



How COVID changed the face of internal comms

We all know that COVID has had a huge impact globally and these changes have trickled down to everything we do. Internal communications included. Below are five of the most noteworthy changes we have seen in internal communications as a result of the pandemic.

1) Digital transformation

The digital transformation has been a long time coming. Before COVID, organisations were adopting technology to support with internal communications but the arrival of COVID fast tracked many of these. The urgency of keeping people updated reached levels never before felt and as such, many organisations, including the NHS, made very swift procurement decisions.



2) Greater emphasis on leadership

Aside from fast and reactive decisions being made at the time, COVID has also changed a lot of opinions and expectations for the long term. For example, during COVID senior leaders became much more visible. They were asked to lead their organisation and communicate that leadership. They were the ones communicating vital messages and this transparent approach was well received. There is now an expectation, and desire, for this to continue.



3) More focus on wellbeing

The pandemic also saw the physical and mental health of our staff feature much more highly in our internal communications, especially within the NHS. Throughout COVID there was a huge focus on staff wellbeing and this is continuing today.

4) Greater awareness of societal impact

As our mindsets shifted throughout the pandemic and internal communications became more focused on our society as a whole, staff are viewing their organisation in a new light. They are considering wider social, economic and environmental factors. Whether it is how an organisation is going to respond to the COP26 agreement or how it supports employee burnout. Staff are now putting a greater expectation on their employer to respond to these societal issues. This is evidenced in a recent [Edelman report](#) which found that 73% of communication professionals say that social issues have shifted their communications agenda.



5) Increased priority for internal comms

Internal communications were forced to change during the pandemic but many of those changes have seen a positive outcome. Staff have liked the changes and leaders have recognised the value in open, honest and consistent communications. As such, many senior leaders are now putting a greater focus on internal communications. A report by [Gallagher](#) evidenced this with two thirds of internal communication professionals stating that their level of influence increased during 2020.



An additional challenge only relevant to the NHS

On top of all of the changes above, internal communicators within the NHS are also adjusting to requirements to communicate in a different way.

Changes in the NHS Digital policies designed to protect the NHS Digital system no longer allow the use of external email platforms. That is because these providers use spoofed emails and these are now banned. As a result, any spoofed emails sent will not get through to the intended recipient.

While there are solutions to this (which are listed below), this is another dynamic that NHS internal communicators are having to contend with during a period of enormous change.

A time for positive change

Whilst there is a lot of change to adjust to, this is a period of great opportunity for internal communicators in the NHS. The profile of Internal communications has been raised so now is the time to adopt the positive changes and further evidence the value of internal comms.

The rest of this guide will help you maximise the opportunity by identifying the most effective ways to communicate with staff, how to write communications that resonate, how to reduce inefficiencies within your team and how to build an effective strategy.





The best way to communicate with NHS staff

There are of course many channels to communicate with your staff; team briefings, newsletters, employee engagement platforms, intranets, messaging platforms and social media channels to name but a few. But email is by far the most common channel used within the NHS, and in fact wider business world. The internal comms report by [Gallagher](#) found that in 2021 nearly every organisation surveyed used email to communicate internally.

With email looking set to stay as a major communication channel lets address how to overcome the non-spoofing challenge NHS internal communicators are facing.

The first option is to use Outlook to send all email communications. This will get the emails to your recipients but there are two potential challenges:

- a) You will have no data on how effective each communication is. While it is common for internal communicators to not measure the effectiveness of each communication (our study found that [48% of organisations don't have these insights](#)); that doesn't necessarily make it the right option! Without data you cannot see how many people have engaged with your communication, you cannot see which links they clicked on, and more importantly, you cannot make informed improvements to better engage with your staff.
- b) The other potential issue is the time in which it will take to circulate your message. Outlook is limited to send 30 emails a minute. If you have a team of 5,000, that will take 2 hours and 36 minutes to reach everybody. For urgent comms, or for NHS organisations with a big employee count, that may be unacceptable.

The second option is to use a specialist email provider such as [NewZapp Trusted Delivery](#) to send your internal emails. With this solution you can guarantee your internal emails will reach their recipients and they will do so much faster. (Trusted Delivery will send anywhere between 100 and 400 emails per minute.)

The one downside of a solution such as this is that you need to pay for it! But, in return you guarantee the delivery of your emails, get them sent significantly faster and receive analytics that give you valuable insight to inform your internal communications strategy.

Beyond the methods you use to distribute your emails, there are many other things you can do to ensure you deliver an effective internal communications strategy. The rest of the report discusses these.



How to ensure your internal communications resonate

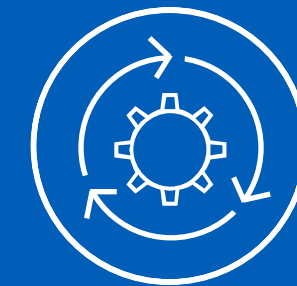
As an internal communicator in the NHS you have a tough challenge. You have a highly dispersed workforce, many of whom are overstretched so capturing their attention will take a bit more effort. Below are our five tips to help ensure your communications resonate.



Listen to your staff

If you feel there is room for improvement in your internal comms the first port of call will be to ask the opinion of those who receive your communications. What do they like? What do they lack? How frequently do they want to receive information? What ideas do they have? There is nothing more engaging than being asked for your opinion and then seeing your ideas come to fruition.

You can gather this feedback either in person by asking people (but just make sure you ask a good cross-section of staff so that you don't get skewed results) or through a staff survey.

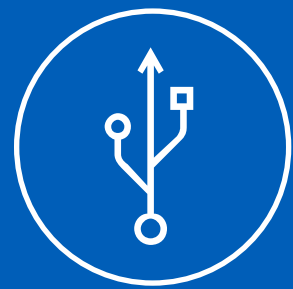


Be consistent

Consistency takes two avenues – the frequency of your communications and your core messages.

First let's look at frequency. As humans we naturally adopt habits and routines. By sending specific internal communications at the same time, it will become habit for your staff to check their email at the set time. It's a small change that can make a big difference.

The second consideration is how you portray your communication strategy. All of your messages need to link with the goals in your strategy and the wider corporate values and goals. Consistently reconfirming these in subtle ways will help to cement them in people's minds. This is particularly relevant during periods of change because it reiterates the purpose of each decision.



Consider different formats

We all digest information in different ways so it is worth considering alternative ways to get your message across. For example, did you know that 75% of employees are more likely to watch a video than read an email or text? Videos can be particularly useful when sharing a message from senior leadership because it puts a face to the words.

Once upon a time there would have been an expectation for these videos to be professionally produced and very polished, but today we are much more familiar with 'selfie' videos. These simply-shot videos are often easier to relate to and more appealing because they portray more of the individual's personality.

But if you don't have the means, or a willing party to be in front of the camera, there are other formats you can consider. Podcasts are a brilliant alternative to video which don't feel as daunting to record. You can also consider displaying your usual information in a different way. For example, could you include a number of updates all in one newsletter, or add imagery to a message, or convey information in an infographic?

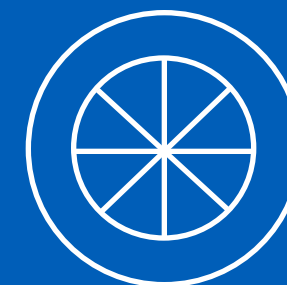
Sometimes simple changes like adding bullet points or a key notes section can make all the difference. By giving your internal communications a different look you could capture the attention of people who haven't previously engaged with your communications.



Make them personal

Communications that mean something to someone are the ones that resonate. We are people communicating with people so adding personality to our communications can make a real difference.

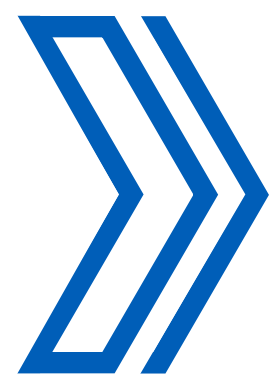
If you don't already have a tone of voice guide consider creating one. This will help ensure there is the right balance of personality and professionalism. If you write communications on behalf of others you may also want to consider creating mini tone of voice profiles for those individuals. That way your communications will fit with their personality and subtly differ from one another, helping your staff connect with each message.



Segment effectively

Research by [SaneBox](#) found that only 38% of the average inbox contains important, relevant emails. As a result, we have all become very good at hitting the delete button! We need to ensure internal communications don't follow the same fate of forever moving to the psychological junk folder.

One quick and effective way of preventing this from happening is to segment more accurately. With every communication you send consider if it will be of interest to all the recipients. If it won't, you may need to rethink your segmentation groups. When we are bombarded with so much information, taking time to better segment is a very wise use of time.



Removing inefficiencies within internal comms teams

Time, limited budgets, limited resources, staff changes and system limitations all contribute to inefficiencies. A report from [NHS Providers](#) puts this into perspective. It found that from the 130 Trusts interviewed, 88% had concerns over capacity, skill mix and resources.

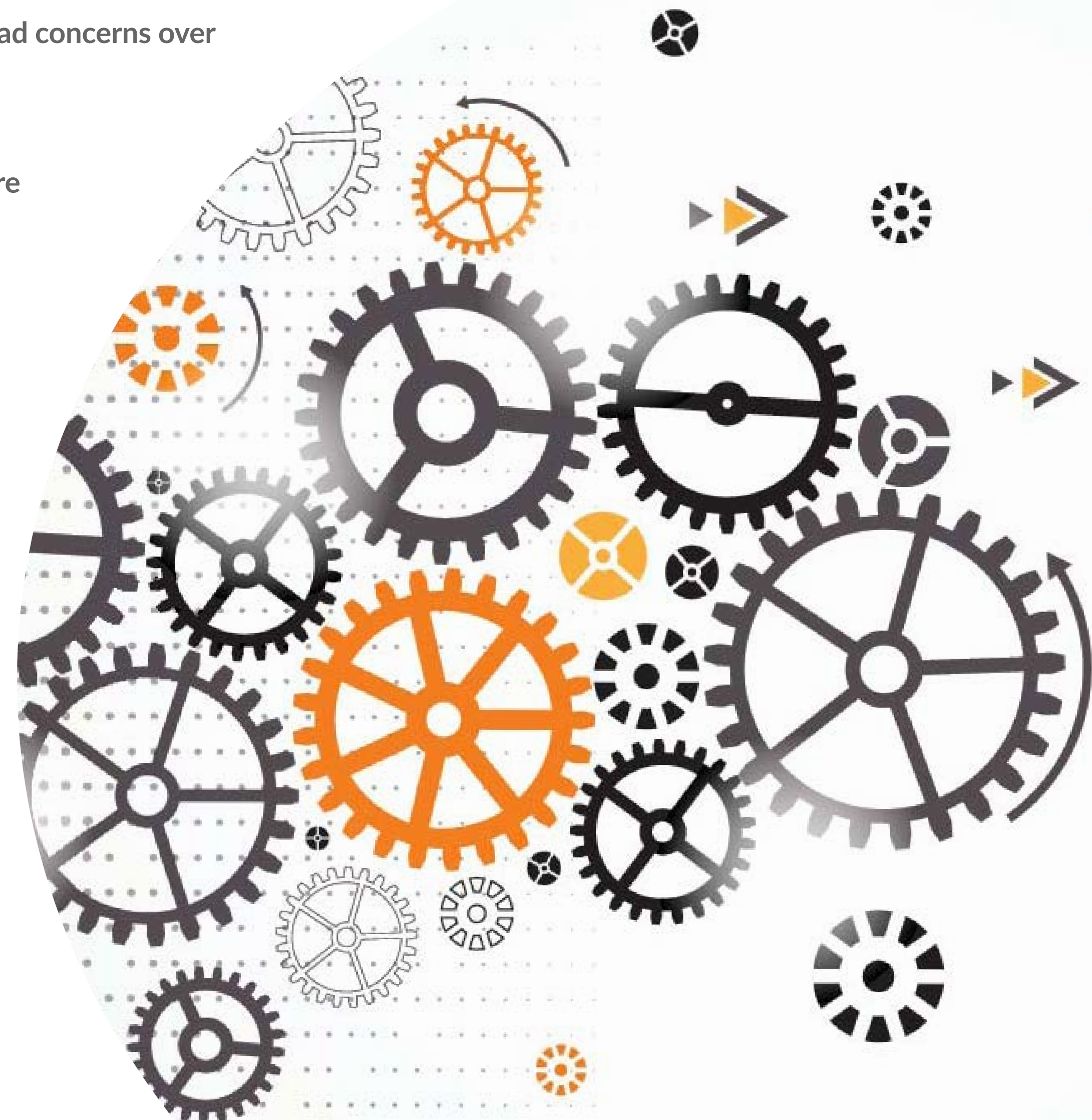
With so many pressures and challenges to contend with, it is important that internal comms teams are as efficient as they can be. Below are our top five tips for cutting out inefficiencies.

1. Ensure everyone understands their role

On average, [46% of organisations have more than 5 people responsible for internal communications](#). With so many fingers in the pie at any given time maintaining efficiencies can be very difficult. Lines can be blurred causing delays, duplication and frustration.

By ensuring everyone knows exactly what their role is and what is expected of them you will be able to remove many of these inefficiencies. Clarifying roles may entail a review of job descriptions but often a less formal session will suffice. Take to that session an overview of what needs to be done, including future strategies, and ask your team to consider their strengths. Then you can distribute each task to the person best suited to manage it.

If you have multiple people in your team, you may also want to consider using some sort of job planning tool. This will list everything everyone is working on and show progress on each for optimum transparency.



2. Remove silos

The larger your team the more likely you will suffer from silos in which one individual holds sole responsibility for a specific task. In this situation, sickness or other priorities can cause significant inefficiencies and present a real risk to the department.

The job planning tools mentioned in point 1 will help to alleviate these but, where possible, also ensure at least two people are trained and knowledgeable in any given tasks.

There are also silos outside of your team to consider. If you are reliant upon other teams or organisations to support you consider the working relationships you have with them. For example, do you rely upon your IT team or an external agency? If so, do you ever have to wait unexpectedly for them? If you do, it would be worth reviewing your processes and potentially creating an SLA (Service Level Agreement) to establish realistic expectations and to then ensure they are always met.

3. Ensure buy-in from senior leaders

The NewZapp Trusted Delivery [State of Internal Comms Report](#) found that 17% of internal communicators state a lack of leadership as their greatest challenge. Without leaders advocating your internal communications you will have an uphill battle.

If you feel this is lacking it may be worth taking things back to basics and running a mini campaign just for your leadership team. Within that campaign explain your purpose and use some statistics that evidence the value of what you do. Ideally these statistics will evidence ROI to truly emphasise the value. If you need to, use statistics from outside your organisation, whether from other NHS authorities or the wider corporate world. The more they understand how internal communications supports them and the wider organisation, the more they will want to be involved. With that involvement will come greater encouragement for staff to connect with what you do.

4. Instill clear processes

For you to maintain efficiencies you need to ensure you have processes that run smoothly and are known by everyone. This includes those within your team but also those outside. If someone comes to you and asks for a communication to be sent they need to know what the process is to do so. That process needs to include what information you require, the timescales in which you will respond and the expectations of that person (i.e. approval processes).

With these processes clear for everyone to see it should also help you ensure you receive transparent and valuable information to be used in your internal communications.

5. Ensure your systems are fit for purpose

Legacy systems or tools that aren't fit for purpose are an enormous strain on resources. A [OnePoll study](#) found that just outdated technology alone results in the average employee wasting 26 minutes every single day.

We would recommend you review all your processes and systems to unearth what inefficiencies you have. You can then decide how best to tackle them. These inefficiencies will vary from carrying out tasks manually because the digital solution is too cumbersome to populating information in two separate systems because they don't integrate. But no matter what they are, and how big or small they are, they are an opportunity to improve.

You may need to encourage your team to take a step back when considering your efficiencies. Often inefficiencies are so engrained in day-to-day work that people forget there could be a better way of doing things. A session with everyone in a room together, away from their screens should do the trick.

Of course, this review may also uncover positive findings such as an opportunity to consolidate systems and save money. Either way, get your entire team involved and challenge the status quo.





How to create an effective internal communications strategy

If you are about to create your internal communications strategy here are the six considerations to bear in mind. These are the backbone of every internal comms strategy and will help ensure you stay focused and cover all bases.



Consider your current situation

Your first task is to review what your current situation is. Who do you communicate with? How do you communicate with them? What do you communicate? How successful have those communications been? What are the needs of your staff and have those needs been met? What challenges have you faced? What problems are you experiencing?

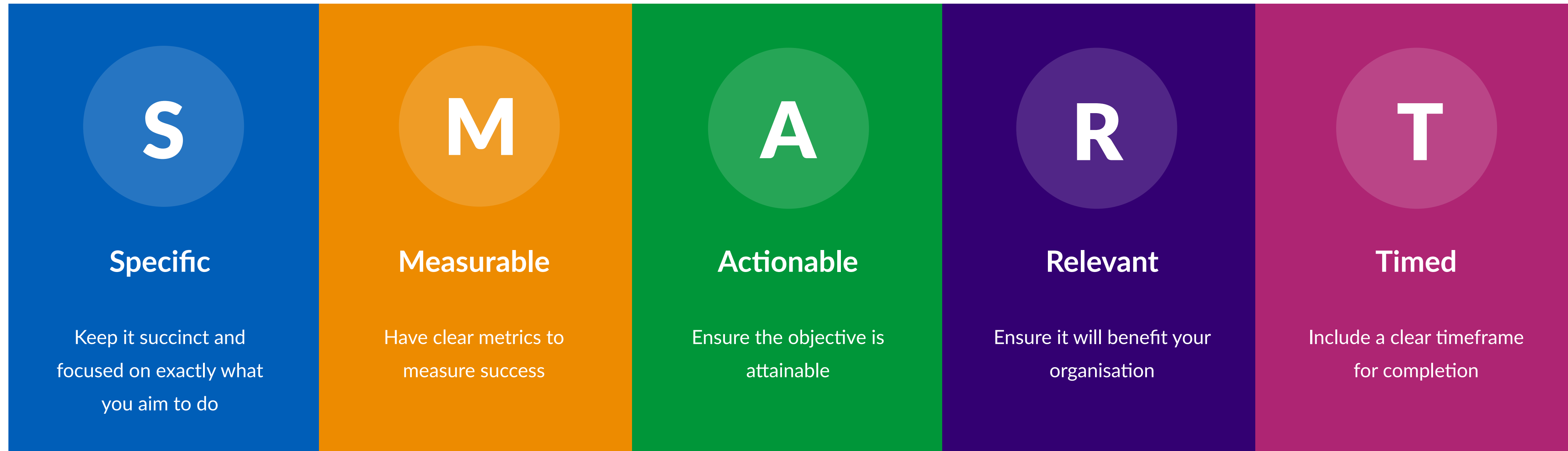
In essence, collect as much information as possible because this will help you to identify how you can improve your strategy. While you want to know what has worked well, at this stage, the greatest value will come from insights that highlight what hasn't worked well.





Consider the purpose of your communications

What are your objectives? They can be as big or small as you need them to be. For example, it may be your objective to educate staff of an organisational change, or you may want to increase engagement with your communications by 50%. The scale of the objective doesn't matter, but what is important is to ensure every objective meets the SMART criteria.



It is fine to have multiple objectives (as long as they are all SMART). But where possible, keep your objectives as succinct as possible. The rest of your strategy will go into a lot more detail so the more concise your objectives can be, the more focused the rest of your strategy will be.

The most important rule to remember at this stage is: if it can't be measured, it's not a suitable objective.



Consider your audience

What do you know about the staff you are communicating with? Are they already segmented effectively, or could you do this better?

If you aren't confident in answering the questions above, you may need to explore the answers further. A survey, whether verbal or written, could help you understand more about your staff. While this takes time, it's a worthwhile research exercise because the better you understand your staff the more targeted and effective your communications will be.

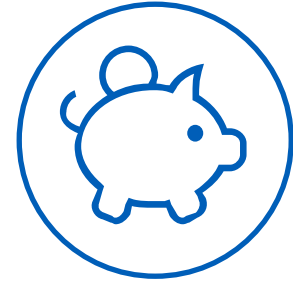
Your question set should include information about them as people rather than just them as staff. Questions such as 'what do you consider to be a good work/life balance' and 'how do you best consume information' are great examples of this.

With this information you can do two things:

Firstly, review your existing segments. Is there a better way to categorise your staff? Or a more refined way? Do you have enough categories? Do you have too many? To answer these questions consider the objectives of your internal comms strategy and the type of communications you will be sending. If your segmentation options enable you to communicate your core messages to those who need them, and only those who need them, you have successfully segmented your staff.

Secondly, you can build audience personas. Your audience personas will be fictional people – each of whom represent an average person in each of your segments. Your personas will then act as a reference tool every time you write a communication for that audience. If you think the communication you've written will resonate with the person you've created then the chances are it will meet the needs of your target employees.

To get the most out of your personas ensure they have an equal balance of professional and personal information. This is where the audience research will come into its own. By including information such as where they live, their age, what they do for a living, what they do outside of work, their challenges, and their frustrations, you will have a very relatable persona. The more real the persona feels, the easier it will be to write communications that connect with each group.



Consider your budget

Unsurprisingly, the [NHS Providers Report](#) cited budget as the biggest challenge for NHS communicators with many respondents expressing concerns that shrinking budgets will leave them short of specialist expertise and increase reputational risk.

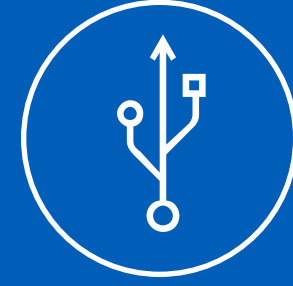
But as difficult as it is, juggling expectations vs budget is an essential part of an NHS internal comms strategy.

The first question to cover off is whether you have an opportunity to expand upon what has previously been done. Or do you need to curb spending further?

Whatever the answer, your budget needs to be stretched for all its worth! Review how the budget has been previously spent and how effective that expenditure was. If you did things differently, could you make efficiency savings?

Speak to your peers. Do they have any recommendations for how best to achieve your objectives? This would be particularly useful if your strategy looks different this year and is likely to require additional resource and/or training.

While budget is often the greatest challenge, by addressing the financial cost of your strategy at this point, you can schedule enough time to build a business case for additional budget or adjust your plans to better meet budgetary limitations.



Consider your channels/tools

How are you going to engage with your staff?

With your objectives in mind, first consider what you will be communicating: announcements, news, objectives, vision, values, events, process changes, people changes, crisis communications, success stories?

Then, think of how you will reach your segments. Will email suffice or do you need to utilise other channels too? These could vary from an employee engagement platform to face-to-face meetings.

By bringing this information together you will start to map out the beginning of your communication plan. At this stage it doesn't need to be detailed, but it will give you a head start to the tactical planning that will follow.

The final point to consider is the tools your internal team use. When delivering your communications via your chosen channels are there any additional tools your team require such as databases or design software? If you already have systems and processes in place do they all work effectively? If there are better ways to complete these tactics now is the time to review them. Particularly because many of them could hold consolidation opportunities.



Consider how you will measure your performance

A huge point and an absolutely crucial one. Without measuring your activities you cannot hone and improve your strategy, and you cannot evidence the value of your internal comms efforts.

By following the SMART criteria each of the objectives you have set will be measurable so now it is a case of identifying the most suitable measure for each. Below we have outlined the 10 most common methods of measuring internal comms, including the pros and cons of each.

1) Open rates

Open rates show you how many people have opened your email.

Pros	Cons
You will know what proportion of people have opened the email.	You will not know if these people have actually read your email.
Open rates can be a good indication to the effectiveness of your subject line.	Some systems will include multiple opens within the open rate tally (for example, one person could have opened your message 20 times and that will still be included).

2) Click rates

Showing you the number of staff who have clicked a link in your email.

Pros	Cons
A useful way to understand what the most engaging parts of your email are.	Not all emails will include links so this measure cannot always be used.
	There are click rates and click to open rates, both of which will generate very different statistics so consistency will be essential for this to be an accurate measure.

3) Email hotspots

A heatmap that shows you the areas of the email that your staff have clicked most.

Pros	Cons
A useful add-on to email clicks because it shows which parts of the email staff focused on most. For example, if they click on a link in an email signature it suggests they are curious about who you are rather than the message you sent.	Less useful as a standalone statistic because it doesn't provide enough context.

5) Log in rates

If you have a system your staff access to digest information, such as a staff app or intranet, you can monitor how often staff access that system.

Pros	Cons
You will understand whether those systems are considered valuable to your staff.	Unless you explore further, you will have no information about what they have read once logged in.
Most systems will show the time and day of access helping you identify the best time to send communications.	

4) Page visits

A metric used within modern intranet platforms; a page visit shows the most popular pages of content on your intranet.

Pros	Cons
Effective way to understand what content staff are reading.	To get the greatest value you would need to merge this statistic with others such as 'time on page' to understand the bigger picture.
Most platforms will show unique visits in addition to the total so you can accurately see the number of individuals that visited the page.	

6) Device usage

An overview of the device staff use to read your communications.

Pros	Cons
Very helpful to understand how your staff digest your communications.	It may be difficult to drill down into different teams/segments limiting what you can do with this information.
Understanding staff usage will help you adjust how you write, i.e. if the majority of staff use a mobile, your communications can become much more concise.	

7) Staff feedback

Directly asking staff to give their opinion about a specific subject. Usually carried out by survey or face-to-face in focus groups.

Pros	Cons
This method goes beyond hard data giving you a good understanding of staff sentiment.	It can be time consuming to collect this level of data.
With control over the question-set you can focus on very specific areas if you need to.	

9) Staff turnover rates

A measure of how many people have left the organisation at any given time.

Pros	Cons
An easy way to monitor overall engagement.	This statistic will not be a direct representation of your internal comms efforts but will provide valuable insight on overall staff engagement.
Particularly valuable in evidencing the ROI of internal comms when used as a benchmark.	

8) Employee Net Promoter Score (eNPS)

The eNPS is a method to capture your employee engagement rate. Unlike the staff feedback above, this is achieved via a one question survey.

Pros	Cons
A simple way to understand staff sentiment.	Internal comms is not the only factor to influence employee engagement so the eNPS cannot be considered a direct representation of internal comms success. But it is a good indication.
A very effective statistic to use as a benchmark.	

10) Exit interviews

A way to explore opinion at a deeper level – particularly if there are questions in the interview that relate specifically to internal communications.

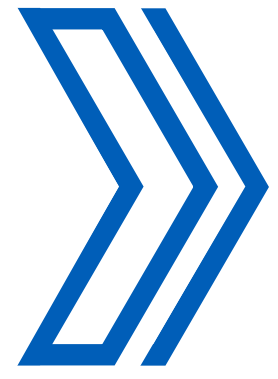
Pros	Cons
Valuable source of insight if questions relate to internal comms.	There may be bad feeling on departure which could influence opinion.

How you will measure your performance - conclusion

The metrics that you select will depend entirely on the objectives you have set. But, if you can use multiple metrics and blend both hard data and staff sentiment you will have a much greater level of insight.

Key takeaway: When measuring the success of your internal comms an important aspect is the frequency in which you record these metrics. There is no right or wrong cadence; they just need to be consistent. Once you have decided on your timescales, stick to them. Otherwise, you cannot benchmark effectively. Without solid benchmarks you cannot implement any tests and that will hamper any improvement efforts.





Developing your internal comms strategy into a tactical plan

With these five points covered off you now know what you need to achieve, who you are targeting, the cost associated with what you need to achieve, how you will reach your target audience and how you will measure what you do. Now you can build your tactical communication plan.

You started to pull this together when considering the channels you'd use in the previous section (page 14). Now you can expand on what you have. Here's the process we'd use to put an internal communication plan together:

1. Make a list of the communication tasks you need to complete.
2. Assign timescales to those tasks, i.e. at which point during the year will they need to be completed.
3. Include the objective of each communication task to keep focus.
4. Identify which groups of staff will receive each communication.
5. Assign the channels that will be most suitable for that communication.
6. Establish who will be responsible for delivering each communication.
7. List what measure will be used to monitor the success of the communication.
8. Build contingencies to accommodate potential delays. Your contingency can also be used for any reactive communications that will need to be sent throughout the year.

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Conclusion

As an internal communicator in the NHS you are part of an internal comms revolution. While the pandemic brought many challenges it has also presented a huge opportunity. Internal comms is starting to get the recognition it has long deserved so now is the time to increase this recognition and bring communications to the forefront of agendas.

Now is the time to be putting all the ducks in a row. To find the right way to communicate with staff and to build a solid strategy that will deliver transparent, valuable communications.

Paramount to this is data. With data you can identify failings, implement improvements and evidence how effective internal comms is. Without data, you will be working in the dark and the lack of clarity will result in internal communications falling back into the shadows.

If you would like help raising the profile of your internal communications, [get in touch](#). We can show you how NewZapp Trusted Delivery can help you quickly deliver visually appealing emails with valuable internal comms metrics.

About Trusted Delivery

NewZapp Trusted Delivery is an email communication platform that will deliver all your internal emails every single time.

No spoofing issues. No junk folders. No warnings of external emails.

We are the only email service provider able to guarantee delivery that is fully compatible with the NHS Digital Governance and Information Security Management policies.

Discover how NewZapp Trusted Delivery can help to improve the working lives of your employees by getting in touch:

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