



MANUFACTURING SPOTLIGHT

Tackling *employee* turnover

Have you heard the word “jobpocalypse?” It’s how some experts are now describing the war for talent, the Great Resignation... all the employee retention-related challenges facing many businesses right now. But, when we first read that new term, it really struck us. The name alone implies the dire – and enduring – situation many businesses find themselves in right now. They’re looking for new ways to tackle the ongoing issue of attracting and keeping talent, because it clearly isn’t going away anytime soon.

While Tschida Communications works across a myriad of industries, we’ve recently seen an uptick in communication needs from the manufacturing industry, specifically around internal communication. These companies are wisely recognizing the need to engage and communicate with their employees like never before to combat the effects the “jobpocalypse” is having on their businesses. (Note: While most manufacturing organizations have had some form of internal communications over the years, it’s often been HR-driven. This is about taking a broader, more strategic approach to the content shared with employees, and the ways that content should be delivered.)

In this whitepaper, we’ll share observations and best practices that other manufacturing companies can use to communicate with their notoriously hard-to-reach frontline employees, based on our work with organizations in that industry.

SCALING THAT “FAMILY FEEL”

The manufacturing organizations we’ve worked with to date are family owned, and their leaders grew up in the business. In fact, it’s one of our favorite things about working with these companies – hearing stories from the CEO of how their first high school job was mopping the shop floors, etc. When a leader has that kind of tenure, they also have deep knowledge of the people who work at the company. In many cases, they not only know their names, but they know their entire family and details about their lives.

Many manufacturing leaders recognize the need for more intentional internal communication when they look around and realize their company has outgrown their ability to continue knowing everyone’s story. They want to preserve that “family feel” and tight-knit culture even as their team continues to expand. Internal communication is a great way to do this –

rather than catching some employees at the watercooler, it creates a platform for the CEO to reach every employee with timely messages and team recognition.

EVOLVING CULTURE TO COMPETE

Not surprisingly given the above, when our team talks to frontline manufacturing employees about culture and communication at their organization, they use words like “family,” “small town,” “home,” “fun,” “nice,” and “friendly.” Meanwhile, the leaders at those companies use words like, “growth,” “fast-paced,” “innovation,” “accountability,” and “forward-thinking” for where they’re taking the company.

It’s always fascinating to show our clients the difference between what employees and leaders say, because it highlights another important reason to communicate intentionally with employees – to bring them along on the cultural change that needs to happen for their company to remain relevant and competitive in the future. There’s a tension between the company’s desire to maintain the “feel good” aspects of their culture while infusing more accountability and an orientation toward performance. Internal communication helps ease that tension by explaining the rationale for cultural changes, what’s in it for employees to evolve with the company, and by showing – not just telling – what good looks like through stories that showcase desired behaviors and recognize employees.

MITIGATING SAFETY INCIDENTS

Manufacturers are laser-focused on safety. When they observe an upward trend in safety-related incidents, communication can play a role in preventing future issues. In addition to ensuring employees have the information they need – in a language they understand – to do their jobs safely, there’s typically an opportunity to help managers lead more effectively through clear communication.

Even as our clients create internal communications



strategies and functions for the first time, we continually remind their managers that they are the company’s primary internal communicators. A big part of our job is to provide managers with communication tools and resources that help them lead their teams even more effectively.

START BY TALKING TO YOUR EMPLOYEES

Now that you know both the general and manufacturing industry-specific signs that indicate you might need to communicate with your employees more intentionally, what’s the next step? We always start by talking to employees directly to learn how they experience the company’s formal and informal communication practices currently, and what they think needs to change and stay the same. In many cases, we hear from frontline employees that our conversation is the first time they’ve ever been asked to share their opinion. While it can be tempting to skip this step in favor of executing what management already knows they want, please resist that urge – the simple act of asking can make a world of difference for this audience!

While you likely can’t speak with every employee directly, you can ensure you get a representative sample by making a point to interview employees:

At each key level within your organization. That might look like C-suite, managers, supervisors, and frontline – or in your company it might look entirely different. Just ensure that every key level is represented proportionally. So, for example, if 30% of

your employees are supervisors, ensure that 30% of the employees you select to interview are supervisors.

Within each function of your organization.

Similar to level, ensure that all key functions and/or departments within your organization are represented within the population you choose to interview.

At every key location. It's critically important to interview employees at all locations – not just headquarters because of the ease of proximity. Here again, if 30% of your overall employee base is in a particular location, ensure that 30% of the group you interview comes from that location.

That embody the demographics of your company.

Be sure your list of interviewees captures the mix of genders and ethnicities represented across your employee base. In cases where your company lacks diversity, be sure to seek out those voices in your interviews, even if it technically represents a disproportionate percentage compared with your overall population. It's critical you hear from diverse employees and identify any trends in their experiences that need to be understood and addressed.

Once you've determined a representative set of employees to speak with, it's time to get out and talk to them – our very favorite part of doing this work! Compared with our background in more corporate environments, we find the candor and directness of frontline employees so refreshing.

Our work relies on getting their honest, unfiltered feedback, and that's exactly what comes in. This can be where having the involvement of a neutral, third-party really makes a difference – whoever conducts the interviews, the key is to ensure your employees feel comfortable opening up to that person and telling them the truth about their experience.

What should you actually ask employees? We recommend a mix of questions that cover how they'd describe the culture, what content they most value and what they'd like to hear more about, what methods of communication they prefer and would like to see in the future, etc. Be sure the questions reflect what you most want to know and can feasibly take action on. It's also critical to ask people managers what tools and resources they need to lead and communicate with their teams even more effectively.

**COMMUNICATING WITH PURPOSE**

Now that you've taken the time to hear from employees and leaders throughout the company about how the formal and informal channels of communication are working, and you've gotten honest feedback about the culture, it's time to take action!

Start by prioritizing what you heard. Which changes are quick, easy, and/or inexpensive to make? Plan to tackle those quick wins first to demonstrate that you took the feedback you collected seriously and are taking action on it. In our experience, activities in this category often involve increasing the visibility of the CEO and other key executives amongst front-line staff. This can be as simple as blocking leaders' time to "walk the floor" and informally connect with employees more frequently. Other common quick wins include implementing rules of engagement for email to reduce irrelevant information; committing to more frequent updates of frontline facing communications

like bulletin boards and breakroom flyers; and adjusting recurring “stand up” meetings to make them more efficient and effective.

Once you’ve identified the quick wins and have prioritized them on your communications roadmap, look at the medium-sized initiatives that could be address employee feedback. When it comes to executive visibility, you might take it a step further by implementing a scheduled “coffee break” meeting with the CEO and employees to provide dedicated time and space to hear what’s really on employees’ minds. To strengthen middle managers’ roles as leaders and communicators, maybe recurring meetings need to be completely revamped or established when they haven’t existed before, or you can create new tools and content to aid them in contextualizing company information for their specific department or team.

Finally, you’ll likely identify some longer-term, larger communications initiatives to consider. These vary considerably depending on the company and the internal dynamics involved, but can include any of the following:

Whether to establish a **company intranet site** to make internal content easier to consume and curate all employee tools and resources into one, easy-to-access place. Intranets are a great way to make employees’ jobs easier and more efficient by providing everything they need at their fingertips. They’re also a great way to convey key information without relying on email, which many employees struggle to manage – not to mention the fact that many manufacturing employees don’t even have company email addresses.

Whether to start creating **articles and stories** that bring key topics like culture and desired behaviors to life for employees. (These are often served up on the intranet; much like a daily news site shares breaking news, the intranet shares the most important company news and information each day.) Company articles help to show, not just tell, employees what “good” looks like, and increase engagement by recognizing employees and enabling employees to engage with each other on key topics by liking and commenting on content.

Whether to implement an **employee engagement survey** to keep a regular pulse on how employees feel about working at your organization. While these surveys have historically been conducted annually, more and more organizations are moving to a “pulse” approach, where employees are frequently being asked for their feedback so leadership can monitor and respond to trends as needed.

Each of these are largest investments and should be guided with the support of internal communications experts who’ve led and managed those efforts at other organizations. They can help you avoid the pitfalls that often come with communication projects of this size and ensure each of these efforts is set up and managed to best inform and engage your employees, middle managers and leaders.

If you’re ready to get started communicating more intentionally with your manufacturing employees, get in touch! We’d love to guide you through the process we’ve developed with our other industry clients and get you on your way to engaging and retaining your employees!

Learn more about our services at
www.tschidacommunications.com

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