

New rules needed as technology replaces face-to-face meetings

Sept 11 has forced firms to think again over travelling staff, but how can HR help them communicate effectively?

One organisation was shocked to find that it had 10 per cent of its workforce travelling when the planes hit the World Trade Center.

That will never be allowed to happen again. A third of large companies have cut back on executive travel since 11 September and many are using video and teleconferencing to perform overseas business (News, 4 December).

US research suggests that the use of videoconferencing has increased by 40 per cent in the past three months.

It means that HR professionals need to adopt new rules for effective communication between people in different locations.

Companies trying to get people to work in multidisciplinary teams have traditionally relied on a mix of face-to-face meetings and electronic communication. Informal networking provided the most valuable means, creating goodwill and understand-

ing of each other's constraints and priorities.

Now we shall have to learn lessons from employers that have implemented home-working programmes and have geographically dispersed workforces that have limited contact with their colleagues.

As face-to-face meetings reduce, organisations will have to rely more on electronic communication. These are often the weakest weapons in the communication armoury.

Staff are already reeling from e-mail deluge and voicemail rage.

Managers are seduced by how easy it is to e-mail huge volumes of information in their battle to keep staff "up to speed". Videoconferences may be fine for tightly focused meetings, but poor on encouraging small talk. Teleconferences can penalise those who are not operating in their native language or naturally talkative.

HR managers need to ensure leaders



Videoconferencing allows facial expressions to be seen, which can help get the intended message across

know how to achieve the same level of communication as they managed through face-to-face talks. This will involve rebalancing the "reach" and "richness" of internal communication. Reach is the extent to which a communication channel can get to the desired audience, and richness is the capacity of different communication channels to carry information and emotions, and provide interaction.

Face-to-face meetings and telephones, for example, allow quick response, conversation and involvement in real time. Videoconferences can allow personal feelings and emotions to come through, which helps convey both straightforward meanings and underlying subtleties of message.

However, e-mail and voicemail do not allow people to interact at the same time.

Good internal communication will mean ensuring electronic channels are "lean but not mean" by using them more imaginatively for two-way conversations.

Oracle, for example, uses webcasts and webconferences to get the message across to its people, and then involves them in debate by using chatrooms. This allows those who are less voluble or who are not communicating in their native language to respond without feeling slow or stupid.

BP Amoco gets more out of meetings by using webcams to relay the proceedings via its intranet to those who can't attend.

Greater collaboration, at a distance or in the same room, requires more understanding of the ways group members influence each other, and demands greater

management of social interaction and trust building.

Making this work demands a keener sensitivity to cultural and language differences and an understanding of how technology and people work best together.

Richer communication is needed in organisations that face uncertain times. The greater the degree of change that employees face, the more likelihood there is of misunderstanding.

In the shift to electronic communication, we need to remember that informing is not the same as communicating. Communication is two-way, and HR forgets that at its peril.

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