The Ultimate Guide to Internal Communications Strategy

By Vignette
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Preface

“If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail!”

— Benjamin Franklin
Successful companies share one common trait: they spend a lot of time and energy making and executing plans to insure they continue to flourish. Yet, when it comes to internal communications there rarely is a strategy. In fact, ‘only one in three internal communications departments (35%) has a long-term strategy in place for internal communications.’ (Poppulo Global Summary Report, 2016). Often this is because leaders lack the vision, fail to provide enough support or are simply just not inspired to drive initiatives around internal communications.

The one-in-three ratio is even more alarming as even in the minority of cases where strategies do exist it’s reasonable to assume that not all are as good as they should be. This is the backdrop to our decision to create this Ultimate Guide to Internal Communications Strategy, and why we commissioned Gregg Apirian and Mike Lepis of Vignette, the Employee Experience Agency™, to write it.

Our intent here is to present a clear, step-by-step path to help leaders, internal communications, and HR practitioners develop and deploy effective internal communications strategies.

Before we dig in, it is important to explain that our approach is driven by a simple concept: Your people are your company’s most important investment. On the most basic level, happy employees return greater value and lower turnover resulting in better performance and efficiency. Most of us in the industry are familiar with the positive business benefits of having engaged employees. Often quoted and worth repeating because it remains relevant – Gallup’s Q12 employee engagement survey of 1.8 million employees shows a 21% increase in productivity and 21% profitability for companies in the top tier of the survey, compared to those with lower employee engagement (Gallup, 2016).

Beyond this, though, it is important to recognize that your employees are the personification of your brand. They serve as the best recruiters for new talent and are crucial for onboarding new hires. They can effortlessly build communities within your organization, improve your company’s reputation and even change lives.

Yet time and time again we see that internal communications is severely lacking leadership’s support, resources and, most importantly, vision. As businesses come to the crossroads of company growth and employee experience, having a well-thought-out and fully supported internal communications strategy can help avoid a crisis point. As with most major structural changes, it starts at the top. This requires IC and HR practitioners to drive these changes with a smart, branded and focused approach that wins the respect of their leadership and employees alike. This kind of change may be hard, but it results in measurable positive outcomes.

As internal communicators, it is your responsibility to understand your employees, your culture, and your business. All three need to work in harmony and once they do you can build trust and work to activate your employees over time. This requires using branded content that is strategic, creative and culturally relevant to drive experiences. Through this whitepaper, our goal is to guide you to uncover your vision, build a strategy, and create an employee experience that you can be proud of.

Tim Vaughan
Head of Content
Poppulo
Introduction
The Four Pillars to Success
Introduction

Tactics Are Not Strategy

The first order of business in developing an internal communications strategy is to clearly define what it is not. A strategy is a carefully chosen plan that is created to bring about a future state of operations. Tactics, on the other hand, are the actual means used to achieve the goals defined in the strategy. The confusion between the two is a common mistake within the Internal Communications & HR community. In some cases, tactics are applied from other companies or competitors without any consideration as to whether they are an appropriate fit. The essential rule is that tactics are most effective when aligned with an overall strategy.

For example, let’s say you are tasked to communicate an important message to all employees. Do you choose to create a poster that will hang near the elevators or do you post it on your company’s intranet? Or both? How do you know which approach is best? How do you measure and report results? Is your content sending the right message to the right audience? Are employees taking action? Without a strategy, you cannot answer these questions.

Finding Your Focus

Begin your journey by exploring the various business objectives your internal communications strategy must support. One strategy may not achieve every objective. And a company may need more than one strategy to reach a desired future state. Your objectives can range from changing employee behaviors to educating employees on benefits. Sometimes you need to communicate with thousands of employees to provide guidance across different locations. There are some objectives that present great challenges such as transforming the global culture of the entire organization. Whatever your objectives may be, it is important to clearly define them before developing the strategy.

Once you’ve identified your objectives, you can use these four pillars to craft a foundational internal communications strategy that wins over leaders and employees alike. The four pillars are:

- **Vision**: A future state goal (or set of goals) that serves as a guide for this process.
- **Alignment**: Synchronizing goals with stakeholders, leadership, and peers throughout the organization.
- **Research & Insights**: Validate the vision with well-supported data and insights about your people, culture, and employee experience.
- **Creation**: Prioritize actions that will shape your strategy and the methods you will use to plan, deliver and achieve your objectives.

The profession of internal communications attracts a variety of people from different backgrounds. Most are passionate and empathetic and, of course, very good communicators. But currently “change management” is not a core skillset. This has to change. As your business grows, you need to revisit your strategy. You must keep your finger on the pulse of your company and use more data-driven approaches to advance your strategy over time. If you are not comfortable implementing a strategic vision that can evolve, then find a change management resource within your company or seek help from outside your organization. Ideally, you should acquire the skills yourself to become adept in working this way and become the subject matter expert. Creating the strategy is only the beginning of the process. You need to make it live and breathe.

At the end of the day, it will be up to you to take your organization into the future with a powerful and modern approach to enable effective and efficient internal communications.
Part 1

Vision: Lead the Way
So don’t look for perfection. Instead, take the time and effort to develop your vision and validate it over time. Articulating your vision is the first step in the process that allows you the opportunity to define the way internal communications will play a role in a future state of your organization.

Begin by identifying how you are currently communicating with employees. What works and what doesn’t? What do you know about your employees’ behaviors? Their likes and dislikes? How do they use technology or how do they learn? What are their preferred channels and vehicles? On a deeper level ask about their sentiment. Are they happy? Do they believe your company is their ideal employer of choice? What do they like and respect about the company and what don’t they? Your ultimate goal here is to find new approaches that activate leaders and employees through brand, culture, content, and experiences. You should be evaluating internal communications through “community, content, and dialogue rather than volume and channels” (Ruck and Welch, 2012). And what may be working now may not work in the future. Remember the vision is not the strategy, but rather the initial statement of your internal communication objectives.

Next, take a good look at your company’s business strategy and identify where internal communications can support it. Consider how your internal communications can mobilize the collective strength of the company. This is valuable in any business, especially large, dispersed organizations. It can bring consistency to how employees interpret and represent your brand. Effective internal communications will also increase the efficiency of your people and operations. These are the elements that make up a business case for your internal communications strategy because they demonstrate how it returns value to the organization. For example, imagine you are driving a digital-first POV as part of your customer experience strategy. You are offering your customers modern tools for self-service such as e-commerce, mobile apps, etc. But how are you delivering digital content to your employees? Are you using digital as a channel? Are the intranets, websites and other digital vehicles designed in a similar way as the customer experience? Is the employee content as meaningful? If you expect them to know how to help your customers with your company’s digital tools, shouldn’t your employees also be using digital as well? Taking this approach sets a great example and will help train your employees to deliver exceptional customer experiences.

When internal communications supports your business strategy, it gives your approach legitimacy and makes a stronger case for additional resources. When asked, 80% of internal communications professionals shared that their budget will either remain flat (67%) or decrease (13%). This leaves only 1 out of 5 who would be expecting an increase (Poppulo Global Summary Report, 2016). As noted in the Deloitte Human Capital Report, “the opportunity [with communications] is to close the gaps among technology, business, society, and government.” (2017) The potential for affecting change within your organization is significant, but it is essential
that you step up and make a compelling argument for that change.

With your communication objectives aligned to your business strategy, you now need to be able to envision what success looks like. Again, you aren’t looking for perfection, but you must achieve important milestones. Identify key performance indicators (KPIs) that are relevant to your business. These may include: lower turnover, increased trust, employer brand perception, a change of behavior or habit, learning or productivity. Beyond KPIs, there are other aspects that are less tangible but are important to measure. These include answering questions such as: What are the best channels to use to reach employees? Are employees getting the information they want or need? Is the information timely and transparent enough? How does the company guide employees through their journeys? Do employees have a channel to provide feedback? Along with these vital questions, there are outcomes to consider such as sentiment, behavior, and return on investment.

With a firm understanding of your current state of internal communications, you can begin to shape your vision of the future state. A vision should guide you to:

**Figure 01: Elements of your IC Vision**

1. **Audience:** Understand your leaders and employees better. Know their preferences: wants, needs, frustrations, and learning styles.
2. **Preferences:** Know their preferred channels, languages, vehicles, dayparts* and frequency of communications.
3. **Goals:** Align your communication goals to what you know about your employees. The content you create and the actions you ask them to take should feel targeted and meaningful.
4. **Resources:** Identify the resources you will need to bring your vision to life. This includes the capital, people, and capabilities as well as the technology. And consider any change management resources you may also need.
5. **Measurement:** Determine how you will measure your efforts. You will need to know if your communications are effective and how they deliver ROI.

*’Dayparts’ is a term used in marketing that refers to the best times of a day and/or week to send and receive communications.

**Why it is important to document your vision?**

1. **Find a North Star:** A good practice for all internal communications practitioners is to seek out inspiration and success stories from other industry leaders in employee experience. Find a LinkedIn group such as The Institute of Internal Communications (IoIC) to gain insights on best practices. Follow industry blogs (such as Vignette and Poppulo). And dive into industry reports from leaders such as Gallup, Edelman, Deloitte.

2. **Documenting Shows Commitment:** Putting your vision down into words gives the idea credibility and increases the chance of it actually happening. In fact, research shows goals are more often met when they are documented. (Gail Matthews Dominican University, 2008)

3. **Facilitate Alignment:** You need people to buy into the vision. By documenting it (providing examples and using data and insights), you will start a discussion that begins to turn your vision into a reality. This gives you the opportunity to inspire, inform and defend your ideas. Where possible get creative help to deliver a well-designed presentation of your vision. This will allow you to show leadership the value to the brand and culture. Remember, you are always selling this vision so make sure you are armed and ready to win over supporters.
When your vision feels like it has come together, compare this new future state to your current state. Immediately you can begin to identify where you have gaps. You now have more clarity on where to go and how to fine-tune your future state vision.

Vision Do’s and Don’ts

Vision Do’s

- Play to your organization’s strengths. Leverage the positive aspects of your business and culture to help support your vision.

- Be the biggest champion for your strategy. It’s ok to get excited, show your passion. Recruiting others to join the cause is vital to your success.

Vision Don’ts

- Don’t define your vision based on an incremental improvement to your current state. Think big and give your organization something to strive toward.

- Don’t jump to a conclusion in a vacuum. Solicit multiple points of view from leadership to new-hires to tenured employees.

- Tactics are not strategy. Don’t define your vision in terms of what other companies are doing.

- Deeply understand your company’s business strategy. It is vital your vision for your internal communications strategy supports the company’s business strategy.
Part 2
Align: The Secret to Success
Support for your internal communications strategy beyond your department is vital. That makes finding alignment with the key people in your organization essential to win the support you need. But who are these people? As the IC Kollectif puts it, “internal communicators need to have the confidence to engage with senior management and to educate them on how to achieve effective internal communications.” (Disrupting the Function of IC – A Global Perspective, 2017). So to begin this pillar, you need to know who to align with to move your vision forward.

First, consider the stakeholders or executive committee who own the responsibility of developing the strategy and its outcome. Without their participation and buy-in, there will not be any strategy or the one you create will not be as effective. Second, look at the executive leadership or C-Office. They are ultimate decision makers and will review what you and the other stakeholders present. Some may also sit on your executive committee as well. Finally, there is your own team, who will be part of creating and sustaining the strategy. Having their support will make it easier to move forward, and they can provide useful insight along the way.

It is important to keep in mind that internal communications cuts across every part of your organization, touching employees and job seekers too. Success will be determined by your effective alignment and participation throughout the different departments or office locations. So it is also helpful to seek out specific people leaders (or managers) all through your organization. They’ll know the most engaged employees and can recommend a short list people who can champion your strategy. This will help you validate your plans and will play an important role in the execution.

Next, you will begin aligning these important people around your strategic vision. But you must be ready to present it with confidence and, at the same time, be open to feedback and be willing to fine-tune your vision based on their likes or dislikes. You also need to assess what parts of your vision are culturally relevant. And be honest with yourself about how much change (and how quickly) your organization can adopt. It is crucial that you manage the expectations of your leadership and stakeholders.

A vision is only as strong as your commitment to it. Help leadership and your stakeholders align on what it will take to achieve success. This means looking at the staffing requirements (both internal and external). Make sure you understand your team’s capacity. Identify areas where they are deficient and find solutions. And most importantly determine the total cost to create and implement your strategy. This is something IC and HR practitioners need to know before reaching out for external help. This is your reality check and will likely force you to go back and narrow down your key
priorities. Remember this isn’t about perfection, so you don’t have to do everything all at once. Share, align and prioritize your objectives over time. A phased approach to aligning with others in your organization is always a smart move.

Change management is inherent to any success rollout of an internal communications strategy. The scale of the change you seek is impacted by many factors including the size of your organization as well as the number of locations and how they are dispersed. Regardless of the scale, you will want to identify your change management needs. This involves a wide spectrum of variables including your organization’s readiness for change and the quality and quantity of change. What is important is to coordinate your change management planning along with your internal communications strategy. This may require advancing your (and your team’s) skills and capabilities. Do you have the tools and technology to achieve your vision? Taking some time to think about a change management plan can save you time, money and aggravation down the line.

You are embarking on a journey to transform your organization. This is a herculean task and not something you can do all by yourself (even if it feels like you are alone on an island). It takes a village. No matter what your strategy is aimed at accomplishing, alignment across brand, leadership, peers, and culture is essential for your success.

**Align Do’s and Don’ts**

**Align Do’s**

- Get leadership onboard to support and participate in your vision and eventual execution of your strategy. Their involvement and support is key to the success of your strategy.

- Get your immediate team on-board next. Surround yourself with passionate and motivated people to bring your vision and strategy to life.

- Make friends and allies across your organization. And don’t just look across and up, support is necessary from a variety of roles within the organization, not just the manager/director/executive level.

**Align Don’ts**

- Don’t work on as an island, it takes a village. It is a sure fire way to sink your vision or have it cut back dramatically. If you think you can roll out a new internal communications strategy alone, you’ll be disappointed.

- Letting others present your vision or plan is not ideal. Don’t distribute your strategy without a team of stakeholders. Be sure to show a unified effort to the vision and strategy.

- Don’t avoid the conversation around the investment of resources and needed budget. When you look for alignment with leadership, don’t present your vision without including what it would cost to achieve your vision.

- Don’t get discouraged. Change requires leadership and tenacity.

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**Consumerizing the Employee Experience**

Employees frequently demand more and more from their employers. The consumer trends of ubiquitous technology, transparency, and brand loyalty have changed the landscape for marketers and internal communicators. Here are a few examples of how consumer expectations are influencing employees:

- **Experience:** In 2015 Airbnb hired a ‘Global Head of Employee Experience’ and continues to break barriers in what work looks like for employees going way beyond open kitchens and collaborative work spaces. (Forbes 2017)

- **Technology:** Employees are looking for experiences at work that mimic what they are using in their personal lives. (Edelman, 2017). How closely does the technology at your organization match what your employees access outside of work?

- **Measurement:** Everything is quantifiable today, from your steps to your individual productivity. Measurement needs to be a top priority for all internal communicators if they are to stay relevant.

- **Gig Economy:** This is more than just a flexible working engagement. We know this is highly popular for many skilled workers. Use this trend to augment your team with top-level talent in writing, design, project management, and strategy. You can’t do it all and should not have to. Especially with so much talent available on an as-needed basis.

- Know who the influencers are and recruit them to help support your vision for a new era of strategic internal communications.
Part 3
Research & Insights: Removing the Guesswork
Research & Insights: Removing the Guesswork

Often internal communications practitioners move from alignment directly into tactical execution without taking time to validate their strategic vision.

While it is tempting to jump into action, we strongly encourage you to seek further insights that will better shape your internal communications strategy. Colin Mitchell makes the point, “Market research is a given for any consumer marketing campaign, but companies seldom invest in such research when their employees are the audience... Why go to the trouble? Because once organizations find out what’s on people’s minds, they can tailor their campaigns accordingly.” (The Harvard Business Review, 2002).

This next step will remove the guesswork and begin to build an even stronger case supported by data and powerful insights. Just as an experienced marketer would do before launching a campaign, IC and HR practitioners must become more data-driven. Applying modern research, insights and action planning methods will greatly benefit internal communications strategy. By doing this, you will better understand your audience, which will enable your internal communications strategy to deliver greater value back to your organization.

When it comes to communications (internal or external), understanding your audience is one of the oldest rules in the book. For internal communications, this includes both leaders and employees. So it’s essential to know as much as you can about them and their preferences. While sometimes a single message to all employees is appropriate, in general segmenting your audience helps you target content for a specific audience. And using a tool like Poppulo enables highly granular personalization, segmentation, and targeting. This makes the messages more meaningful to your employees and gives you a better chance at activating them.

Ask yourself what channels and vehicles do your employees prefer? Can you predict how to activate them around your messaging? Are you translating the English language into other languages? Is translation enough or do you need to customize employee experiences based on role, geography, or generation? Don’t assume they prefer a particular communication approach just because you or your leadership want them to use a certain channel or vehicle. Be mindful and don’t let an existing toolset drive your decisions as this can sacrifice your strategy and ability to measure (Ruck and Welch 2012). Guessing at this scale, generally leads to ineffective communications. And even when you know their preferences, you still need to experiment and learn over time what works and what doesn’t.

Also, consider how your people best consume information. What are their learning preferences? Are they visual, auditory, or tactile learners? Is it better to use more visuals to activate them? Or is it necessary to have their manager sit down with them for a one on one meeting? It is also important to look at the timing and frequency of communications. Consider the idea...
of dayparts, where messages are sent at certain times of the day or week. In many organizations Mondays are busy, and people are focusing on the week ahead. On Friday some people begin to check out early. It is essential to find the day and time that allows your messages to land with the most impact. And how big is your organization? Do you have different offices in other cities or across the globe in different time zones? As with most things in life, it’s all about the timing. There may also be language and local customs to consider. All of these pieces are an important part of your internal communications strategy.

By now it should be very clear there is a lot more research you can do to learn more about your employee’s behaviors and preferences. But before you jump into research, it is helpful to perform an audit to understand the gaps between the areas of strength and where you need improvement. Use the following categories as filters to determine what to look for in your audit:

Figure 03: Elements of an IC Audit

Brand
Audience
Culture
Capabilities
Capacity
Globalization or Localization

Brand
You likely have a brand and in some cases more than one brand. That brand plays an extremely important role with your internal communications strategy. A brand is designed to influence your customer’s perception of your company’s products and services. Take a moment to better understand your brand so you can begin to translate its essence for internal use. Write down a concise and clear statement of the personality, core values, emotional rewards and functional benefits of your brand. This exercise will help you think through and eventually create your employer brand. This is how your employees perceive what it is like to work for your company (and will be an important component later in Pillar 4, Creation).

Audience
Dig deep to understand what you already know (and don’t know) about your employees. Then go further to unearth all you can about the way they prefer to work and the communication tools they like to use. Find out what they love or hate about the current state of the internal communications ecosystem and the ways they consume content. The more you know about your audience’s preferences, the more you can create and deliver targeted content they are ready to consume and activate around. Spend the time to find out what will drive them to take the action being asked of them. Start thinking about your current audience profile and how it can be updated into a more useful segmentation. Consider segmenting in several ways like role, generation or geography. Ask how are your employees alike and how are they different. And what are the nuances between them?

Culture
Every company has a culture. But is your culture helping your company achieve its business strategy? Does it contribute to making your company a great place to work? Define the unique personality of your company and determine where and how your people embrace it (or don’t!). In some organizations, leaders establish the culture. In others, it is leaders and employees together. Consider the history of your company. As your business has changed over the years has your culture transformed with it? As clearly as you can identify where the culture is and where it needs to be in order for your business to thrive. Whatever you discover about your culture, it will ultimately guide your internal communications strategy. In some cases, you may discover that a key objective for your vision will be to transform itself.
Capabilities

The team you assemble to plan and manage your internal communications strategy will make or break your success. So you need to quickly determine what you and your team are capable of. Your audit will focus on your people, process, and technology. Does everyone share the same vision for a future state? What kind of experience does the team have? What are their current skills vs. what do they need to be capable of in the future? What tools and technology are you currently using for your internal communications? Eventually, you will need to build a full-time team with the right balance of vision, capability, and capacity to realize your new internal communications strategy. Start thinking about this now as you will need to make a strong business case to leadership to receive what you need.

Capacity

Capacity is one of the most overlooked yet crucial factors in creating an internal communications strategy. It is rare to find any company that has enough people with the time to execute the work that needs to be done. Regardless of the size of your team (large or small) don’t make plans you can’t support. Honestly assess the capabilities of your team and ensure everyone (full-time, contracted or agency) has the capacity to plan, implement, measure and iterate your internal communications.

Globalization or Localization?

This last part of your audit is only for those companies who support employees who speak more than one language or are a global company with people in multiple countries speaking many languages. The standard approach for most companies is to translate English-first content into other languages. While this may work sometimes, most people expect communications to be delivered in a way that is familiar to them. That means using the correct idioms, in the proper context, correct word choice, etc. Now consider what it says to your employees if you don’t deliver communications in the way they think is appropriate. It can send the message that their employer doesn’t care enough about them. This is especially true when it comes to the use of language and customs. Use your audit to understand how this segment of your audience needs you to deliver communications so your internal communications strategy can address this and get it right going forward.

Going Deeper

After you complete your auditing process, you should have a good sense of your current state of internal communications and how that compares with the vision of your future state. Ultimately what you want to extract from your research are valuable insights that can shed light on your final strategy. But these insights are not always clear at first. Therefore, you need to dig further to extract more information by conducting surveys and interviews. Our preferred method is to synchronize the results from the surveys with the interviews so we can drill down on specific points. For example, you ask the question in a survey: “Do you want to be promoted?” Most people will probably answer yes – it’s a black or white response. But when you ask the question during a one-on-one anonymous interview, the answer can be a bit more gray: “Well, of course, I want to be promoted, but right now I’m actually hoping I won’t be because a promotion would require X and I don’t like X.” A survey only tells you the “what” while an interview helps unearth the “why.” In our experience, this combination always leads to the most powerful insights. A suggested place to start is by performing:

- **Leadership Interviews**: Meet with a select group of executive leaders and the C-Office. Interview them to understand their wants, needs, and expectations for how internal communications supports their business objectives.
- **Employee Survey and Interviews**: Select a minimum of 20 employees (include more where possible to be statistically significant). For these surveys and interviews make sure you select from across departments, locations, and tenures.
- **All Employee Survey**: Aim for statistical significance by surveying as many employees as possible. Ideally, you will be able to survey all employees. Survey fatigue only comes from bad questions and
lack of follow through. Get in the habit of sending survey’s on a regular basis as it creates a culture of feedback. The pulse survey functionality within Poppulo’s software is an excellent method to reach employees this way.

Now let’s review what to look for in your surveys and interviews. Go back and recall the assumptions you made when you created your vision such as:

- How is our employer brand perceived?
- How are our leaders perceived?
- How can I get leaders to participate in internal communications?
- What channels and vehicles do employees prefer and why?
- What are the best times of day/week to send communications?
- How frequently should communications be sent before an employee feels like it is too much?
- What issues and frustrations do they have?
- How do they consume communications and learn best?
- What behaviors need to change?
- What new habits need to form?
- Does culture need to transform or not? If so, how?
- Is our employer brand ready to use? Do we need to create it from scratch or can we elevate the existing version?
- What are the capabilities and capacity of my current team?
- How does my team need to grow to support my vision?

What you take away from the research process will be your raw data. Now you will begin to analyze the data in order to extract meaningful insights. One approach we use is a gap analysis, where you compare your future state vision with the discoveries you made in your audits, surveys, and interviews. Find the areas of strength and weakness and identify the gaps between where you are and where you want to be. You may already have some early thoughts on how to take action on these gaps.

Now consolidate your findings. These are the insights that are born out of your analysis of your data.

Document each insight in a clear and concise manner and include notes on potential actions you can take in response to what you have found.

Once you feel confident you have thoroughly researched, extracted and documented valuable and game-changing insights, it is time to present your findings to your stakeholders. The most effective way to do this is to conduct a workshop with key stakeholders and executive leadership. Here you will review the insights, align on the objectives and prioritize the actions you need to take. Before you present, take one last look at your findings. As objectively as you can ask yourself what the insights tell you. Are they clear enough to help you decide what actions you need to take? Does the research go deep enough to allow you and the stakeholders to understand the issues and realize the solutions? The workshop offers you an opportunity to step-up and make a powerful business case for your vision. So make it count. Create a roadmap of key milestones over a 1-3 year time span, using visual representations of actions, owners, and timing.

During the workshop seek to align with leadership and stakeholders in order to prioritize the actions taken in order to achieve the vision. The types of actions vary from company to company. They can focus on your people, such as activating employees around your employer brand or refining your recruitment marketing. Maybe it is more about your culture like updating the company’s purpose and values or creating content about the company’s heritage or history. Regardless of the specific actions you and your stakeholders decide to include, an action list should be the output of the workshop. This is the moment when your strategy begins to take shape.
Research & Insights Do’s and Don’ts

Insights Do’s

• Challenge organizational assumptions in your research. Draft questions that will put some of “givens” within your organization. You may be surprised what you find out.

• Highlight your wins and strengths at every opportunity. In your research, you will find areas where you are doing well. Embrace those insights to amplify the positive aspects of your employee experience.

• Look to understand your employees wants, needs, preferences, learning types, and perceptions. These are the key to delivering in ways they will be more ready to receive and take action on.

Insights Don’ts

• It’s easy to take one insight and run with it. Be patient and get a full perspective before making major changes in how you are approaching internal communications.

• Don’t project your observations, opinions and habits and call that ‘research.’ Realize you are probably not the average employee within your company. Use your research exercise as an opportunity to take a step back and listen.

• Don’t be surprised if some insights are challenging to some closely held assumptions or beliefs. Embrace the outliers and dig in deeper to uncover the “why.”

• Don’t skip research. You can’t afford to guess anymore. Research validates or helps you pivot your vision.
Part 4
Creation: Building Your Internal Communications Strategy
Your prioritized objectives and actions are now finalized and fully supported by your stakeholders and executive leaders.

Now you are ready to get to work on applying your vision, alignment, and insights to build your internal communications strategy. To begin this process, you will first need to create two important foundational tools that you will use going forward.

Create a Profile of Your Audience

The first tool is a profile of your employee audience. This can be either in the form of personas or a more robust segmentation. Think of a persona as a high-level summary of the key behaviors and characteristics of an employee. This is based on what they do, their preferences, the challenges they face, and other relevant information. If you are using personas, you usually create three to five to start with. Audience segmentation is a process of dividing employees into subgroups based upon defined criteria. These include demographics, psychographics, communication behaviors, media consumption use, and learning styles. Audience segmentation can go as deep as you need it to. Regardless of which direction you take, the point is to create a profile that allows you to know your audience. Armed with this tool, you will be able to create targeted content across your organization, where the messages are heard and followed through with action.

Create or Enhance Your Employer Brand

Another critical toolset is the employer brand, and to start is made up of two components: A narrative and a style guide. Few companies today have an established employer brand, but many are starting to jump on the bandwagon. It’s becoming clear they understand that an employer brand plays an important role in managing the perception employees have on what it is like to work for the company. The employer brand narrative is also known as the employee value proposition (EVP), which helps employees understand the value and benefits of working at the organization and expectations of them as employees.

To create the employee value proposition, find the aspects of your company, brand, culture and total rewards that excite and inspire your employees. It is also helpful to assess the connection and/or disconnect between your brand and its perception among your employees. Use this knowledge to create a narrative that clearly and concisely describes what value the company offers employees beyond compensation. Tone of voice is important here too. So make sure you find an appropriate employee-centric tone that fits your brand and culture. Ideally, you should create a tone
that feels personalized, just like marketers do for you as a consumer. You want to activate employees to live the brand and encourage others to do the same. The employee value proposition also plays an important role with your recruiting efforts, helping to find and attract job seekers and candidates to want to work for your company.

The second component of the employer brand is the style guide. You can get creative and explore secondary color palettes, typography, photography and graphic styles — this is fun and exciting. Play off your brand and culture to find visual styles that can help connect with employees more easily. Also using the power of design, you can drive excitement around your brand and communications. The style guide will also be used to police the brand. It should include lightweight direction on what to do and not do to make it easier for employees to stay on brand.

Create Your Internal Communications Strategy

You might not realize it, but by this point in the process you are almost finished creating your internal communications strategy. You now have:

• A future state vision that has the backing of your stakeholders and executive leaders.
• Audited your current state and understand strengths, areas for improvement and gaps in your team, capabilities, and communications.
• Compiled research that helps validate much of your vision and course correct where it was off.
• Developed personas or segmentation of your audience
• Created or updated your employer brand
• A firm list of prioritized actions you need to take to address your communication objectives

What do you do next with all this powerful and insightful information? You document your strategy and get leadership to sign off. Remember, it is also important to get their full commitment. This means real support in terms of the people, technology, capital and all other resources required to bring your internal communications strategy to life.

Your strategy document should include the following content:

• Overview: Summarize the communication objectives and how they help serve the overall business strategy.
• Insights: Summarize what you learned about your leaders and employees, such as their preferences, learning styles, channels and vehicle use.
• Employer Brand: Include the employee value proposition and style guide.
• Audience Profile: Provide the personas or segmentation.
• Channels & Vehicles: Map audience profile to preferred channels and vehicles.
• Actions: Summarize the prioritized actions your internal communications strategy will focus on (e.g., create and activate employees around employer brand, create and activate employees around a new shared purpose and the company’s existing core values, etc.)
• Resources: Detail the resources you need including (but not limited to) recruiting, staffing and training people, tools, and technology, tactical creative planning and execution, content creation, agency support, etc.
• Change Management: Include a summary of your change management plan.
• Measurement: Include a measurement plan: what you plan to measure; how frequently you will share results with stakeholders and executive leaders; how you will share the results; and what you will do with the results (apply leanings to your work and iterate until you achieve success). No matter what your comfort level with data and measurement, Poppulo’s ‘The Ultimate Guide to Measuring Internal Communications’ is a must-read for all IC and HR practitioners.
Congratulations! You now have an internal communications strategy. It’s now time to move from strategy to tactical thinking so you can create action plans to achieve your communication objectives.

Creation Do’s and Don’ts

**Creation Do’s**

- When creating personas for your organization make sure they are relevant and unique to the makeup of your employee audience. The more you understand your audience, the better you can serve them.

- The employee value proposition and supporting style guide will work best when they are designed to engage and activate employees and job seekers instead of customers or consumers. Explain the reason behind creative choices such as tone of voice, color, typography and graphic styles.

- Ensure your team is staffed with the right mix of resources to bring your strategy to life. The research and insights you have to back up your point of view will help your strategic and creative partners realize the most effective way to execute your strategy.

**Creation Don’ts**

- Your marketing department may be effective and have the skills to help you bring your employer brand to life. But the reality is they are not close enough to this audience and are probably maxed out or primarily focused on their workload.

- Measurement is key in an effective strategy. Don’t stop developing your strategy until you have included a plan for measuring its effectiveness.

- Now that you have a full strategy, don’t think your work is done. Every quarter, review your strategy and ensure it is still aligned to the business’ needs or evolve it to meet those new needs.

- Don’t wonder why you haven’t created videos, websites and posters yet. That comes after you have a strategy.

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Your Internal Communications Dream Team

To successfully execute and sustain an internal communications strategy a company requires a team of specialized resources. Each member of your team will need to bring a unique skillset to the table. The following list will help you understand the ideal makeup of your team, but keep in mind different skill sets can sometimes be performed by the same person. For example, you likely can’t find an SEO specialist in a Copywriter, but you can find a Copywriter who understands SEO best practices. While your team will start lean, look to augment your team’s capability over time with a mix of full time hires, contractors and agency partners.

- Strategist
- Data Scientist/Analyst
- Writers (narrative and instructional)
- Designers (varying types, e.g., digital, print, user experience, instructional)
- Web/Mobile/Intranet Developers
- Content Managers
- Project Managers
- Videographer
- Video Editor
- Content Strategist
- SEO Specialist
- Event Producer
Moving Into Action: From Strategy to Tactics
Moving Into Action: From Strategy to Tactics

Now it is time take tactical action based on the internal communications strategy you assembled using the four pillars.

As you transition from strategic thinking to tactical planning, there are some preliminary steps to take. First, consider your own role and that of the entire IC and HR team. Up until now, you have been a strategist, crafting a vision that is aligned with your stakeholders and leadership. You have completed due diligence to make sure your future state vision fits with your people and culture.

But now your role has transformed into a content creator and internal marketer. Like your marketing counterparts, you are now tasked to communicate and activate employee audiences using different types of channels, tactics, and vehicles. Your communications might come in different forms to support different outcomes. For example at times a topic you need to communicate to employees might only require a one-off message when others require a campaign that may run many months worth of messaging.

A Tactical Plan For Each Action

When you have completed your internal communications strategy, you prioritized your final actions. Now you need to apply a tactical plan to each action. Remember this doesn’t have to happen all at once. Focus on one action at a time until you have enough people on staff to successfully complete all assignments. When developing a tactical plan, the first order of business is to write a brief that includes the following:

- Summary of communication objectives
- Measure of success – KPIs
- Target audience(s)
- Suggested channels and vehicles
- Team & resources – internal staff, external agencies, etc.
- Budget – this is critical. You need to know what you have to spend is enough to accomplish your objective

Next, it is time to develop your key messages and their hierarchy across personas or audience segments (if applicable). Generally, you should have a maximum of three message points per communication. Each communication should include a call to action (CTA), so the employee knows the action you expect them to take (e.g., learn more, click here, watch the video, etc.).

Now you want to get creative and work with your team to develop your ideas and determine the best vehicles to use (e.g., a video, the intranet, a printed materials, etc.). Once you know the type of vehicle, you can begin to assess what to measure and how to measure it. Through effective measurement, you will overcome the gap of investment and influence many IC and HR practitioners.
experience when they don’t have a measurement plan (Poppulo Global Summary Report, 2016).

Part of your process must include planning of content and channels to achieve maximum effectiveness. Create an editorial calendar to help you manage the cadence of your message against all other communications across actions. And lastly, don’t forget about your promotional plan. This is how you will create awareness of your communications, so they are seen and acted upon.

Now you are ready to execute your tactical plan and create the content for your communications (this includes any promotional material as well). Tactical execution has many distinct parts and deserves an extensive review. The process requires a team of creators in a variety of disciplines that will produce, iterate and finalize your content. This includes different components such as copywriting, design, production (video, design, digital and more) and quality assurance. There is the publishing and promotion of the content as well as measuring impact and analyzing the effectiveness of the vehicle and your approach. Finally, you will need to report back to the team and leadership and align on insights and iteration; what to change, optimize or delete. With these newfound insights, you now have the opportunity to fine-tune the content, so you are better armed to reach your objective. The following is a recommended flow:

- Create the content/communications and promotional content. These people/disciplines should be working together as a team to ideate, create, iterate and finalize content
  - Copywriting
  - Design
  - Production
  - QA
  - Measurement
- Promote the content
- Publish the content
- Measure the effectiveness of the content
- Analyze effectiveness and write reports
- Present reports back to team/leadership
- Align on what to iterate/optimize/create/delete
- Republish
Closing

The Next Steps
Closing

The essential task of this paper has been to take you through the process of creating an effective internal communications strategy so that each communication has a real impact.

This means understanding the difference between strategy and tactics. Make sure you are not jumping into action before you recognize the best approach for you and your company. The four pillars provide a framework that starts with a vision based upon clearly articulated business objectives. Then you will seek to find alignment with leadership, which will galvanize the support you need to achieve the future state objectives. Next, it is about understanding your audience and culture through research and insight. And finally to prioritize actions that align with your stakeholders and create the tools and roadmap to create powerful communications.

We know it is easier said than done. But this is a proven methodology that has helped many companies create and sustain their internal communications strategy.

Once you have completed a strategy and moved into the tactical action stage of communications, it is important to recognize your role as content creator and internal marketer. And while your strategy will be built on a strong foundation of your company’s brand and culture, it is imperative to often revisit your approach as your company grows or changes over time. Stay ahead of your business by evolving your strategy to fit new requirements. Continue the process of creating, publishing, learning and iterating in an effective and business savvy way. Keep on top of the latest trends in communication and technology and constantly seek to improve yourself and your team’s capability and skills. Always allow yourself to become more creative and seek new inspiration to deliver the experiences your employees want and will come to expect.
About the Authors

Gregg Apirian,
Managing Director
Vignette

As the Managing Director of Vignette, Gregg is responsible for agency-wide vision and strategy, operations and finance, business development and engagement management. With nearly 20 years in entrepreneurial and executive-level roles, Gregg has been an instrumental leader at many distinguished agencies. Prior to Vignette Gregg was EVP, Digital Marketing at Trailer Park, EVP at Schematic (now POSSIBLE), and began his agency career as co-founder and CEO of BLITZ.

Mike Lepis,
Co-Founder & Creative Director
Vignette

As a Creative Director, Mike is responsible for developing insights and mapping them to the creative solutions that drive employee engagement for Vignette’s clients. Early in his career Mike worked for both consumer marketing and internal communication divisions at Nike. As a creative, one of the biggest challenges Mike saw for IC was the inability to correctly interpret data to uncover authentic insights. In 2004, modernizing IC with insights-driven creative became Mike’s mission. In 2006, Vignette became his vehicle.

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At Poppulo we go further

We’re not content to have created the world’s only software specifically designed for internal communications.

We’re energized by working with amazing companies to ensure that IC is part of the strategic function of organizations everywhere.

And it’s why we created exceptional whitepapers to tackle two of the most important issues that IC professionals face, measurement & insights (The Ultimate Guide to Internal Communications Measurement), and strategy.

We hope you found The Ultimate Guide to Internal Communications Strategy helpful.

The Poppulo Team

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