



Employee Engagement or Employee Advocacy?

by Centre for Strategic Communication Excellence

Chapter 5 of the IC Kollektif ebook, *Disrupting the Function of IC: A Global Perspective* explores employee advocacy with a thought provoking question:

“New research shows that employee engagement has grown far beyond the common definition, moving toward employee advocacy. What does this mean for internal communication professionals?”

The Centre for Strategic Communication Excellence is pleased to share excerpts of the response from four IC professionals: Dr. Leandro Herrero, Priya Bates, Jen Shatwell and Saskia Jones.

The Definition of Employee Engagement Isn't Changing. Everything Else Is: Excerpt from Jan Shatwell's article

The 2017 Edelman Trust Barometer reminds us that our employees are considered the most credible source of information about our companies, and thanks to platforms like Glassdoor, employees in the age of social media can serve as such more publicly and

prolifically than ever before. So engagement is no longer an employee-business dynamic. It's an employee-public dynamic that has real business ramifications.

In part because of this, and no doubt because they were bombarded by news of a “worldwide employee engagement crisis” in 2016, our stakeholders are more interested in engagement than ever before. They understand its potential to impact the bottom line, but they don't fully understand the variables that affect it, and they want us to get to the bottom of it.

For these reasons, internal communication professionals are asking more and better questions about employee engagement. We're demanding and utilizing more meaningful data sets to evaluate it. We're interrogating the concept and, in particular, its return on our investments of time and resources. Hence, there is a slew of new thinking around the topic and attempts to wrangle and define a largely subjective and intangible concept.

At the risk of oversimplifying or coming across as glib, I'd like to suggest that it's our frame of reference that's changing and that, fundamentally, when it comes to employee engagement, only this question is essential: are employees motivated to give us their best and is their best good enough for our businesses?

The Best Employee Advocacy Programme is the One That Does Not Need Exist: Excerpt from Dr. Leandro Herrero's article

Employee engagement has grown as an industry in its own right, driven by the sub-industry of surveys and rankings. Somebody said that science advances by a series of funerals and, as far as I am concerned, employee satisfaction surveys are not feeling very well and deserve at least a dignified retirement, before it is too late.

But engagement refuses to go and has found ways to upgrade itself. People are now talking employee advocacy, or even employee activism, mixing up conceptually and practically very different things.

Recent pieces of research (a loose concept in the human capital business) and position papers by experts, are also using the term employee activism, perhaps because activism is on anybody's TV screen these days. They have hijacked the term because it sounds powerful, but what they describe when they actually do, is at best employee advocacy. That usually means having your employees as advocates of the company, presumably overtly praising the good things in the outside world.

This is a noble aim, often developed and implemented in a naïve way. And internal communications can be caught in the fire, expecting these professionals to be the drivers of that advocacy. I have, for example, seen plans to provide materials and prompts for employees to be able to have conversations about those good things that the company does.

The Engagement Solution: Engagement from the Inside Out: Excerpt from Priya Bates article

Engaged internal audiences, whether they are employees, members of an association or club or families in a community, have the potential to help organizations and causes succeed. Leaders know this too and ask Human Resources teams to lead engagement. After all, engagement is about people, right? In the 2015 Edelman State of Engagement survey, it's clear that engagement is still widely perceived as falling under the domain of HR versus being a driver of business performance and employee advocacy and herein lies the challenge. [iii]

Organizations must have engagement strategies that are aligned with business strategies involving all parts of the business, and include employees, leaders and executives. Engagement strategies must be integrated into every day interactions and activities. And like every good strategy, it must begin with setting the right goals.

When leaders, managers and employees align to a common strategy and work together to deliver results it is magic. Communication and HR professionals can push organizations beyond check-the-box engagement programs into powerful engagement strategies that turn employees into proactive advocates for the brand.

Communicating from the Inside Out: Excerpt from Saskia Jones article

What is employee advocacy?

Simply put, employee advocates defend their organisation against criticism and champion their organisation, online and off. Employee advocacy programmes actively encourage employees to share brand content through their own networks. Social media is not the only way for them to do this, but it's a clear channel to promote and measure success. The potential benefits are huge, providing another channel to your market through thousands of personal networks.

With many companies fearing the risks of such lack of control, you'll need leadership on board to make this happen. You'll need to have great content to share and encourage use of technology and training. But most importantly, you'll need to empower employees from top to bottom to share their personal experiences both within and outside the organisation, with integrity and authenticity.

Isn't it risky?

Many brands try to restrict how employees use channels such as Twitter and Facebook to share company information. The reality is that the internet allows a potential for open dialogue which can't be stopped. Consumers are sharing their experience about brands and employees are able to share their ideas, whether we like it or not. Our job is to embrace and leverage this opportunity, not to be scared of it. That's not to say the risk of damaging tweets, blogs or posts is over, but with the right training and guidelines this can be minimised.