

COMMUNICATION & COLLABORATION

KEY POINTS

- Businesses today face organisational, technological and behavioural barriers to communication and collaboration
- Staff members from different generations and different cultural backgrounds will have differing approaches to communication and collaboration
- To succeed, businesses need to develop multichannel strategies to overcome structural and behavioural barriers in the way of communication and collaboration
- Building strong, positive relationships helps to foster a culture of positive communication and supportive collaboration in the workplace

“Genuine collaboration is an environment that promotes communication, learning, maximum contribution, and innovation,”

Jane Ripley, Wired Leaders

Open communication across an organisation, and genuine collaboration among its employees, both play an important role in building a happy, healthy and successful workplace.

But, collaboration in modern workplaces can be impeded by siloed teams, internal hierarchies, geographically distributed workforces, technology challenges and cultural roadblocks. Overcoming these blockages to communication and collaboration can be achieved through organisational and cultural change, as well as through the implementation of new approaches and technologies.

In this Tip Sheet we will predominantly be looking at organisational and cultural strategies and changes that can improve communication and collaboration at your workplace.

ORGANISATIONAL AND BEHAVIOURAL CHALLENGES IN COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION

“Cooperation is the thorough conviction that nobody can get there unless everybody gets there,”

Virginia Burden, American author

We like to think that every member of staff in our organisations is on the same page, working together and heading in the same direction. But, this isn't always the case. As businesses grow, as their work becomes more varied and complex, as staff take advantage of new technologies to work in different ways, communication can become fragmented and interrupted and the collaboration needed to get the job done can become more difficult.

Barriers to communication and collaboration in modern workplaces can generally be divided into two categories: organisational and behavioural.

Organisational barriers in the way of communication and collaboration include:

- **Silos:** Particularly in large organisations employees can become comfortable working and communicating with only the people in their areas of expertise or responsibility. In organisations divided into departments and teams, communication between these groups can become entangled in bureaucracy, lost in transmission and translation or the sharing of information between teams may not even happen at all!
- **Inadequate policies and procedures:** Information or Knowledge policies and procedures can help to improve the sharing of information in organisations, particularly when these policies tackle one of the key barriers to communication and collaboration: the lack of urgency around the need for improved communication and collaboration
- **Ineffective or non-existent tools and resources:** Where teams are geographically dispersed or when they use different tools to gather and share information, communication and collaboration can become difficult

At a time of rapid changes in technology and the emergence of Bring Your Own Device approaches to workplace technology (when people use their own personal laptops, tablets or smartphones to access, edit and share workplace documents and files), it's vital that businesses implement approaches that facilitate the use of technology for improved communication, information sharing and collaboration

Behavioural barriers in the way of communication and collaboration include:

- **Complacency:** “It's always been this way” is the attitude that can stop communication and collaboration in its tracks. Organisational cultures and behaviours develop over long periods of time and changing these approaches isn't quick or easy. If barriers to collaboration exist in your workplace, accepting this and committing to taking action are the first steps towards improvements
- **Contradictions between policies and practices:** Sometimes the words in a Human Resources policy or procedure sound wonderful but, in practice, silos and other barriers still hinder communication and collaboration; and everyone in the workplace knows it

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- **Limited trust:** Continuing on from the point above, when actions don't reflect the wording of internal policy documents employees are less likely to listen to, or engage with, messages from senior executives and leaders in the organisation

GENERATIONAL CHALLENGES IN COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION

The 'generation gap' between workers is an additional key driver of behavioural barriers that can impede communication and collaboration at work. In today's workplaces, staff are drawn from the Baby Boomer, Generation X and Generation Y/ Millennial generations. The rapid advance of technology and the evolution of attitudes towards hierarchy have an impact on the ways that workers from different generations approach communication and collaboration.

Given this diversity in attitudes and approaches, how does a workplace successfully bring staff from these different generations together to achieve great outcomes? Steps that can be taken to ensure workers from different generations communicate and collaborate effectively include:

- Looking at the different internal communication channels/ tactics and determining if these approaches are best suited to the needs of your organisation
- Using this audit to ask staff members about ways they prefer to learn and share new information
- Using this audit to ask staff about specific communication tools they prefer such as all staff meetings, all staff emails, internal chat/ social media apps (such as the Slack messaging app or the Workplace For Facebook service), internal newsletters, etc.
- Implementing a company mentoring program where more experienced workers are 'buddied' up with younger staff members to better share information around work roles, policies and procedures

A reflection of the different generational approach to communication can also be seen in the emergence of new technologies and new ways of working. The increasing number of staff working from home or from other remote locations (such as interstate offices or overseas locations) also creates new barriers to communication and collaboration.

Previously mentioned internal chat/ social media apps can play a role in enhancing communication between remote locations, but other technologies including secure cloud-based file sharing tools, increased used of laptops and mobile tablets and the emergence of the smartphone as a workplace tool will also play a role in shaping the best channels for communication and collaboration in your workplace.

Empowering your employees to work from, and collaborate from, anywhere via technology can enhance productivity, but there is also a risk that workers who are less familiar with technology can be left behind. It's important that when your business or organisation looks to a technology strategy as a part of enhancing communication and collaboration, less technologically savvy employees are supported to use these new tools so that everyone benefits.

STRONG RELATIONSHIPS ARE THE KEY TO POSITIVE COMMUNICATION AND EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION

We spend so much of our time at work and the friendships we forge with our colleagues have an important role to play in building a healthy and happy workplace. These relationships form the basis for positive communication and collaboration, so how do we build strong relationships at work? A workplace culture that fosters positive communication and effective collaboration is built on:

- **Inclusion:** We can include others at work by showing genuine interest in building positive relationships
- **Development:** A creative, collaborative culture is one that encourage staff and allows mistakes to be made and learned from
- **Engagement:** A listening culture, as mentioned earlier, is a key to communication and collaboration
- **Enhancement:** We can help people to grow and learn at work by creating an environment where positive and constructive feedback is normal and an important path to personal growth

There are many challenges in the way of effective, positive communication and collaboration at work, but there are also a range of strategies and tools that can contribute to building inclusive and supportive workplace cultures. What are some of the ways your workplace encourages improvements in communication and collaboration?

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