VIRTUAL CONFERENCE:

**2021 Internal Communications and Culture Next Practices Conference**

February 24-25, 2021

**Executive Summary**

*Notes from select sessions at the virtual conference.*

11:20-11:35 a.m. ET

PANEL

**Hybrid or Remote? Understand the Unique Communications Challenges Posed by Different Workplace Arrangements**

Panelists shared some of the top challenges they are facing this year:

**Jonny Oser, Director, Internal Communications, Facebook** shared that his top worry is burnout. All panelists noted that this year—2021—has been a different experience than 2020. Last year was a journey of survival and jumping from crisis to crisis, but many employees feel that the new year hasn’t brought change and that’s a huge problem for morale.

Oser also shared that a top worry was culture: With thousands of new employees joining Facebook since the beginning of remote work in March of last year, there are so many Facebook employees who have never stepped foot in an office. How do you preserve that culture, things like civility and friendliness, which have suffered without in-person interaction?

Oser also worries that when you do bring people back to the office, how will you onboard and reestablish workplace norms? He foresees it feeling like starting a brand new company all over again.

**Philip DeSouza, Director of Communications & Marketing for HIROC**, shared some of the things his organization has done to try and create a workplace culture besides Zoom happy hours. He shared:

* Lunch with CEO
* Chocolate Fridays
* Open mic nights

However, DeSouza stresses that these events are not the same as meeting in person. He, like Oser, also worries about workplace reentry. There is going to be a totally different social norm when we reopen, he says. “Do we need buttons to say ‘I am OK with a hug’?” He says that some people will want a handshake and others will not.

All the panelists agree that technology is the answer to heling keep people connected.

Oser, with Facebook, touts their own tools for building work community online, Workplace from Facebook. He says that the past year of crisis has actually been a blessing, offering unprecedented opportunities to test new platforms and tools.  “We would never have been able to convince leadership to do things fully remote,” he says but reports that Facebook has had great success with a virtual all hands, which was developed more like a TV show than an in-person event.

Technology gives you opportunities to address all kinds of challenges, Oser says. Tech is really the key to the future.

For **Jill Hastie, director for CEO and strategy communications at Manulife,**the challenge has been getting employees at an insurance company, who might have been around for a couple of decades, to adopt new technology and patterns of communication. “We’re an insurance company so technology has not been our forte.”

However, change has been coming along and Hastie’s experience is a reminder to persevere in brining your organization into the 21st century, despite the obstacles.

DeSouza recommends taking advantage of your seat at the table and just trying as many things as you can. “There’s no harm in trying things,” he says. “If it works—great. If not, it’s OK. If it doesn’t work, just change. Keep at it everybody.”

2:15-2:35 p.m. ET

**Use Internal Communications to Move the Needle on DE&I Objectives**

*Sarah Jensen Clayton and Nina Boone, Korn Ferry*

**Progress on DEI journey**

·         There’s been tremendous progress in corporate America in the last 6-9 months on DEI – CEOs are taking action, employees are taking it upon themselves to organize and customers are holding brands accountable for their involvement (or lack thereof)

·         However, not everybody is along the same line of the DEI continuum

o   Some organizations aren’t talking about DEI at all, but that isn’t a viable option

o   Most organizations are making external statements and holding internal listening sessions, which are some good early steps

o   The next steps are running assessments to see where they need to improve and taking meaningful actions

·         If inclusive communications is a pyramid, at the base is ‘driving change’: establishing a business case for DEI, having better spokespeople on topic, shifting language and conversation on topic

**Five biggest questions**

1.       How can we help leaders communicate DEI through word and deed?

·         Create self-awareness and discovery opportunities on how to become leaders

·         Assess their skills qualitatively to see where development is needed

·         Close gaps through coaching and learning opportunities

2.       How can Internal Comms partner with DEI and HR to deliver better outcomes?

·         Establish DEI principles:

o   Inclusive design: Rethink internal comms and channels from perspective of disadvantaged users

o   Inclusive content: Examine what you’re putting out to organization (i.e., using nonbinary pronouns, avoiding language with offensive origins, etc.)

o   Diverse voices: Explore who is featured in newsletter, who is represented at town halls, etc. These voices should tell their own stories

o   Emotional followership: Provide safe forums for employees to discuss challenging issues

o   Organic networks: Empower ERGs that can help make connections at the grassroots level

o   Feedback loops: Everybody has different levels of comfort with providing feedback – there needs to be a variety of ways to solicit/receive this feedback

3.       How can we leverage communications to drive DEI engagement?

·         Develop a DEI glossary so communicators can develop their vocabulary

·         Give employees access to your organization’s social media channels to share their stories

·         Organize hackathons (and similar brainstorming sessions) that can engage employees on ways to use a D&I lens for business solutions

4.       How do we protect against employee criticism and reputational backlash?

·         Organizations need to be fully inclusive – nobody should be ‘second’ in line, all top talent matters

·         Inclusively designed organizations can help lift the most overlooked employees – if systems work for those marginalized groups, they will work for everybody

·         A shared responsibility model means commitments from leaders *and* employees to help drive change

5.       What does DEI look like in a virtual workplace?

·        [The IBM Work From Pledge During Times of COVID-19](https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/i-pledge-support-my-fellow-ibmers-working-from-home-during-krishna/) is an example of a model for inclusive behavior with remote-learning

If your local community isn’t diverse, remote workplaces can encourage new recruitment strategies focusing on diversity

3:35-4 p.m. ET- Wednesday  JUSTIN

**Lessons and Top Tips From the Best Internal Comms Videos and Podcasts of 2020**

*Carmen Collins, Cisco*

*Kelly Johnson, American Medical Association*

We Are Cisco podcast

·         Cisco’s strategy for attracting candidates was using employee voices

·         New purpose for Cisco in 2020: “Empower inclusive future for all”

·         Team asked themselves, “How do we talk about employee experiences externally?” Podcast was an opportunity to showcase employee voices

·         Measured success over first week and first month for downloads & listens

o   Conducted 10 episodes for first season – the longer the episodes were listed for listening, the more downloads they received

o   Shorter episodes had more listens

o   Pandemic episode in April 2020 was their most popular episode for last year

·         Build a machine of employee advocacy. If your employees love your product, they’re going to communicate it to their networks

o   Start with passionate, super ambassadors sharing their stories first and work outwards from there

·         Before you make the jump to any channel/product, outline your goals and strategies to make sure the new product aligns with what you’re trying to accomplish

Video Campaigns @ AMA

·         Goal within employee communications is ensuring employees are informed about AMA’s work + that they’re staying connected with one another. Video content was a huge part of their efforts

·         2 new video series for employees:

o   Views From the Couch series: Provided subject matter experts and senior leadership an opportunity to showcase their strategic work within the organization. Either conducted as interview/fireside chat.

o   Tell Us series: Pulse surveys within organization showed that employees felt disconnected from one another. Served as a substitute for watercooler and elevator chat. Could come in form of tutorial or instructional videos, such as how to make/sew their own facemasks.

·         Brainstorming ideas + tools and tech

o   AMA Today intranet site allows content managers to share updates about what their business units are working on. That can provide inspiration for Views From the Couch series

o   Utilize Yammer to lead conversation about topics for Tell Us series

o   Must-have tools for shooting videos:

§  Ring light: Supplemental lighting is crucial

§  Headphones

§  Smartphone: Better video quality for recording than computer/laptop

11:20-11:40 a.m. ET

CASE STUDY

**Communicating to a Large, Distributed Workforce During a Crisis**

**Nicholas Sucich, USPS**

[Sucich](https://www.linkedin.com/in/nicholas-j-sucich-39048b3a/), director of digital communications for USPS, has been with the sprawling agency for nearly 23 years. He’s endured multitudes of stressful events during his tenure, though 2020 threw curveballs that would baffle even the most battle-tested communicators among us.

As you might imagine, internal comms at USPS is a complex venture. The agency has more than 630,000 employees—the second largest civilian workforce behind Walmart—and about 500,000 of them lack “direct digital access,” according to Sucich. Most are either out on the road delivering mail, or in one of USPS’ 30,000+ post offices or 350 mail sorting facilities.

Communicating with so many frontline workers presents a slew of challenges, even in the best of times. And then came 2020.

Sucich says USPS has had about 140,000 staffers affected by COVID since last year. As a result, they’ve hired about 200,000 people during the pandemic. It’s been a nonstop cycle of onboarding and education—and also employee appreciation.

Sucich and his team have been publishing consistently on Blue, which Sucich says is the largest intranet in the world, as well as on Blue Lite, a public-facing website that doesn’t require an employee login. The agency has seen great success with infographics and videos on staying safe during the pandemic. He notes, in particular, positive feedback toward a 20-part series called “Thank you for the thank-yous.” The short, uplifting videos feature kind gestures of gratitude provided by real customers.

This sort of uplifting content—not to be outdone by fresh updates to its [230,000-vehicle fleet](https://link.usps.com/2021/02/23/new-vehicles/)—have been a boon during such a stressful season, which for USPS has included a major hubbub over election mail concerns. In response to that flap, Sucich worked hard to reassure employees and the public that nothing was amiss. He helped “stand up” an Election Mail team (in addition to its “COVID Command Team”), which showed consistent proof that the agency was preventing any sort of voter fraud or problems with mail-in ballots. Without missing a beat, the agency continues handling about [472 million](https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2020/09/21/voter-fraud-fears-and-mail-worries-grab-headlines-but-the-wait-will-be-the-worry-in-2020/) pieces of mail a day.

**Strong, consistent leadership comms**

Sucich says Louis DeJoy, the fifth postmaster general he’s served under during his tenure, is a natural communicator and has been delivering weekly messages to employees throughout the pandemic. Leadership comms and top-level messaging solidarity has been crucial during this period.

In the face of ongoing (and baseless) attacks against political bias or even “sabotage” at USPS, Sucich offers a reminder that, “You have to be able to get a hold of the narrative,” noting that you’ll always have competition to your version of events. Regardless of the crisis, you must be able to control the narrative, and get the right info out into the world. To do a better job of this,

Sucich says to:

* **Understand what the conversations are.** That means consistently surveying employees, facilitating feedback forums, and frequently “listening” to what employees and customers are saying on social media. Sucich says his team gains troves of great feedback from employee groups on Facebook and Reddit.
* **Learn what feedback are employees giving to and getting from managers.**
* **Make sure employees feel appreciated, valued and respected.**
* **Expand employee assistance programs—and consistently remind employees of available benefits.**
* **Make good use of digital signage.** If you still have onsite workers, of course. USPS uses 4,000 screens at its facilities to broadcast important messages to workers.
* **Be flexible and adaptable.** Sucich notes that USPS has not traditionally been a remote work-friendly environment. COVID-19 has changed all that. The agency has pivoted to enable about 5,000 workers to telecommute, and he notes that this newfound flexibility has been tremendous all involved.

Ultimately, much of crisis survival is about listening. Listen to what your employees and your customers are talking about. Take note of their concerns, fears and suggestions, and act accordingly. Tell stories about how you’re responding to those concerns. And always make sure employees feel appreciated. They are the ones out there delivering the mail, so to speak, and they are the ones who will determine your company’s fate.

As the USPS motto says: “Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.” The same could be said for frontline employees of all stripes.

2-2:30 p.m.ET

FIRESIDE CHAT

**Why Busting Silos with Everyone From HR to PR is Critical for Communicators in The New Business Landscape—and How to Do It**

**Pamela Yoon,** **Waymo**

Building the World’s Most Experienced Driver

Waymo is the leader in the autonomous driver space

* 20 million+ miles on public road
* 20 billion+ miles in simulation
* They’ve been in 25+ cities across the U.S.
* That means they have roughly 1,000 years of human driving experience

94% of crashes in the United States involve human choice or driving error

* Cased by speeding, distraction, drowsiness, alcohol -- some of the largest contributors
* Ultimately, it’s humans *overestimating* our abilities (reflexes, our skills) and *underestimating* factors out of our control (road conditions, etc.)

As communicators, having a wide array of experiences is very helpful to giving a holistic view of strategies, campaigns, etc.

**Q: How can IC make sure their goals are aligned with HR, and help tear down silos?**

Think about it in terms of a blind date:

* You do research before you go (look up your date online, learn what you can, etc.)
* You show up as your best self and present yourself well
* On the date, you listen more than you talk
  + You also ask questions to gain clarity on who your date really is

SO, in terms of IC and HR:

* **Research:** Know your partners and leaders.
* **Presenting well:** Represent your team and your function well.
* **Listening:** Listen more than you talk, and actually LEARN about those you’re working with.

**Q: How do silos get created, and how can we tear them down?**

As communicators, our superpower--our currency--is information.

Information is actually the most valuable asset for anyone within that organization

Traditionally, when you have such a precious asset, like in a zero-sum game, you protect it and don’t share it. But you can’t do that with information if you want effective communications.

Ask: What are you optimizing for? Is it clear? Is it in alignment?

* Org changes, executive departures or intros, all of that can change what you’re optimizing.
* Sit down with your partners, and ASK what they’re optimizing for--what their goals are. Don’t assume you know what’s going on and their strategies.
* Then, find the commonalities.

**Q: Especially in our remote working environment, how can we work together?**

There are subject matter experts that have answers on nearly all topics--but even they don’t have answers on when COVID-19 will be over, vaccine rollout, etc. We’re ALL grappling for answers, and there is nothing definitive.

* Again, ask: What are we optimizing for?
* Safety is generally a focus--and most will look at this when planning a return to work
* Ask: What’s your culture? What are your values? These will help you as you bring in your HR partners, executive team, etc.

Embrace this time that you have a seat at the table. Be a strategic hand at offering a solution, strategy and insights on leading your organization through it. BE the strong voice in the employee experience.

**Q: Internal and external communications are becoming more integrated. How can these teams better build off of each other (a “mixternal” approach)?**

The line between internal and external communications has become more “poreous” and integrated, so the wall is breaking down--a natural evolution to work together

The Employee Experience, including social media, apps, etc. are also breaking this down.

Figure out what the business is and what your partners are trying to solve, so you can find common ground.

* That’s where the relationships are formed and strengthened
* That’s where learning and information sharing happens, too
* At that point, the collaboration can really happen

Austin Channing Brown: “The work in being an anti-racist is being a good human to other humans.” <--This is both simple and profound.

In a similar manner, the key to having a solid partnership is to *be a good partner.*

You deal in knowledge. You’re at the hub of information within your organization. You are entrusted with the privilege of holding the keys to that information. **What will you do with that information?**

Communicators have been fighting for a seat at the table, but that has been won. Now, what are you going to do with that power?

* If you guard and politicize this information, this will decrease trust.
* If you share and facilitate collaboration and easily give, you’ll get more trust and doors will open.
* You have an incredible opportunity to make a huge impact within your organization, and make a change--no matter your organization or how big your team is.

Renee Brown: “At the end of the day, you want to be able to say that you contributed more than you criticized.”