

INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

Positive messages from air traffic control

Executives are often swamped by the sheer weight of emails and corporate information. Alison Maitland talks to a company that found a solution by looking at radar and runways

Until recently, information overload was a serious problem for the 2,200 staff at Birmingham Midshires, part of HBOS, the UK banking group. Employees were "bombarded with bits of paper and e-mails with no weighting or priority attached to any of them", says Fiona Nelson, internal communications manager.

"We might be telling people we were entering a new, specialised lending market and, on the same day, saying there was a cake sale with proceeds going to the British Heart Foundation. "Junk e-mails and in-house messages added to the clutter of communication. We had a new business strategy and a lot of important information was getting missed."

Internal communications failure is a widespread problem, according to DPA, a corporate communications consultancy. Over the past three years it has talked to directors of large US, European and Japanese companies, small businesses and non-profit organisations.

The message from the boardroom is consistent. "Our people just don't listen," a senior executive at a software and engineering conglomerate told DPA. "We launch a new strategy; everyone nods - but nothing changes."

The sheer volume of e-mails, memos, intranet information and newsletters has caused "mass desensitisation" of employees, it says. The problem is exacerbated by a low level of trust in managers and cynicism about new ideas presented without any explanation of the context and thinking behind them.

Birmingham Midshires decided to tackle the problem this year with

a "communications radar screen", based on the concept of air traffic control. Instead of a communications free-for-all, Ms Nelson meets directors every quarter to discuss forthcoming announcements and prioritise them to decide when they will land on employees' screens or desks.

The number of "arrivals" has been cut by packaging related information - for example, a new product launch and the training and information technology systems to support it - in one comprehensive message that enables staff to understand the big picture.

Her team acts as "air traffic controllers", with all management communications going through them.

"Previously there were occasions when the person who shouted loudest would win," she says. "Now we have debates about priority - but it's relatively easy to solve if everyone can see that one thing is going to affect 1,000 people and another only 50."

The idea of using "radar" and "air traffic control" came from Synopsis, a consultancy that says organisations find coherent communication especially difficult in uncertain times, when there is heavy competition for "air space": employees' time and attention.

A recent Synopsis survey of 100 European and US companies found that only 13 per cent knew how much time their staff had for dealing with communications and were, therefore, able to make best use of it.

"Few businesses would continue to churn out products with no regard for customers' capacity to consume them," says Bill Quirke, managing director of Synopsis. "Yet that is what 87 per cent of communicators seem to



Talking down: air traffic control has inspired a communications system that prioritises messages and announcements to decide when they will land on employees screens or desks PA

be doing."

He says a company's air traffic control team should include people from different functions - human resources, corporate communications and possibly also marketing and information systems. To be effective, they need board-level backing.

"If the top team don't agree the words, the result will be mixed messages," he says. "Failure of communication starts when the messages being developed are not credible, are ill-thought through, are presented only from management's view point and are not challenged and reality-checked."

Another air traffic control enthusiast is Karen Perego, who heads the corporate communications practice at Aon Consulting, a human resources consulting firm in Canada. She developed the idea while overseeing inter-

national communications at Royal Bank of Canada and Bank of Montreal.

To check how communications were used, she would present groups of employees with copies of all the internal information they had received in the previous 90 days and ask them to divide it into two piles: what helped them and what got in the way. They always produced a third pile, larger than the others, of information they claimed never to have seen. Sometimes it even included packages with signed courier slips attached.

"Over 50 per cent of the information was going nowhere. All of those corporate expectations were not being met," says Ms Perego.

"I could see that everybody was aiming to land on the same Tarmac at the same time with huge cargo plane-loads of information for employees. The employees were almost being

physically annihilated."

Communications industry figures suggest that 60-80 per cent of information is not understood in companies and that between \$650m and \$1.3bn (£415m-£820m) is lost every year trying to understand communication, says Ms Perego, who is on the board of directors of the Council of Communication Management, an international professional association.

She found the air traffic control idea struck a chord with executives familiar with being stuck in circling aircraft that were unable to land because of fog or an overcrowded runway.

Her efforts to get the right information to the right people at the right time resulted in an "air traffic control" or "business intelligence" system that identifies criteria for filtering and prioritising messages. If, for example, a company wants to focus on customers, communications relating to customer relationship management will receive a higher priority than others.

Software that manages the message flow automatically is then linked to the company's existing information technology systems. Everything other than personal correspondence has to go through the automatic system. Emergency communications override it, going through the air traffic controller who clears the "runway" of all other messages. Senior managers also regularly monitor the way the system is working.

The system alerts front-line employees 90 days in advance that a big communication is coming, allowing them to plan the time and staff levels needed to handle it. It enables a company to put a cost not only on produc-

ing information but also on absorbing it.

"There's competition to get it as succinct as possible so the cost of communication and the volume go down," says Ms Perego. "Now we have really streamlined little jets landing on the Tarmac."

Is there any resistance? People initially see it as bureaucratic, she says. Some managers feel disempowered by having their control over information removed. New air traffic controllers can have a fairly "brutal" first year and need coaching to deal with resentful managers.

However, the positive results can be rapid and striking, she says. Employee satisfaction rates rise sharply, the volume of paper drops by 75 per cent on average and merchandising and distribution costs are cut by 400 per cent.

Prioritising and packaging communications can also help staff who feel they have too little, rather than too much, information. Sophie Blanpain, head of equities research at Morley Fund Management in London, says people understand better what is happening in the business since the introduction of a communications management system based on the Synopsis model of air traffic control.

Instead of lots of snippets of information, the 1,000 staff now receive a monthly electronic business update that puts financial performance, new contracts, hirings, departures and IT projects into context.

This is especially important in the current volatile business climate, says Ms Blanpain. "If you don't have the information, you tend to assume things are a lot worse than they are."