

Chapter 11

Can Internal Communication Drive Business? An Overview of Its Strategic Values and Practice Tips

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Abstract In Asia Pacific, people often overlook the strategic value internal communication can bring to a corporation. Most companies have a belief that external communication, like marketing and public relations, generates more value than internal communication, and they tend to pay more attention and resources to those external functions.

In this article, the author talks about the strategic roles of internal communication and how internal communication can impact on business. The article covers leadership communication, strategic communication, change communication employee engagement, employer branding, and manager communication. It also introduces a variety of communication platforms used by internal communication.

I have to admit, there was a time when I did not think that internal communication (IC) was as important as external communication. Not until I started working at my current company, which is a Fortune 500 company headquartered in the USA specializing in industrial automation, did I know the power and strategic value IC can bring to a company.

11.1 Situation in Asia

In Asia Pacific, IC has taken off much slower than external communication. Most companies have a belief that external communication, like marketing and public relations, generates more value than IC, and they tend to pay more attention and resources to those external functions. I believe this is part of the reason why the development of external communication is far ahead of that of IC.

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However, as time goes by, companies started to realize the importance of engagement and leadership and how IC can play a critical role in these aspects. Gradually, IC has started to take the stage in the corporate communication field.

11.2 What Roles Does Internal Communication Play?

Bové and Thill (2000, p. 7) define internal communication as “the exchange of information and ideas within an organization” and which performs a “logistical” service managing content from several communication channels. In these companies, its functions are limited to newsletter production, publishing stories on intranet, and organizing town hall meetings.

In some companies, IC performs the role of internal promotion of the company’s mission, strategy, and the management team’s vision. In others, which are fewer, it acts principally as strategic adviser, offering high-level consultation, and is responsible for leadership communication.

11.3 How Do I View Internal Communication?

How do I view IC? I truly believe IC’s purpose is to foster a culture of open, authentic communication that inspires, mobilizes, and gives voice to employees at all levels of the organization to achieve business results. It does create significant business impact on a company.

11.4 Why Internal Communication Is Important?

I see a lot of similarities between a president leading a country and a chief executive officer running a company. A lot of effort must be dedicated to engaging and earning people’s trust, especially when the population is huge. Of all the efforts dedicated to people engagement, communication is arguably one of the most important.

First, imagine how US President Obama engaged his voters and, later, citizens with his spectacular communication skills. Then, imagine how a CEO of a multinational company, with a team of several thousand employees across the globe, engages the staff through leadership communication, which is a critical part of his/her role.

Within a company, IC helps engage employees and motivate them to give their best efforts. It also helps retain employees. A survey conducted by the workforce productivity group, Institute for Corporate Productivity (i4cp 2009), found that internal communications have an effect on staff retention. 81 % of US respondents named IC as their favorite method of minimizing turnover. Among the higher performers, 91 % named communication as their top method, while only 71 % of the lower performers gave it their highest priority.

11.5 Strategic Roles of Internal Communication

Now, I will go deeper to explain the strategic roles of internal communication.

11.5.1 *Communicate Corporate Strategy to Help Employees Create a Line of Sight*

I would like to begin with corporate strategy communication because I have personally witnessed how powerful communication of company's direction can impact employee engagement.

Though one may think that every company should have a clear corporate strategy, in reality, many companies fail to achieve this. In a large corporation, an employee may hear a number of initiatives, several priorities, and tens of slogans floating around the company, and they may become confused about what the most important company-wide priorities are.

Take my current company as an example. A few years ago, employees were confused about our company's direction and top priorities. The main reason was that all departments and teams had their own strategy. Employees felt that the company was not very engaging; they did not know where their company was heading (Diagram 11.1).

Diagram 11.1 A line of sights in the company



When our global IC director came onboard to work with our Senior Vice President of HR, a significant change started to take place in the company. Together, they worked closely to develop a framework, what we called “Strategic Framework” for strategy communication, which started to gain popularity among senior leaders and, later, business unit and functional unit heads.

11.5.1.1 Create a Framework for Company-Wide Use

Our company’s Strategic Framework has four key pillars summarizing the key themes of the company’s strategy. After the launch of the Framework, leaders and employees began to have a common language to describe the company’s priorities. Through continuous promotion of the use of the Framework, including endorsement by the CEO, the Strategic Framework will soon become an integral part of the company’s systems and practices. As the Framework is increasingly used to develop team goals, the alignment of individual, team, and company goals becomes much clearer and easier (Diagram 11.2).

Let me explain how the Framework is structured. For each level in the Framework, there are two columns. The column on the left is the higher-level strategy, while the one on the right is the strategy of the next level down. For example, the left-hand side is the CEO’s strategy, and then on the right, it could be the strategy of a global business unit (BU) or functional unit (FU). If the right-hand side is the goals for “global” HR, then the right-hand side should be the “regional” HR’s goals. Each level should develop its own strategy from the level above, and this process continues down the line. This cascading process should go right down to the individual employees, who develop their respective individual goals.

If all BUs and FUs can disciplinarily follow the cascade process, we will achieve our ultimate goal of our company to “a line of sights.” In other words, all individual

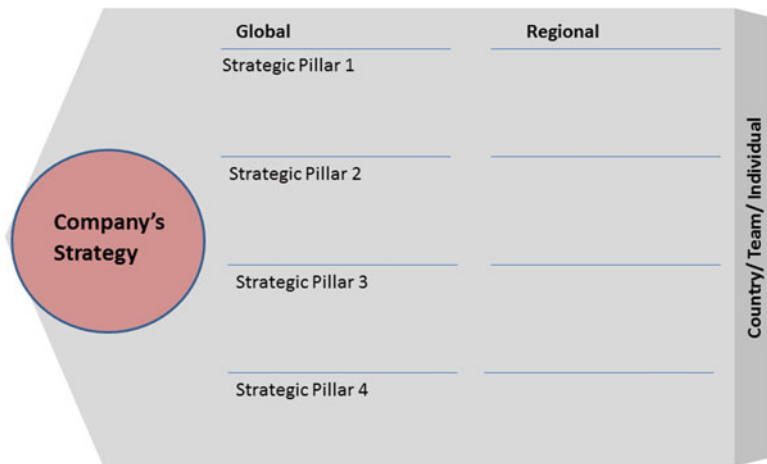


Diagram 11.2 An illustration how a framework helps create a line of sight

goals should have a connection to the company's overall goals. With such a backdrop, every employee should know what role their individual efforts play in the company's overall direction. When employees know how their roles contribute to the company's main objective, they start to see the value of their work. As a result, they will feel more engaged and are more willing to go an extra mile to give their best to the company.

This phenomenon was proved through our company's employee engagement survey, which was conducted three years after the launch of the Strategic Framework. The scores from the questions relating to "understanding the company's direction" had risen compared with the previous employee engagement survey done three years ago along with the overall engagement score.

11.5.1.2 Convince Senior Leaders to Take Ownership

It is very important to have the CEO and senior leaders take ownership of communicating the company's strategy. Words coming from higher positions usually add a lot of weight to a message. Employees will be more convinced and engaged when senior leaders paint a bigger picture of how they want to lead the company and the ultimate goals they want to achieve.

11.5.1.3 Use Captivating Visuals to Communicate Complex Ideas, Like Infographics

It is important to make employees interested in the company strategy. Instead of writing a long passage to explain what the strategy is, I chose to use an infographical approach, which is to conceptualize the information using graphics.

From my experience, readers pay twice as much attention to graphics as they do to words alone. The fact that my company's strategy was presented in an infographical way helped to create a "hype" in the company. Many employees put the infographic posters up on their cubicle walls. A number of leaders came to me to get the graphic images to use in their team strategy.

Below is a beautiful example which demonstrates how infographics can help illustrate a set of coherent concepts in a simple but vivid way (Diagram 11.3):

11.5.1.4 Make Good Use of Videos

Videos have become an important part of IC strategy. The thoughts you put behind the production can make a difference. In my case, since the president of Asia Pacific, whom I worked with, is an expressive and engaging executive, I chose to have a casual video interview with him where he could articulate the strategy in a vivid way.

Making a video is one thing, and how to promote the video is another. No matter how good the video is, if you cannot attract employees to view it, all your production efforts will be in vain.

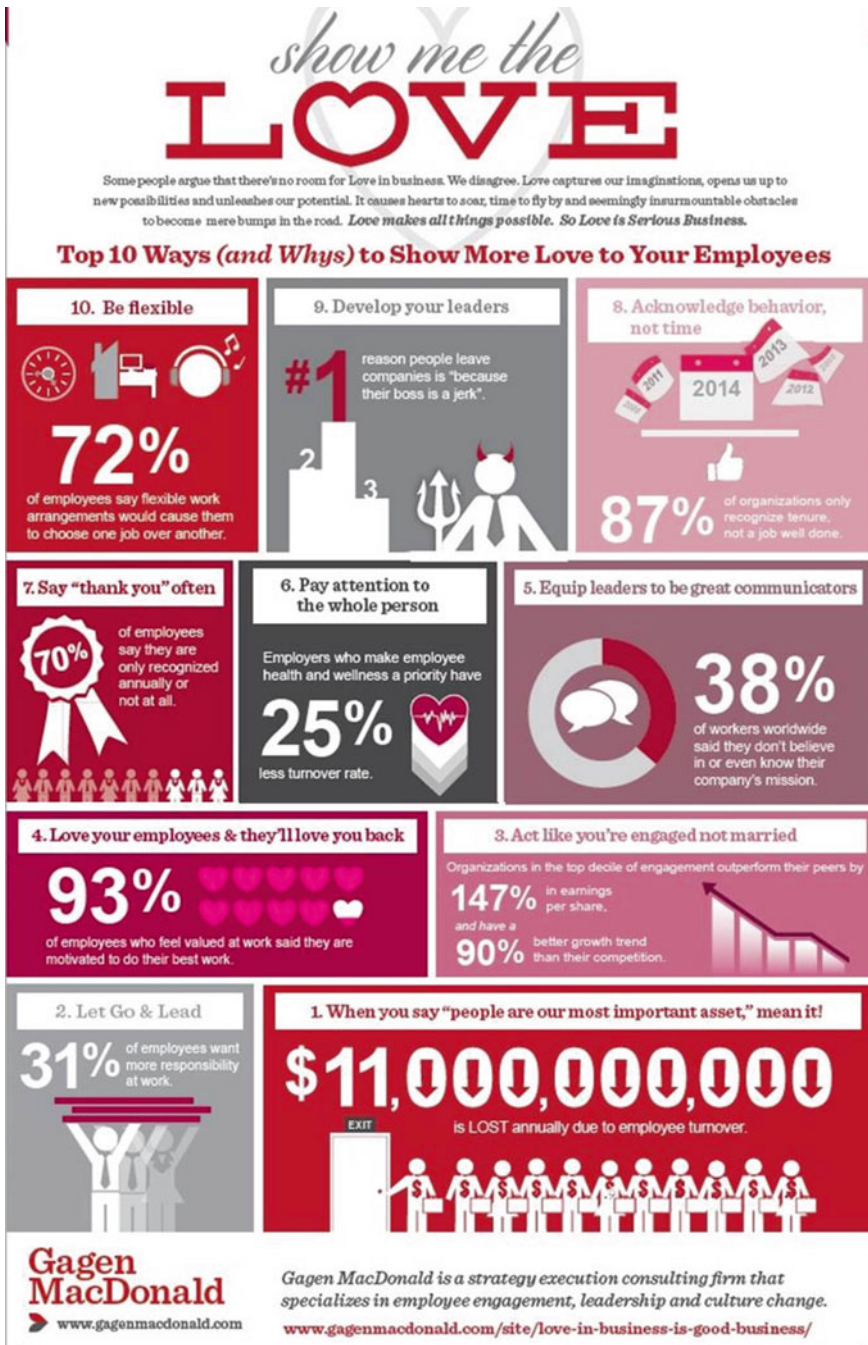


Diagram 11.3 An example of using infographics to illustrate multiple concepts (Gagen MacDonald 1998–2014)



Diagram 11.4 Pencil sketch of the senior leader I video-interviewed

To promote the video, I hired an illustrator to pencil-sketch the president's portrait. I inserted the sketch into the email to attract employees' attention. I also created a short quiz asking about some key points of the strategy, i.e., the top three priorities, the three business initiatives and our key strengths, etc. Employees' response was overwhelming! I received a lot of positive feedback about the video. Employees told me how they could connect with the president, though they have never met him in person. Some employees told me they were attracted by the sketch of the president, while others were intrigued by the quiz (Diagram 11.4).

11.5.1.5 Evaluate Results with a Survey

What gets measured, gets done. A lot of times, we put all our efforts into communicating, but we may overlook the importance of evaluating the effectiveness of our work.

Three months after we launched the communication campaign for our company strategy, our global IC team launched a company-wide online survey with the purpose of finding out the employees' understanding of the corporate strategy.

I truly believe that evaluation is important. It is like a "school report." It shows whether a good job has been done in communicating the corporate strategy. On the other hand, it can be a strong proof to the CEO and other leaders of how well employees understand the strategy. Since senior leaders are normally the "sponsors" of strategy communication, a positive survey result can boost their confidence and encourage them to do even better in communicating with their employees in the future. So, do not forget to include this important step in your communication plan.

In our survey, we had questions asking about one of the three attributes (Davis & Company 2005, p. 19).

Attribute	Example of question
Experiential:	Are you aware of our company’s strategy?
Attitudinal:	Do you think you have a good understanding of our strategy?
Knowledge testing:	Can you name the four key pillars of our strategy?

11.5.2 Help Leaders to Build a Strong Leadership Brand

Leadership communication usually refers to the communications you prepare for your senior leaders which can demonstrate their leadership roles. According to Barrett (2006), leadership communication is a controlled and purposeful transfer of meaning, influencing a single party to a community. Through communication abilities and resources, it creates and delivers messages that guide, direct, motivate, and inspire others to take action. Good communication does not guarantee a good leader, but a good leader must have a high competence in communication.

Helping leaders to build a clear and influential image of what they expect becomes a strong support for people management. You can also help leaders to become more effective communicators and enhance their understanding of why communication is one of the key business drivers.

As a communicator, what can we do to support our leaders in communication?
What impressions do the following three photos give you?



Photo A (White House 2014)



Photo B (White House 2014)



Photo C (White House 2014)

Your answers for Photos A, B, and C in order would probably be: “authoritative,” “approachable,” and “concerned.” Now, you may see how an image can affect your impression on a person, especially if it is the first time you meet or have met that person.

As an internal communicator, you are the one who is responsible for shaping the leader’s image among employees. We can influence our leader’s image by carefully choosing his/her photos and words to be used in his employee communications.

If your leader has a serious character and you want to present his light-hearted side to make him seem more approachable, you can capture his relaxed moments in photos, such as during the annual dinner, festive parties, and company’s outing, and share them with your employees.



Photo D: Mr. Ruff was one of the senior executives I used to work with



Photo E: I captured Mr. Ruff’s cheerful face during Chinese New Year to show his approachable side

Internal communicators are the writers who craft the CEO’s messages, including their speeches. We should carefully choose the words that reflect their character – their “voice.”

For example, if a leader has an authoritative character, we tend to use short sentences and affirmative words like “should” and “act now” to reflect the leader’s firm tone. The rhythm of the speech should also be taken into consideration as it also reflects the leader’s character. All in all, a good leader communication piece should make the audience feel that the leader is “talking” directly to the individual.

11.5.3 Drive Change in an Organization

In a corporation, the IC team plays a key role in leading major change among employees to cope with the ever-changing business environment. The objectives of the change could be to influence employees’ opinion, behavior, and values including ethics, morale, and culture. The change topics could be reorganization, acquisition, launch of company’s strategy, change of computer system or office relocation, and so on.

Let’s take my company as an example. Our India sales team decided to go through a reorganization to better meet with customers’ needs. The sales members were reassigned to new roles to match the company’s target industries. One of the benefits was that the sales people became specialized in dealing with individual customer segments and establish closer relationships with their customers.

11.5.3.1 Change Communication Process

The process of change communication starts with “creating awareness,” alters to “creating acceptance,” and eventually evolves to “creating visibility.” I have summarized the sequence of stages and key elements involved in each stage of the change process in the following diagram (Diagram 11.5):

There are common best practices when communicating a major change initiative (Davis & Company, 2005, p. 26):

- Leverage dialogue to drive information.
- Communicate in a variety of ways.

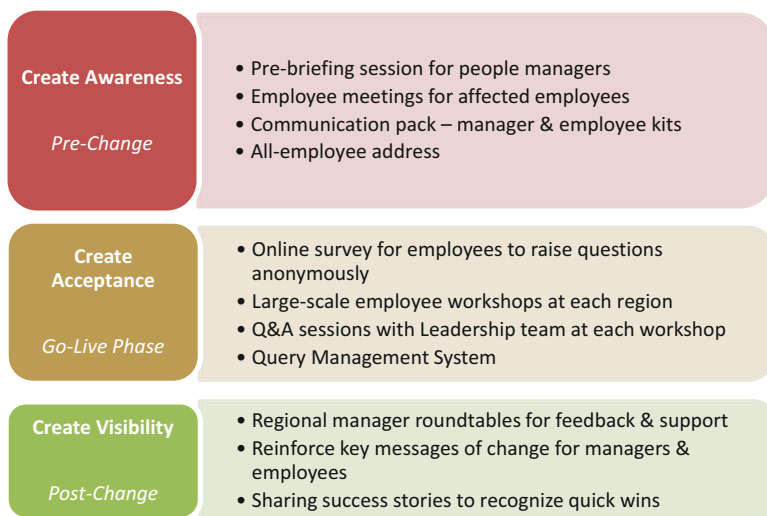


Diagram 11.5 Different stages of a change process

- Involve leaders and managers.
- Don't communicate too much too soon.
- Make change relevant to the audience.

11.5.3.2 Communication Materials

A full set of communication materials is prepared for managers and employees. Managers always play a critical role in communication, especially for communicating change. According to *Communicating Change* (1994, p. 15), a research done by GE and Hewlett-Packard revealed that the better the manager's communication, the more satisfied employees are with all aspects of work life. It also says that it is not an employee's communication relationship with the CEO or head office that matters; rather, it is his or her communication with his or her supervisor that is paramount (p. 17). Often times, employees find their managers the most trustworthy communicators. The IC team should prepare a kit of communication materials to assist managers in communicating the change. Below, I listed the content of the communication kit for the India sales team change project, for your reference (Diagram 11.6).

11.5.3.3 Changing Values and Behavior in Stages

Other changes that the IC team will drive include shaping employees' values, which, in turn, leads to a subsequent change of behavior. Again, using my company as an example, we highly emphasized ethics and required all employees to maintain a high level of ethical standard in all daily business operations.

Manager Kit	Key Messages
	Frequently Asked Questions and Answers
	Manager Talk Tips
	Meeting scheduling template and guidelines
Employee Kit	Role Change Letter
	Relocation /Retention-Bonus /Compensation Change Communication
	New Organization Chart for the Region
	New Job Description
	Write-up on the Segment with "Who's Who" and contact list

Diagram 11.6 Content of communication kits

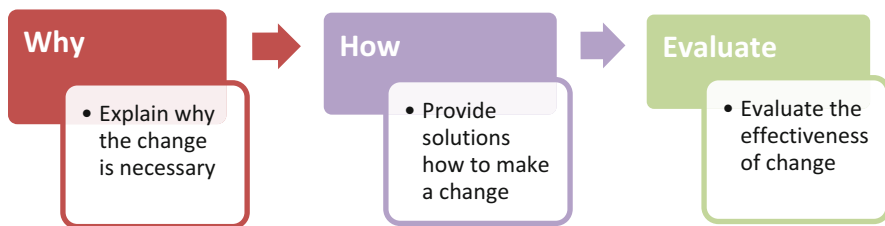


Diagram 11.7 Change communication process

The reinforcement of high standard of ethics in my company involved three phases, as shown below. This is also a typical process of change communication (Diagram 11.7).

Why: Senior leaders communicate the important reasons why we all need to maintain a high level of ethical standards in all business operations.

How: Provide tools and solutions for overcoming barriers which may hinder employees from practicing ethical behaviors. Our company developed an ethical online training program requiring all employees to complete the training annually. It is an interactive online training and is scenario based. It provides recommendations on how to handle difficult situations.

Evaluate: There is a test at the end of the training module. Employees are evaluated on whether they have a good understanding of our company's requirements of ethics standards. Employees need to pass the test; otherwise, they must revisit the whole training module to ensure they understand what the company requires. To improve the effectiveness of the training, the company takes feedback from employees and modifies the training format and content in a continual process to improve the training. Because what the company cares about is their understanding, rather than the score of the test, employees are allowed to go through the training and discuss the scenario-based questions with other team members. This is something that is worth mentioning if the mission of the change exercise is shaping employees' values.

11.5.4 Inspire, Engage, and Motivate Employees

IC plays an active role in engaging and motivating employees to go the extra mile.

11.5.4.1 Set Up Employee Meetings

One of IC's roles is to create opportunities and organize activities for leaders to communicate with employees. An all-employee town hall meeting is one common channel for leaders to communicate key corporate topics to employees. The topics could be corporate strategy, result announcement, welcoming newly acquired employees, etc.

It is just as important for the employees to feel that they are encouraged to express their views and know that their input will be acknowledged respectfully. Apart from formal events, the IC team can also set up casual activities, allowing employees to get involved and share their thoughts more openly. Some examples could be breakfast with leaders, straight talk, and lunch and learn.

As an IC professional, our job is to evaluate and recommend the most suitable communication channel and vehicle for our leaders. I would say not all leaders are suitable to do a casual event such as breakfast with leaders. We need that to propose a communication format that our leaders are most comfortable with and from which we anticipate the best response from the employees.

It is understandable that employees feel more engaged if they can communicate with their leaders and voice out their own thoughts. However, if their leaders fail to take action to make change after they heard from their employees, it can create a serious “backfire.”

11.5.4.2 Create Inspiring People Stories

It is human nature to associate oneself with someone who has a similar background or has encountered similar situations. That is why people’s success stories are well received by employees; they can relate themselves to the stories.

One way to engage employees is to create personal feature stories that inspire the audience. There are multiple story angles. For example, we can interview an employee who has obtained an important award from the company. We can interview an employee who has worked at the company for a long length of time and ask him/her to share his views and experience and why he/she likes to work at the company. We can also create a story to introduce an employee who just got promoted and ask him what he believes were the main factors behind his success.

However, we do not need to limit ourselves to story writing. We can do video interviews, podcasts, photo stories, and comics to make the employee stories more interactive and convincing. People react better to a range of medium, rather than repeating the same methods. So, be creative!

11.5.5 Strengthen the Employer Brand by Identifying and Articulating EVPs

IC can support a company to strengthen its brand as an employer. An employer brand is different from the corporate brand of the company, though they do share a few attributes.

Employer brand denotes an organization’s reputation as an employer. According to Minchington (as cited in Lubecka 2013), employer brand is “the image of the organization as a great place to work.” Having a strong employer brand helps to attract target employees and retain current staff.

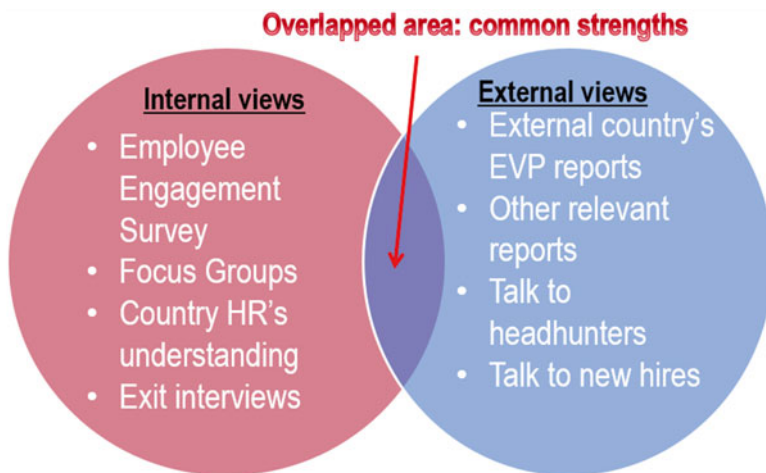


Diagram 11.8 Illustration of my definition of EVPs

IC team can work with a consultancy to find out the key value propositions offered by the company to its employees. These value propositions are called “employee value proposition” (EVP). Some call it “employment value proposition” and some “employer value proposition.” EVP can be defined as a set of associations and offerings provided by an organization in return for the skills, capabilities, and experiences an employee brings to the organization (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Employee_value_proposition). EVP, in my own definition, is a combination of internal and external perceptions of the strengths of a company as illustrated in the diagram below (Diagram 11.8):

IC should identify what a company can offer to employees, as an employer. In other words, why a potential employee should join the company, and why an existing employee should stay.

McDonald’s (GRI 2012) uses the following themes for its EVPs. An employee quote accompanies each theme:

- **Family & Friends** – “I work in an enjoyable, energizing atmosphere where everyone feels part of the team.”
- **Flexibility** – “I have a challenging, varied job that has the flexibility to fit into my lifestyle.”
- **Future** – “I have an opportunity to grow and progress by learning personal and work skills that will last me a lifetime, whatever I choose to do.”

Research also shows that a strong employer brand substantiated by a set of appealing EVPs helps the company save a significant amount of cost in talent acquisition. Below are the findings of Corporate Executive Board (CEB 2014):

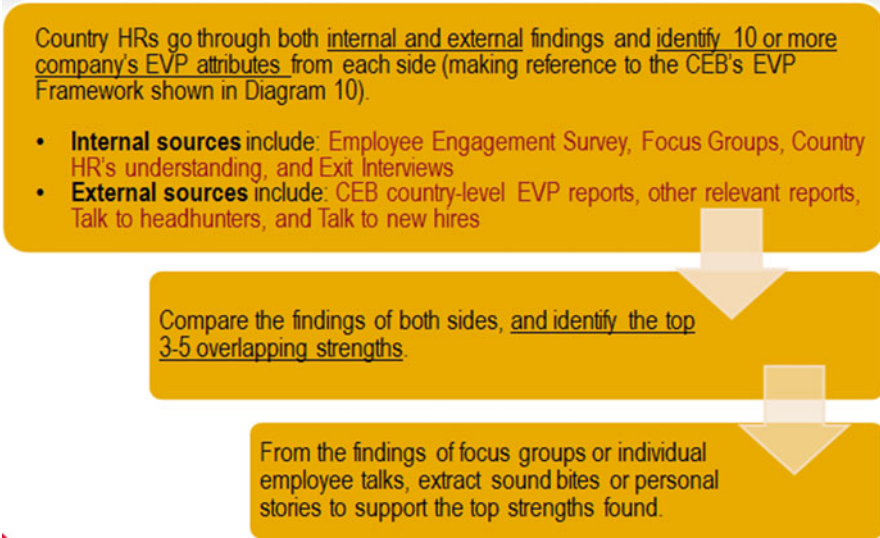


Diagram 11.9 An example of an in-house EVP-defining process

(a) *Attraction benefits*

When candidates in the labor market view an organization's EVP as attractive, the organization can:

- Reduce the compensation premium needed to hire these employees by 50 %
- Reach 50 % deeper into the labor market to attract passive candidates

(b) *Retention benefits*

Organizations that effectively deliver on their EVP can:

- Decrease annual employee turnover by 69 %
- Increase new hire commitment by 29 %

11.5.5.1 Define Your Company's EVPs

If the situation does not allow you to hire a consultancy to lead you through the EVP identification process, you can consider leading the process with your own team. I would propose the following process (Diagram 11.9):

The above illustration is a simple method for a company to understand what it offers as an employer to prospective employees and existing staff. One point which is worth noting is that it is important to use a framework of EVP categories and attributes, which provides common terminology to summarize and categorize the findings of each source. CEB provides good reference on Framework of EVP categories and attributes (Diagram 11.10).

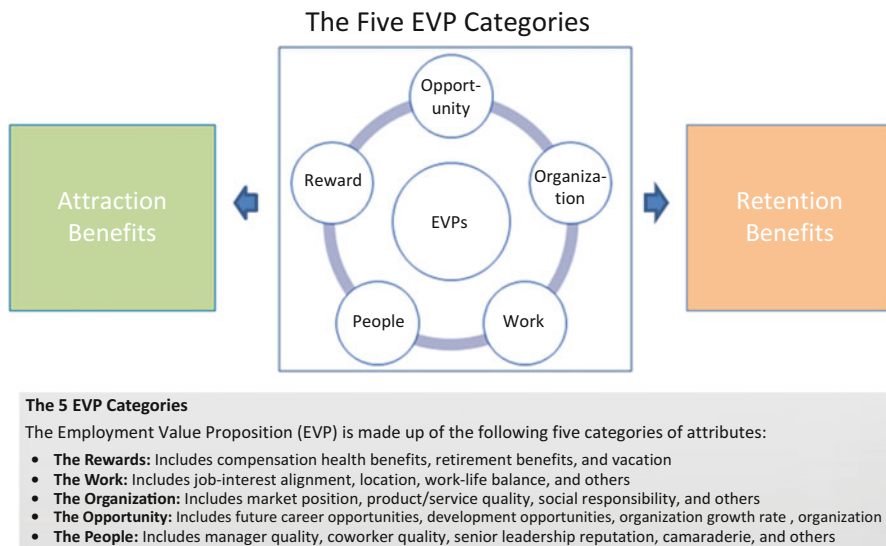


Diagram 11.10 CEB’s illustration on EVP categories

In the process, I mentioned “focus groups” – what I mean is free riding on existing focus groups and simply adding in a few critical EVP questions. For example, what do you like most about our company? What do you like least about the company? What change you would like to see in the company?

It is also important to collect employees’ stories and sound bites in a written format from “focus groups.” These can powerfully substantiate the EVPs and will become useful materials for the subsequent employer branding campaign. To make the participants feel comfortable, you should ensure what they shared will remain anonymous.

11.5.6 Craft EVPs

Often times, members from a company’s Human Resources department find it difficult to introduce its company to a prospect or a new hire. This is because they are not sure what words they should choose to describe those concepts and values, i.e., EVPs, even though they know the company’s strengths by understanding and intuition.

To help them, and every employee in the company, to articulate the company’s EVPs, IC can create a statement to describe each EVP. The choice of words is critical, and I believe this is exactly the area which IC is best at offering its strategic value.

Before launching the statement of EVPs, they should be tested with existing employees. Employees are the best people to verify if the statement accurately and

precisely describes their experience in the company. Equally important, the statement should be endorsed by senior leaders as they are the ones who steer the company and have a fair overview of the company. In fact, the senior leadership team should be engaged throughout the entire process starting from identification of EVPs to crafting the EVP statement.

Once the EVP statement is ready, IC should collaborate with its external communication teams, such as public relations or marketing, to formulate a branding campaign. The campaign should cover both the external and internal audience. The objective is to educate, sharpen, and renew the audiences' understanding of your company's employer brand.

11.5.7 Help Managers Become Effective Communicators

It is understandable that employees often turn to their immediate managers first if they have questions about the company or their issues at the workplace. However, very often, companies overlook managers' great potential to be an effective communicator.

To help managers develop themselves into good communicators, there are a few things we need to implement:

1. *Help managers understand communication is one of the competences a leader should possess.*

A lot of managers got promoted to their current positions possibly due to their technical capabilities rather than their people management skills. They may not be aware that they are lacking managerial skills, including communication competence, which are essential for their roles. Human Resources members can help them understand what is required from them as a manager.

2. *Provide a communication kit to support managers throughout the communication process of a corporate topic (e.g., key messages, presentation slides, Q&A, and communication tips).*

IC can prepare good-quality communication materials for managers. The materials can help managers build their confidence in communication.

3. *Establish a communication platform which consolidates all communication materials, communication tips, and reference materials to be prepared and constantly updated by IC.*

In my company, we set up a manager resources site on SharePoint dedicated to people managers. The objective is to get managers into the habit of visiting the platform to collect information to convey the company's important topics down to their team members.

4. *Provide communication training to equip managers with theories and techniques.*

IC can conduct communication training for people managers. Personally, I believe face-to-face classroom training is the most effective; however, if budget

and trainers' bandwidth do not allow, designing an interactive online training module for people managers is another good option as they can take the training at their own pace.

5. *Assess managers' communication effectiveness through annual employees' evaluation or a 360-degree review and link it to their performance review.*

A manager's team members will be the best people to have a say in how their manager performed as a leader. To make the evaluation more meaningful and motivational, the rating should be included in the managers' annual performance evaluation. In other words, how a manager performed in communication will be linked to their bonus payout.

11.6 Most Common Internal Communication Platforms or Vehicles

As I have introduced the important roles IC plays, below I share the commonly used platforms or vehicles:

1. *Town hall employee meeting:* All employees are invited to attend the meeting, and usually the topics presented at the meeting are important, influential, and enterprise wide.
2. *Global conference call/Web conference:* When a physical meeting is not possible, especially when participants are across the globe, companies can make use of technology to conduct virtual meetings.
3. *Casual chat with leaders:* Another way for leaders to communicate with employees is through a more casual setting to get more direct and authentic feedback. In my company, we have "breakfast with our leaders" and "straight talk."
4. *Email:* Though email seems ordinary, it is still one of the most common communication vehicles.
5. *Intranet:* Same as email, it is one common platform most companies use.
6. *Social media platform:* Employees usually are more open when they are in an informal environment. One of the social media platforms for corporate use is Yammer. Its layout and functions are similar to those of Facebook. Employees and leaders can share their voices through this casual and interactive platform. Users can form groups to gather for like-minded discussion. I believe this platform is more useful when a company needs to lobby for: a value which the company wants to foster, a change it wants to lead, or a topic on which it wants to collect feedback from employees.
7. *Road show:* Conduct exhibitions or workshops across countries. I once worked for a company which invested in a big road show around the world to educate employees on the company's innovation strength. At the road show, the company displayed to us the key innovative inventions, products it put into the market, and its key clients. This was definitely one of the best activities which made me take pride in the company.

11.7 Internal Communication Deserves More Awareness in Asia Pacific

IC used to be seen as a tactical and low-value function. Its value and strategic roles seem to be underestimated and not fully understood especially in Asia Pacific. As the function continues to evolve, IC starts to gain more weight and respect in corporate functions. More and more companies have started to see the impact that IC can make on the company's performance and its value in reducing costs on recruiting and retaining talented employees. I hope this paper can give readers a better overview of how a company can leverage IC to drive business performance and recognize the values IC brings to an organization.

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