Workplace Communication Blueprint
How to effectively communicate employee benefits
What does Newton’s 3rd Law have to do with communication? Well, it’s useful to have in mind when thinking about getting your message across. The purpose of communication is to make something happen – produce a reaction. This could be raising awareness of a topic, imparting information or encouraging action to be taken.

If no reaction comes, if nothing happens, then the equation is broken and the communication effectively fails. Communication is not a one-way process. It requires two parties to be involved and active in order to achieve its objective.

The power of communication cannot be underestimated. Those that master the art, like Steve Jobs or Mark Zuckerberg, have headed up some of the most influential businesses the world has ever seen. While not everyone can live up to their standards, prioritising effective communication and taking the time to get it right, can reap enormous rewards. Communication should not be something that is handed over to the marketing team to deal with, every manager and every department in the business has a responsibility to make it a priority and get it right.

“The ear of the leader must ring with the voices of the people” Woodrow Wilson

While the 28th President of the United States of America was referring to leading his country, it’s a pertinent thought for business leaders and line managers to be mindful of. An essential part of communication is listening. It will inform what the message should be, measure how successfully it came across and indicate what the next steps should be. Effective communication is like a lively conversation, with two parties engaged in the process. Each is listening to what the other is saying and responding in an appropriate way that reflects the previous answer. It is not about shouting about your own agenda and ignoring any reaction from the audience.
The aim of this report is to explore how companies can best communicate to their staff about the employee benefits that are available to them. Effective communication should be a key consideration and is absolutely essential if that employee benefits package is going to perform the role it was designed to do.

Employers offer benefits for a variety of reasons, including:

- Attracting the best staff
- Retaining key employees
- Motivating the workforce to improve performance
- Helping employees stay fit and active
- Boosting staff morale

This is by no means an exhaustive list, but the key driver is ensuring employees are fit and happy and keen to perform to the best of their abilities. As discussed in our report from 2014, Creating Companies That Care¹, a well-designed employee benefits package is a vital part of building an organisation that views its workforce as an asset to protect.

However, it is only able to do this if staff know about what benefits are on offer and value those that are available. If the package is communicated poorly or not at all, then employers might as well throw the money they’ve spent on it down the drain. This was the conclusion of Money Talks², a report by Cass Business School, conducted by Professor Nick Bacon. This report builds on those findings, exploring not just why communication is important but investigating how to do it better. This will help increase take-up rates, improve the return on investment made into those benefits and inform any future benefit offering, ensuring employers offer what their employees want and value.

¹Unum, Creating companies that care: Building a blueprint for employers to engage with employees, 2014
²Nick Bacon and Kim Hoque, Money Talks: Communicating Employee Benefits, 2013
Introduction

NICK BACON, PROFESSOR OF HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT, CASS BUSINESS SCHOOL, CITY UNIVERSITY

The impact of HR practices on organisations’ success or failure is undeniable. Research undertaken at Cass Business School has identified 18 high-performance work practices which, when used together, enable businesses to perform 20% better than those which don’t undertake them. But good HR practices can deliver bad results for organisations if they aren’t implemented properly. The creation of a good pay and benefits strategy is a high-performance HR practice, but it’s pointless if it’s not communicated properly.

The Money Talks report discovered levels of employee turnover and absence are the same in organisations that offer employee benefits but don’t communicate them as those that provide no perks at all.

So, communicating benefits is crucial. Failing to tell staff effectively what employee benefits are on offer is costing UK companies £2.7 billion every year, through increased staff turnover and sickness absence. For a typical company with 1,000 employees, this equates to £470,000 every year.

Around two thirds of employers, 64%, have invested in a large range of employee benefits but are failing to make it clear to their staff what they are entitled to. These companies are no better off than those employers who haven’t invested in any at all. These figures underline starkly the need to getting the communication right.

3 Nick Bacon and Kim Hoque, Money Talks: Communicating Employee Benefits, 2013
Good communication is valuable, but other factors need to be considered too. It’s important that senior managers don’t just talk a good game, they need to follow their words with actions, building trust with their workforce. From this trust, loyalty, motivation and engagement will grow. Unfortunately, in the UK, trust levels in employers are low – one study suggests a third of employees think trust is weak between them and their senior managers and 31% say they do not trust senior management.¹

Trust between employers and employees is crucial in communicating benefits too. If only two-thirds of employees trust their employers, then a significant proportion of the workforce is not taking messages about the benefits available to them at face value.

Employers must make it clear to their entire workforce that they are valued and that the wellbeing of employees is at the heart of their business. This message should be reinforced by behaviours right from the top, through senior managers and all line managers. The role of line managers is particularly crucial as employees tend to trust their immediate bosses more than senior management as they are involved with them on a daily basis.

Equally, employees should feel their voice is heard. The benefits on offer should be those that are relevant to employees and have a real value to them. For example, offering a workforce made up of young, single employees with no dependents life insurance isn’t a particularly useful or attractive offer. More significantly, if the way those benefits are communicated does not demonstrate an understanding of who the workforce are and what they find important, then employees won’t feel they are understood or listened to.

Even if organisations don’t have the budget for an extravagant benefit offering, giving employees a say in their benefits package is effective in boosting engagement and take-up rates. Most employees want to feel involved and listened to. It might not be possible to offer every benefit that is requested, but including staff in that discussion will make them feel part of the process and more engaged with the company.

¹CIPD, Megatrends – are organisations losing the trust of their workers, 2013
Developing the communications blueprint

We gathered the views and insights of a range of employee benefits and communications experts from a variety of organisations and sectors and asked over 1,000 employees in the UK about their experiences and view of the benefits they receive and how they are communicated.

Nick Bacon
Professor of Human Resource Management at Cass Business School, City University

Lauren Harper
Communications Consultant at Aon

Lawrence Mitchell
Former Global Marketing Leader and Corporate Wellbeing Programme Creator, Reed Business Insights

Liz Walker
HR Director at Unum

Oonagh Goodman
Head of Marketing and Communications at The Rainbow Trust

Oli Howard
Head of Internal Communications at the Civil Aviation Authority and a Board Member of the Institute of Internal Communications

Jennifer Reid
Senior Communications Consultant at Aon

Matt Ward
HR Development and Communications Manager at the Institute of Directors

Matthew Gregson
Consulting Director at Thomsons Online Benefits

Kate Jones
Head of Internal Communications at Tarmac, and Chair of the Board of the Institute of Internal Communication

Colette Roberts
EMEA Pensions and Benefits Manager SVP at Citi

From this research we have established a blueprint for workplace communications.

There are five action points for employee benefits professionals to take:

1. **Go back to basics** - understand what you want your benefits to achieve.
2. **Know your audience** - educate yourself on the motivations and behaviour of your workforce.
3. **Think external, act internal** - engage with employees as you would customers or clients.
4. **Don’t just communicate with employees, engage them** - build trust through an open, two-way dialogue.
5. **Create social norms** - enable a culture in which talking about, signing up for benefits and measuring benefits is typical behaviour.
The journey to communicating benefits effectively

Most of the GB employees we surveyed claimed to know about all the benefits they are entitled to at work. But there is still a significant minority who are not aware of some or any of the benefits that are available to them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>58%</th>
<th>28%</th>
<th>13%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>are aware of all benefits</td>
<td>are aware of some benefits</td>
<td>are not aware of any benefits</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is an appetite to learn more about what is on offer, particularly when it comes to financial benefits. Over a third (34%) of our respondents agree that employers should take more responsibility for providing financial education and guidance for their employees, and 37% would welcome additional help from their employers on financial issues.

So, there is clearly work to be done by employers. There are many challenges organisations face – communicating to different groups of employees, engaging individuals and breaking down barriers, speaking with one ‘voice’ through many different channels and cutting through the masses of communication that people receive every day.

Our employees, particularly in London, are bombarded with information. We believe that we have a really good benefits offering, and that all the information about it is out there, but it’s all in disparate bits – it’s on different parts of the intranet, it’s in leaflets. Our challenge is in trying to communicate that in a crisp way to move from communication to engagement.

Colette Roberts, EMEA Pensions & Benefits Manager SVP Citi

It’s clear that organisations differ in how sophisticated their benefits policies and communication strategies are. Whatever stage businesses are at, they need to examine their current benefits offering and how it is communicated. Following that they need to decide what they want to achieve and why they want to achieve it.

For small businesses, this is particularly important. Any investment in employee benefits represents a significant cost, when budgets are often tight. It is vital that in these organisations they ask their employees what they would value and appreciate before they do anything else. Embarking on a programme without consulting the workforce can be a costly exercise if the right benefits aren’t selected and waste a substantial amount of time and money. There is no need to rush into a decision, getting the benefits that employees actually want is far more important than introducing them quickly.
1. Go back to basics

The business benefits that organisations are trying to get out of employee benefits are many and varied, but you should start any communications of benefits with those in mind.

Oli Howard, Head of Internal Communications, Civil Aviation Authority and Board Member, Institute of Internal Communications

Why do employers offer benefits? As mentioned at the start of this report, businesses use them for a number of reasons, including recruitment, motivation and retention of employees. They also offer them from a moral perspective and for reasons of altruism. Whether benefits are expensive or free, the package should facilitate employee engagement.

It’s crucial that employers ask themselves what they want to achieve from the communication of benefits. Answers might include higher take-up, better return on investment and improved HR metrics such as engagement, retention and productivity. Measuring the success of both benefits and how they are communicated should be an integral part of the process.
In order to establish any return on investment, it’s important to have a grasp on the likely take-up levels and the costs of benefits. Employees’ knowledge and understanding of benefits must be surveyed too, to establish how much they know about what you are planning to offer and how much education they will need to fully understand the proposition. In our survey, unawareness of different benefits ranged from 17% to 37%.

This shows the level of communication needed for each benefit will differ. In particular, some of the more complex benefits, like an ISA through the workplace or Income Protection may need more focus than others.

Benefits employees are most unaware of:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefit</th>
<th>Unaware Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employee Assistance Programme</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income protection insurance</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical illness insurance</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share ownership/option scheme</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low/no interest loans</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dental insurance</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life insurance</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childcare vouchers</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cycle to work scheme</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discount shopping vouchers</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical illness insurance</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discount gym membership</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical insurance</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pension contribution over the statutory requirement</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible working</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share ownership/option scheme</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Employing about 250 permanent staff members internally and 500 volunteers around the UK, the IoD has recently undertaken a ‘back to basics’ exercise for its internal communications. “Everything we have put out in the last 12 months we have sat back and questioned, ‘why did we do it and how did the employees see it?’,” says Matt Ward, HR Development and Communications Manager. “We realised we could have omitted a big chunk of the communications we had sent out, and grouped communications to make them more relevant and easier to consume. This approach now forms the basis of all the communication we do.”

The organisation decided to turn its total reward statement on its head by giving employees an outline of the benefits that they had not signed up for. Employees can see what benefits they receive and how much they are worth, and now they can also see what they are missing out on. “Some employees were receiving as little as 14% of what they were entitled to,” Ward says. “It was actually the ‘small fry’ benefits – eye-care vouchers, flexi working – that really made people think.”

“The total reward statement was very simple, it didn’t use fancy technology but just changed the message from what employees can have to what they are not using. It worked wonders.”

You also need to establish how effective benefits communications have been already. This can be done by measuring click-through and open rates of emails to see whether awareness is out there, or surveying employees about their understanding of benefits and their opinions on the ways they are communicated.

We have one client who was failing to get people to take up benefits, so before they changed their benefits strategy they surveyed staff about what they felt, not just about their reward package but about the organisation.

They realised that what they actually needed to change was their communications and three months after doing so they resurveyed staff and found a 25% spike in both employee appreciation of the benefit programme and in indicators such as recommending the company as a place to work and feeling proud to work there.

If you simply apply some effort, some resource for communicating benefits, you’ll have a significant return on your investment.

Matthew Gregson, Consulting Director, Thomsons Online Benefits
Focus groups and staff forums will provide a more in-depth, qualitative picture of the communication of your benefit offering. Even though this evidence is more anecdotal, it will provide colour to the figures that you have on benefit take-up and communications. And both qualitative and quantitative data can be measured against take-up rates to establish any further return on investment that has resulted from effective communication of benefits.

But how benefits are communicated won’t matter if employees aren’t engaged more generally. If members of the workforce are unhappy – they don’t think they’re paid enough, they want a promotion, they don’t get on with their line manager, they don’t feel they are making a difference – sending them a voucher for 20% off of the price of a pair of glasses is not going to solve the problem. Benefits can be part of the solution, but they need to take their place in a wider employee engagement strategy.

“Get the rest of your house in order. Widen the focus to consider why people aren’t engaged on the whole. If you have got people who are genuinely happy with where they are, they will engage with your internal communications – it is a virtuous circle.”

Matthew Gregson, Consulting Director, Thomsons Online Benefits

In practice:

• Measure benefits take-up, cost and return on investment

• Survey employees’ knowledge, use, understanding and demand for benefits. In smaller organisations, this can be as simple as including a discussion on it in regular team meetings or asking line managers to talk to their staff about it during their usual conversations

• Measure the success of communications undertaken so far – what impact did they have on the employee? Why were they done that way? In SMEs this could be just observing the mood and demeanour of staff and encouraging them to ask questions if anything is unclear

• Examine employee engagement levels as a whole, and see where communication of benefits fits in

• This is not a once and done exercise. Think about how you can talk about your benefits on a regular basis so they are kept front and centre of employees’ minds
2. Know your audience

“You need to understand your workforce – where they are based, what benefits they want, what benefits they need, how they listen to information, how they interact with information.”

Donagh Goodman, Head of Marketing and Communications, The Rainbow Trust

It’s vital that you are aware of the different kinds of individuals in your organisation if you are to understand what kinds of benefits will recruit, motivate and retain them. A significant proportion of the employees we surveyed say their employers don’t provide benefits that they want or need.

- 50% said their benefits package is not always tailored to their needs
- 32% said their employer does not understand what benefits are important to employees
- 29% said their employer understands what benefits are important to them

If you don’t understand what your employees need and want, then you can’t possibly understand how best to communicate any benefits to them. Think of your employees as you would think about your customers.

**Good customer service is based on:**

- Knowing who your customers are
- Understanding what issues they have
- Establishing how your products and services can solve these problems
- Using the right channels to reach them
Look at your employees in exactly the same way. Who are they? Can you group them by age? How many have dependents? Are they office based or remote workers? What common issues do they have? How can we as employers help them? By going through this process you can start to build up a picture of who your workforce are and begin to understand what benefits might be appropriate to them.

Think of employees as external customers. Tailor your message and tailor your content for the different groups in your audience. Leverage multiple channels, including people – senior managers, line managers. Think about people as influencers.

Lawrence Mitchell, Former Global Marketing Leader and Corporate Wellbeing Programme Creator, Reed Business Insights

Some employers, particularly in larger organisations, have started presenting benefits as packages to appeal to different segments of the workforce at different times. For example, you could bundle benefits, and the communication of them, that might appeal to a particular kind of person – such as family friendly benefits or ‘me time’ benefits.

Not everyone wants financial-based benefits. Many (not just parents) would prefer flexible working hours, for example. Don’t make the bulk of your benefits communications about pensions when not everyone is interested in them. Any communications you make with employees about benefits should be proportionate to the employees’ demand for them.

You also need to think about your workforce in terms of job description and how roles are carried out. Emails, posters, door vinyls, one-to-ones and company briefings are all easy for those sitting behind a desk in head office to access. But volunteers, homeworkers or those not in front of a computer all day have fewer communications options available to them. They won’t be aware of all of these messages, meaning they are either left out, or another layer of communication is needed for the message to cut through to them. In organisations with just a few employees working remotely, tools like Skype or group messaging services such as Slack can be really useful in keeping people informed in a quick and cost-effective way.

Access to a restricted number of communication channels isn’t the only issue. The way individuals in different job roles and at different levels of seniority with the organisation engage with communications differs too. For example, not all employees use social media in a professional context. For many, platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are for private use only. While they can be useful to use for communications, it is unlikely that you will reach everyone in your organisation through these types of platforms. Again, it goes back to the central question about who is your workforce and how best can you reach them? If you have a significant number of younger employees, then social media can be a very powerful tool for benefits communication, as they are likely to be more receptive to receiving messages through these channels.
Some channels work and some don’t. Using WhatsApp for example might be seen as being a bit invasive by employees because they tend to use that personally.

Lauren Harper, Communications Consultant, Aon

We found that the employees we surveyed would like a range of different methods of communication of the benefits that are available to them.

- Emails (from inside or outside the company): 43%
- Intranet: 32%
- Face-to-face sessions/talks led by company: 30%
- Team briefings: 28%
- Printed materials (leaflets, for example): 27%
- Online benefits platform (website/app): 26%
- Company-wide meetings: 24%
- Face-to-face sessions/talks led by providers or consultants: 23%
- Posters/noticeboards: 20%
- Word of mouth: 16%
- Roadshows/benefits fairs: 9%
- Social media: 4%
- Videos: 3%
- Messenger services (WhatsApp, Slack, for example): 3%
- Text message: 2%
- Telephone hotlines: 1%
Our figures show no one method is overwhelmingly preferred, indicating the best approach is to use a number to get your message across. Email comes out on top, perhaps surprisingly, given the fact many employees receive hundreds a day and it’s easy for messages to get lost. However, so many office jobs are based around emails, with employees spending a large portion of their day on them, so it makes sense to include benefit communications on this channel, reaching employees in a place where you’ll know they’ll be.

Face-to-face communications are clearly crucial, whether it’s through talks, briefings or team meetings. This method provides employees with the chance to ask questions and gain a better understanding of the offering from more in-depth explanations. Meetings and presentations can bring the subject to life in a way that an email or poster simply can’t. The dynamic nature of the format may help employees to remember the topic more clearly and they are more likely to discuss it at their desks or on a coffee break, reinforcing the message further.

“We ran a mental health campaign week and we communicated a lot of benefits as part of that – such as our EAP and even things like season ticket loans, which we communicated in terms of saving employees money in advance so that they wouldn’t be worried about money at the end of the year. Employees were also intrigued to learn about the numerous benefits of our EAP which they didn’t expect, such as mortgage advice and basic legal advice; services which can all help improve your mental health by reducing stress.”

Matt Ward, HR Development and Communications Manager at the Institute of Directors

Any knowledge about your workforce should be used to inform what communications methods you use. In larger organisations, segmentation of your workforce is crucial in targeting benefits communication to the right people, at the right time.

In practice:

- Segment your employees as individuals with different benefits desires, needs and job requirements
- Segment your employees by the kinds of communications which might appeal to them and by what channels they can access
- Use this knowledge to inform what methods of communication you use
- Use communications to package bundles of benefits to suit particular sections of the workforce, such as working parents or younger employees
- Plan your communications around relevant dates or awareness days to generate more impact
3. Think external, act internal

HR professionals must think like marketing or communications professionals and treat employees as the company would treat external customers. Messages must be honest, authentic and consistent, even if they convey bad news. This is crucially important now that websites like Glassdoor – in which employees anonymously rate their employer online – exist. Employees are adults. They know that not everything is possible and appreciate an honest answer to their questions. The worst thing a company can do is to shy away from difficult messages or pretend the issue does not exist.

“Within half an hour of us announcing internally that our chief executive was retiring I had a call from someone external to the company about it. What is internal typically goes external. All the messages must be aligned.”

Oonagh Goodman, Head of Marketing and Communications at The Rainbow Trust

This could mean delivering a video message from the CEO rather than relying on lots of different people to get a message across, and explaining the ‘why’ of the message – giving the reasons behind a company’s decision, could be an effective solution.
The HR department is the best place for the workforce to seek information on understanding the range of benefits provided, helping them to choose the right benefits and suggesting new ones, according to the employees we surveyed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Best people to…</th>
<th>Explain benefits options</th>
<th>Suggest new benefits</th>
<th>Provide info on current benefits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HR department</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Line manager</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits provider</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peers/colleagues</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing director</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade union</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff representative</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal comms</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

HR needs to work closely with line managers, who employees are also likely to approach for information and suggestions on employee benefits. Investing in line management training is vital for any business, as they have such a significant impact when it comes to leadership, culture and working practices. Providing line managers with the right tools and skills to manage their team and to give them enough time and support to enable them to carry out the role effectively, should be at the heart of any organisation.
HR also needs to work in tandem with other departments to get its messages across, in particular, marketing and internal communications functions. All three disciplines bring different skills and knowledge that will create a successful campaign or product.

“Communication of benefits requires somebody who can lead the project, which is usually HR. They understand the product. But it needs communications experts to be able to execute it – to segment that audience and adjust the message. And they need to work in partnership with marketing, which has got the skills to engage and leverage multiple channels available.”

Lawrence Mitchell, Former Global Marketing Leader, Reed Business Insights

Case study

Unum

The employee benefits provider moved its internal communications function from being a separate department with a direct line to the CEO to the broader marketing team. And it has created a project management support role, half of which sits in marketing with the other half in HR, with the responsibility of tying the activities of the two departments together.

“We need to make sure that the people within our company are representing our vision externally,” says Liz Walker, HR Director, Unum. “Making sure the message of the external and the internal brand is the same is really important. And there are a lot of communications that you can repurpose to make sure it’s all joined up.”
Thinking like marketing or communications professionals also means taking segmentation further and asking for data from the workforce to personalise the communication of benefits. We asked employees whether they would be happy to provide more personal information to their employer so benefits could be tailored to their specific needs. It is an issue that currently divides employees.

| 44% Happy to provide personal information to employers | 47% Not happy to provide personal information to employers | 9% Don’t know |

If we know someone is on maternity leave, for example, we can do triggered communications – they get an email while they are off to remind them about the childcare scheme and to check they are taking the maximum amount they are entitled to. It’s using the data intelligently so that employees regularly check the benefits relevant to them.

Lauren Harper, Communications Consultant, AON

The sharing of employee data is a much wider issue for companies than just around employee benefits. Younger employees tend to be more comfortable with the idea, having grown up using social media and are very used to being open with their thoughts and feelings. Others believe there should be a distinct line between home and work life and want their employer to know only what is required by law. This issue is one that companies will need to address over the next few years and find a balance that suits their own workforce.
With communication, the more routes and resources you can explore, the better. You should engage any of your benefits providers or advisers to help communicate messages and explore exactly what’s on offer. They can help with content, packaging or production of any content through benefits fairs and one-to-ones, for example. And they will focus on the features of the benefits themselves.

This help from providers can also enable the HR department to switch focus from the features of the benefit – what treatments are covered by a private healthcare programme, for example – to the impact which that benefit has on staff members. In turn, this can lead to more authentic communications, which are more likely to cut across all the information that employees receive.

**In practice:**

- Treat employees like consumers, and make sure your external and internal brands are aligned
- Work with other departments and your benefits provider to create the best messages
- Make the messages authentic by using feedback from employees on their needs and wants
- Think about benefits and communications methods in terms of their impact on employees, rather than the specific features of the benefit
- Be honest. If it’s not possible to introduce a particular benefit that has been asked for, then explain why not. Employees will appreciate your openness and willingness to have a dialogue
4. Don’t just communicate with employees, engage them

Communication and engagement get thrown around quite fluidly, but there is a difference between communicating something and engaging people with what you are saying.

Jennifer Reid, Senior Communications Consultant, Aon

At its core, engagement is about creating the best conditions for all members of the workforce that will enhance their own wellbeing and enable them to give their best to meet the organisation’s goals. Clearly, benefits play an important role in demonstrating to the workforce what they get in return for working for an organisation.

But the provision of benefits alone will not result in greater levels of engagement. Communication of them plays a fundamental role in not just telling people what’s on offer, but in involving the workforce in the process – demonstrated by the evolution of the internal communications sector in the last 20 years or so, from a focus on editorial content to a focus on audience engagement.

---

*Macleod, D., & Clarke, N., Engaging for success: enhancing performance through employee engagement, 2008*
No one is communicating benefits because they want to communicate. They are communicating benefits because they want people to actually engage in, be involved, have a view on benefits and sign up for what they need. Participation rates are what we’re after.

Kate Jones, Head of Internal Communications, Tarmac, and Chair of the Board, the Institute of Internal Communication

So, messages need to be authentic and consistent for employees to register them, consider their relevance and act on them. Otherwise they will passively consume the message with little or no response. A reaction needs to be produced.

A two-way dialogue between employers and employees is crucial in enabling this authenticity. If you’ve researched your audience and segmented them as you would customers then it’s likely you’re already able to have these kinds of conversations with the workforce.

Certain ways of communicating benefits can help too. One-to-ones with benefits providers or managers allow employees to learn about benefits and ask confidential questions, about finances or wellbeing, for example. Including information and feedback on employee benefits in staff meetings, newsletters or internal blogs will help increase awareness and relevance.

Personal experiences made possible by the organisation’s benefits can boost engagement levels too. For example, peer-to-peer communication – using employees to tell human stories or case studies via different media about their sabbatical spent abroad or how their financial benefits enabled them to save for their children’s future – can have a big impact on their peers. As the rise of sites such as TripAdvisor or Rated People show, recommendations from others is having a greater impact on our choices.

We bought a dental provider in 2015 and wanted to see how we could drive up our employees’ engagement with the benefits offered. We used videos and iconography and other fun things and the participation in the benefit went up by 67%. It wasn’t a massive project but it was important to people. They engaged with it and now we can think about what we’ve learnt from the project and how we can implement that elsewhere.

Liz Walker, HR Director, Unum

Creating this kind of dialogue will also nurture a culture of trust, crucial for employees to feel engaged. If, as a rule, the workforce trusts the organisation’s senior management, they will trust the messages about communications that they send. Even if trust only lies with their line manager or immediate colleagues, employees are still more likely to engage with any communication from them.
But the line manager is a crucial part of your workforce and must not be forgotten in the process of appealing to employees. They are not going to learn about benefits by osmosis, and it’s unlikely they will have the time or inclination to seek out information about benefits, so it’s crucial that, as the messengers of your benefits communication, you engage them and ensure the messages they send out are in sync.

Training on the organisation’s policies and where to find them, conference calls, focus groups or regular meetings to outline the organisation’s benefits with line managers are all options, as are linking benefits communication to performance management. But the same rules – of a two-way dialogue and understanding the audience – should be applied to line managers just as they are to the workforce as a whole.

“Managers are not benefits experts. So why do we make them do that role when we haven’t equipped them to do it? We have to take time to invest in their education so they can do the role.”

Kate Jones, Head of Internal Communications at Tarmac and Chair of the Board of the Institute of Internal Communication

But the line manager is a crucial part of your workforce and must not be forgotten in the process of appealing to employees. They are not going to learn about benefits by osmosis, and it’s unlikely they will have the time or inclination to seek out information about benefits, so it’s crucial that, as the messengers of your benefits communication, you engage them and ensure the messages they send out are in sync.

Training on the organisation’s policies and where to find them, conference calls, focus groups or regular meetings to outline the organisation’s benefits with line managers are all options, as are linking benefits communication to performance management. But the same rules – of a two-way dialogue and understanding the audience – should be applied to line managers just as they are to the workforce as a whole.

Case study  The Rainbow Trust

The charity, which provides support workers for families with a terminally ill child, has a “robust” performance management system in which managers are rewarded on their communication skills. “Managers’ ‘People’ objectives are to make sure that they are cascading whatever information needs to be communicated throughout the year,” says Oonagh Goodman, head of marketing and communications. “They are then assessed against how well they have done that.”

In addition, an employee engagement group comprising different people across the charity has responsibility for two-way communication. “They pass down information to employees, collect feedback, share that with the HR and senior leadership teams, then changes are made and cascaded back down again.”
A workforce that understands the organisation’s overall strategy and vision and understands their role in it will be more engaged and receptive to benefits communication. This is particularly important if potentially negative messages – such as restructuring the benefits package – need to be communicated.

Major benefits changes need to be conveyed within the context of the entire company and its future, rather than as HR initiatives. Employees are more likely to engage with benefits changes if they are seen within the context of the business’ overall aims or vision.

The timing of communication is important here too. A really positive and engaging, but poorly-timed message is going to make you look clueless. Making sure that benefits communications don’t coincide with other important communications – organisational changes, for example – is crucial, and is another reason that HR, communications and marketing disciplines must be closely aligned.

Equally, focusing only on communicating on annual or quarterly cycles, at the expense of more frequent or even intermittent communication, is a mistake.

“There are many times I have sat down with a company only for them to say, ‘right we have got this election window to tell employees about the benefit. Let’s do this and then we don’t need to speak to them for another year’. It’s important to be proactive and not reactive about planning benefits communications, and it’s important to keep momentum going.”

Jennifer Reid, Senior Communications Consultant, AON

**In practice**

- Put engagement – and therefore trust – at the centre of any communications strategy
- Ensure any dialogue is two-way and feedback is acted upon
- Link the strategic mission of the organisation to employees
- Engage any messengers of benefits communications and make sure they are educated about the benefits offering
- Line managers are crucial, involve them as much as possible in the process
- Create a communications plan that includes all channels and stakeholders, in the same way any other project would be planned
5. Create social norms - how to walk the walk

There are these wonderful studies in behavioural economics about nudge theory. When people can’t work their way through complex benefits information they tend to do what other people do. So if the line manager says, ‘I’ve got this policy that’s really valuable to me’, then other employees are likely to think the policy will be good for them, too.

Nick Bacon, Professor of Human Resource Management, Cass Business School

Company culture plays a crucial role in improving benefits communications to increase take-up. You need to make the engagement of all employees – including the HR department – in benefits communication a social norm.

This means they work in an environment in which benefits are discussed across the organisation and opting into benefits is expected. For example, if line managers take up flexible working – or at least communicate to their reports the possibility of flexible working – then more employees might feel comfortable taking up flexible working. Include open discussions in team or staff meetings, so the example is clearly set for employees to see.

Communication itself is the first obvious step to achieving this normalisation, and making education part of that messaging is very important. There is a demand for more education and guidance from employers, and our survey found employees want more help when it comes to financial benefits.

Nearly half (47%) of the employees we surveyed said that investments and savings are complicated to understand and 86% say that feeling in control of their finances makes them feel less anxious. Yet they are more likely to go online (45%) to an independent financial advisor (37%) or their bank or building society (29%) than they are to a work colleague (11%) for financial advice. More employees (37%) would welcome additional help from their employers on financial issues than would not (31%).
When it comes to financial benefits...

Forms of communication that emphasise education can help boost take-up because if employees feel that they have had meaningful communication with either a colleague or provider they will see it as education – even as part of other forms of training – rather than a hard sell from a provider.

And when employees have decided to take up a benefit they should be able to find the information they need easily. Convenience and simplicity are usually at the top of their priorities. So, the systems need to be effective and in place for signing up to benefits to become the norm for employees.

It’s about trying to make it easy for people to access the information when they have actually engaged with it and want to find it. For big organisations like ours we have to get as much information in one place and that is easy for employees to find before they have lost interest.

Colette Roberts, EMEA Pensions and Benefits Manager, Citi

Resourcing and prioritising benefits communication also embeds it within the company culture. But this brings its own challenges, in particular demonstrating to the organisation’s senior leadership the importance of investing in messaging.

It’s here that you can return to measurement. If you already know, for example, that there are high turnover rates for a certain group which is critical to the organisation then you can argue to any budget holders that benefits communication is necessary for the business’ operations, and are not just an HR project.

Measuring increases in benefits take-up or reductions in absenteeism, turnover, productivity or costs after new communications campaigns have taken place will establish return on investment which can clearly be presented to the organisation’s senior management.
These metrics will not just help convince the board of the importance of benefits communication, but will integrate the process of measuring the effectiveness of benefits communication with measurement of other HR statistics.

“\nIt’s important that what staff perceive from any benefits communication is that it isn’t a set of disparate, standalone projects, but part of a joined up offer – along with recruitment, performance management and other factors within an employer value proposition – from the organisation to employees.\n”

Oli Howard, Head of Internal Communications at the Civil Aviation Authority

In practice:

• Normalise the discussion and take up of benefits in the organisation’s culture
• Focus on providing education and guidance about benefits
• Ensure benefits information is easily accessible
• Strategically plan the timing of communication and don’t just do it once or twice a year
• Ensure that benefits communication is prioritised by measuring its effects and demonstrating return on investment
Conclusion

Communicating employee benefits requires fighting for a share of employees’ headspace, just as advertising requires fighting for a share of consumers’ headspace. Both employees and consumers have an awful lot of information arriving at them from many different sources.

So, benefits and communications professionals need to find a way to cut through that by offering relevant and engaging messages that reflect the needs, wants and motivations of your employees. These can only be known by fully understanding your workforce and what they need, want and value.

This is particularly the case for smaller businesses, where any spend on benefits represents a significant investment. It’s crucial that time is taken to find out what is possible and getting feedback from staff can be much easier in smaller organisations, who often have less bureaucracy and can be more agile. They can offer to be bolder in their choice of benefits and build their own packages that are unique to their particular culture and the set-up, creating a proposition that can stand out.

You have to ensure that when employees are ready to find out about different benefits, they can find the information they need quickly and easily. And you need to plan in advance when you will send messages out. Telling new employees about benefits when they join then only intermittently updating them will not increase take-up. A communications plan needs to be in place so that benefits are not overlooked or become lost in the background.

Publicising the take up of benefits and amplifying the discussion of them is essential for these goals to be reached. Prioritising communication with investment and cooperation of multidisciplinary stakeholders – HR, internal communications and marketing – will help to embed benefits as a key part of the employer value proposition, and it is effective communication that will get this message across.

But it’s important to remember that what works in one organisation does not necessarily work in another. You need to communicate in the way that’s best for your benefits offering, your organisation and your workforce. Find the formula that works for you, so you can get the equation right.
Summary

In practice checklist:

Go back to basics:

- Measure benefits take-up, cost and return on investment
- Survey employees’ knowledge, use, understanding and demand for benefits
- Measure the success of communications undertaken so far – what impact did they have on the employee? Why were they done that way?
- Examine employee engagement levels as a whole, and see where communication of benefits fits in
- This is not a once and done exercise. Think about how you can talk about your benefits on a regular basis so they are kept front and centre to employees

Know your audience:

- Segment your employees as individuals with different benefits desires, needs and job requirements
- Segment your employees by the kinds of communications which might appeal to them
- Use this knowledge to inform what methods of communication you use
- Use communications to package bundles of benefits to suit particular sections of the workforce, such as working parents or younger employees
- Plan your communications around relevant dates or awareness days to generate more impact

Think external, act internal:

- Treat employees like consumers, and make sure your external and internal brands are aligned
- Work with other departments and your benefits provider to create the best messages
- Make the messages authentic by using feedback from employees on their needs and wants
- Think about benefits and communications methods in terms of their impact on employees, rather than the specific features of the benefit
- Be honest. If it’s not possible to introduce a particular benefit that has been asked for, then explain why not. Employees will appreciate your openness and willingness to have a dialogue
Don’t just communicate with employees, engage them:

- Put engagement – and therefore trust – at the centre of any communications strategy
- Ensure any dialogue is two-way and feedback is acted upon
- Link the strategic mission of the organisation to employees
- Engage any messengers of benefits communications and make sure they are educated about the benefits offering
- Line managers are crucial, involve them as much as possible in the process
- Create a communications plan that includes all channels and stakeholders, in the same way any other project would be planned

Create social norms – how to walk the walk:

- Normalise the discussion and take up of benefits in the organisation’s culture
- Focus on providing education and guidance about benefits
- Ensure benefits information is easily accessible
- Strategically plan the timing of communication and don’t just do it once or twice a year
- Ensure that benefits communication is prioritised by measuring its effects and demonstrating return on investment
Further reading

- **Creating companies that care: Building a blueprint for employers to engage with employees**, Unum (2014)
- **Workplace wellbeing hub** - unum.co.uk/workplace-wellbeing

About Unum

Unum is a leading employee benefits provider offering financial protection including Income Protection, Life insurance and Critical Illness, and corporate dental cover through the workplace.

Our Income Protection customers have access to medical and vocational rehabilitation expertise designed to help people stay in work and return to work following illness and injury. Unum LifeWorks, our Employee Assistance Programme, provides help and advice on a range of work/life issues.

Our Critical Illness customers can also access our Cancer Support Service, providing personalised support for employees with a cancer diagnosis.

We are committed to workplace wellbeing for both employees and employers, and have a wide range of tools designed to help businesses create or enhance their employee wellbeing strategy.

At the end of 2016, Unum protected over 1.4 million people in the UK and paid claims of £293 million - representing in excess of £5.5 million a week in benefits to our customers - providing security and peace of mind to individuals and their families. Unum Dental paid claims of over £11 million, ensuring more than 160,000 people had healthy teeth and gums.

Unum Limited has a financial strength rating of A- (Strong) from Standard & Poor’s with a stable outlook.

Our parent company, Unum Group, is a provider of employee benefits products and services in the United States, including group and individual disability insurance. Premium income for Unum Group and its subsidiaries totalled $8.4bn in the year ended 31 December 2016, with reported revenues for the group totalling $11bn and total assets of $61.9bn. For more information please visit [www.unum.co.uk](http://www.unum.co.uk).
Unum Limited is authorised by the Prudential Regulation Authority and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority and the Prudential Regulation Authority. Registered Office and mailing address: Milton Court, Dorking, Surrey RH4 3LZ Registered in England 983768 Unum Limited is a member of the Unum Group of Companies.

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 1,010 employees. Fieldwork was undertaken between 3rd - 5th October 2016. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of British businesses in terms of size (i.e. number of employees).