, over half of IT spending will come from areas outside the IT Function. Communications identified navigating digital transformation as one of its top priorities for 2018 and reported its largest budget increases for 2019 are going toward digital tools, such as social media and websites. Our research shows effective team digitalization has a positive impact on communications’ engagement, with improved employee perceptions of the organization’s technology level able to improve discretionary effort up to 18%. 
Although large-scale investments into updating or buying new hardware / software can be an effective tool for corporate communications leaders to increase employee perceptions of technology levels, it is far from the only tool. Communications leaders should not only simply invest in new technology, but should also heavily focus on improving their teams’ ability to use existing technology more effectively by increasing team digital dexterity. Digital dexterity is employees’ ability/desire to use and apply existing and emerging technology to drive better business outcomes. Analysis indicates employees with digital dexterity are more likely to succeed as their organizations change through digitalization. Unfortunately, while highly valuable, only 9% of employees are estimated as having high digital dexterity.[10]

While only 18% of communicators feel comfortable navigating a digital transformation, there are corporate communications leaders who can improve digital dexterity of their teams by focusing on five key competencies: business acumen, adaptability, political savviness, fusion collaboration and systems thinking (see Figure 6).[7]

Key Actions That Drive Digital Dexterity
Capabilities of Digital Dexterity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Business Acumen</th>
<th>Adaptability</th>
<th>Political Savviness</th>
<th>Fusion Collaboration</th>
<th>System Thinking</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrates awareness of the broader internal and external business context.</td>
<td>Demonstrates an openness to new and iterative ways of working.</td>
<td>Builds and influences stakeholder networks internally and externally.</td>
<td>Collaborates effectively with employees with diverse perspectives and experiences.</td>
<td>Understands the internal and external relationships between technology and processes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.9x</td>
<td>7.3x</td>
<td>5.6x</td>
<td>4.7x</td>
<td>4.2x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = 3,481 employees from all industries and functions
Source: 2018 Gartner Global Labor Market Survey

Figure 6: Key Actions That Drive Digital Dexterity
Progressive corporate communications leaders take a more targeted approach to improving these capabilities by removing common barriers to digital transformation on their teams and emphasizing how work will become more digital in the future. Table 1 shows various approaches to removing barriers to digitalization include.

**Table 1: Removing Barriers to Digitalization**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team Barriers to Digital Transition</th>
<th>Corporate Communications Leader Solution</th>
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| Current digital transformation focuses on technology delivery, not digital dexterity. | Accelerate digital dexterity:  
▪ Use an upskill approach to help employees learn skills to boost their digital dexterity.  
▪ Develop digital dexterity through consulting, coaching and brokering. |
| Legacy behaviors and thinking about technology usage in work hinders agility during change. | Contextualize digital transformation to emphasize impact:  
▪ Communicate the needs of stakeholders and how digital transformation helps meet these needs.  
▪ Use customer journey maps to show how existing ways of working slow digital business transformation.  
▪ Emphasize how day-to-day work creates value. |
| Employees don’t understand all the changes required for digital transformation. | Contextualize digital transformation to emphasize impact:  
▪ Communicate the needs of stakeholders and how digital transformation helps meet these needs.  
▪ Use customer journey maps to show how existing ways of working slow digital business transformation.  
▪ Emphasize how day-to-day work creates value. |

*Source: Gartner*

Digitization is not something that can be escaped, constant and compounding technological advancements are forcing organizations to adapt or be at a disadvantage. Communications leaders who balance digital investment with digital dexterity can improve perceptions of technology usage, as well as accelerate digital agility.
Conclusion

While the communications function has demonstrated worrying trends in employee engagement — with concerningly low levels of discretionary effort and intent to stay — an EVP-centered approach can enable corporate communications leaders to address said engagement issues. Analysis shows shifting employee perceptions of any of the four highlighted EVP attributes can increase discretionary effort anywhere from 18% to 23%. Corporate communications leaders should focus on fostering trust to improve collegial and informal environments, use an upskill approach to improve team performance and perceptions of co-worker quality and improve team digital dexterity while investing in digital solutions to improve perceptions of technology level within the communications function.

About This Research

This research is drawn from three major studies from our Corporate Leadership Council and Communications Leadership Council and associated studies. Collectively, we surveyed over 42,500 employees from over 300 organizations to determine the most effective approaches to improving engagement within the communications function.

Endnotes

[1] Unified Benchmarking Platform
[3] Gartner analysis
[5] 2019 Gartner Strategic Priorities for Communicators
[7] 2018 Gartner Communications Agenda Poll
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