



University Hospital Plymouth's guide to delivering effective NHS internal communications





Introduction

As an internal communicator in the NHS you have a tough challenge.

You have a highly dispersed workforce of over 9,000 staff, many of whom are overstretched. Add to this the fact that the national NHS Survey shows that Plymouth University Hospital has an engagement score just below the national average, and the scale of your challenge is only too apparent.

But it's not all doom and gloom. The NHS is a national treasure and the people that work in the NHS do so because they want to make a difference. UHP staff are NHS ambassadors and you have the ability to use internal communications to harness their passion and unite them as a team.

This guide explores:

- The ways you can create more impactful internal communications
- How to increase efficiency within your team
- Top tips for building your internal communications strategy



How to ensure your internal communications resonate

Your internal communications really need to capture attention and resonate if they are to bring your Trust together to achieve your shared goals. Here are 5 top tips to help you create more engaging internal communications.



Listen to your staff

There is nothing more engaging than being asked for your opinion and then seeing your ideas come to fruition. By gathering the opinions of your staff you will be able to adjust your strategy to better meet their needs. However, with over 9,000 staff that is a lot of opinions!

Rather than a Trust-wide survey we recommend speaking to a cross section of your staff - whether face-to-face or via a survey. What do they like? What do they lack? How frequently do they want to receive information? What ideas do they have?

BUT... ensure this listening exercise is well communicated. You need the participants to fully understand the purpose of their contribution, line managers to be onboard, and staff to know that they are being represented appropriately. You also need to be confident that the results of your research can be utilised effectively. No one wants to provide feedback that falls on deaf ears.

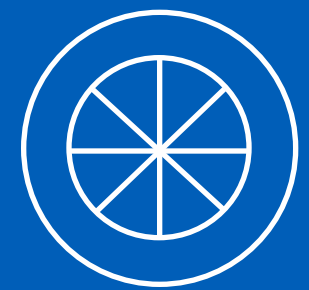


Make them personal

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.

Is your current tone of voice guide relevant and appropriate? If it isn't, consider updating it. You want to find the right balance of personable and professional and, if you write communications on behalf of others, you may also want to create mini tone of voice profiles. That way your communications will fit with their personality and subtly differ from one another, helping your staff connect with each message.

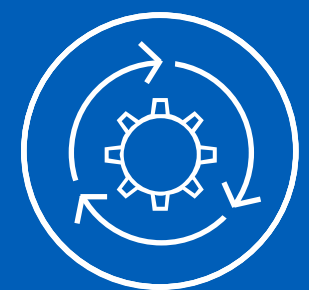
Once you have these, make sure you are utilising the personalisation options in your email platform. Addressing the email to a named person is the starting point but consider other ways of using personalisation too. For example, emails containing personalisation in the subject line are 22% more likely to be opened.



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. Research shows that investing time into effective segmentation results in 50% higher click through rates. 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.

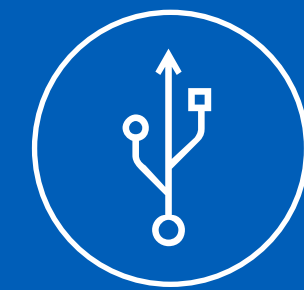


Be consistent

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 Trust's values. Consistently reconfirming these in subtle ways will help to cement them in people's minds. This is particularly relevant during periods of change.



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.



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 your communications team is as efficient as it can be. Below are five top tips for cutting out inefficiencies.

1. Ensure everyone understands their role

Internal communication touches many people - the creators, the informants, the approvers, the opinion givers. The more people involved, and the greater the hierarchy, the more likely it is for delays, duplications and frustrations to manifest.

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. Within your own team ensure everyone understands what is required of them and how their contribution fits into the wider internal comms picture. If you have multiple people handling the same projects you may want to consider using some sort of job planning tool so everyone can see progress and has complete transparency.

For the people outside your team such as those who request internal comms, those who provide information, those who approve and those who give feedback - each of these individuals/groups also need to understand their role. For example, do those requesting your help know how you evaluate the priority of their request? Do those who need to sign off what you do have a regular time slot to do so? Do those who provide feedback on your internal communications know what format to provide that feedback so you can best utilise it?

Defining these boundaries and processes is really important if you are to maximise efficiency.



2. Remove silos

Do any of your team members hold sole responsibility for a specific task? In this situation, sickness or other priorities can cause significant inefficiencies. The job planning tools mentioned in point 1 will help to alleviate these. As will taking the time to ensure a second person is trained and knowledgeable in that task.

But there are also silos outside of your team to consider. If you are reliant upon other teams, or external agencies, to support you, consider the working relationships you have with them. This could be an IT or HR team, a design agency or an NHS partner. If you experience delays or inefficiencies it will be worth reviewing your processes with them. If appropriate, you may want to create an SLA (Service Level Agreement) to establish realistic expectations and implications if that service isn't 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.

It's easy to keep going with something when time is tight but it is worth reviewing your processes and systems regardless of any outcome. That way you can properly evaluate the effectiveness of what you have in place and establish the extent of any inefficiencies you find.

Encourage your team to contribute to this process because they will inevitably be absorbing the inefficiencies. But bear in mind that inefficiencies are often very engrained in day-to-day working life. 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.

Once you've established the inefficiencies you can then evaluate how damaging they are and decide how best to tackle them. But you can't improve if you don't know what can be improved!

It's also worth remembering that this review could uncover positive findings too, 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

To help simplify the creation of your internal communications strategy we've categorised everything into six sections. These become the backbone of your strategy helping to keep everyone focused.



Consider your current situation

Your first task is to review your current situation. 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.

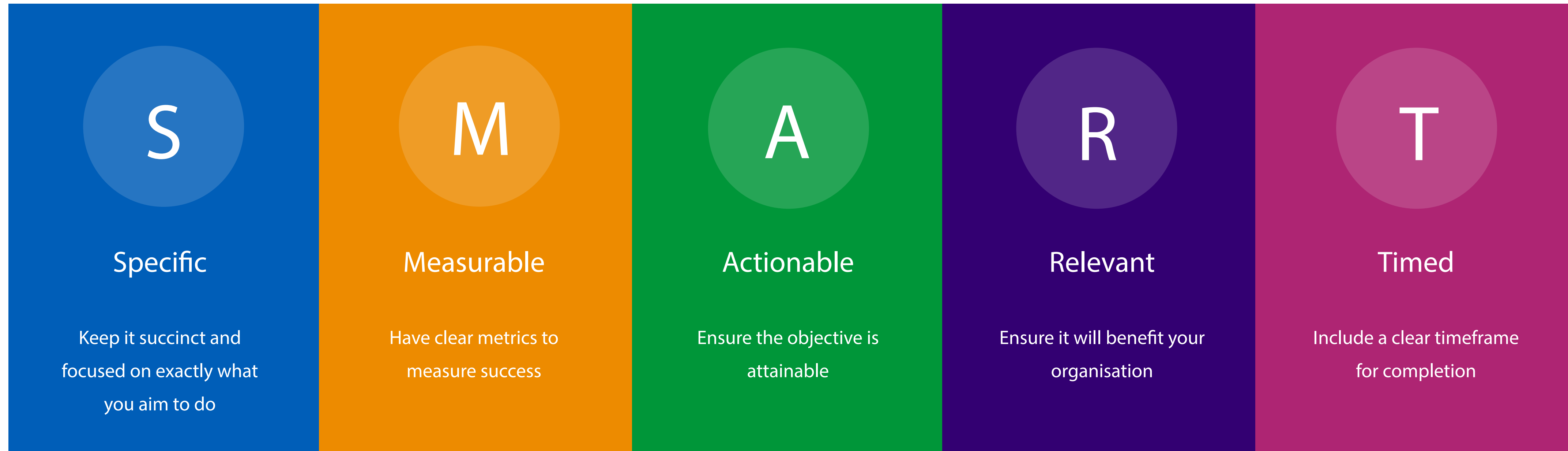


Employee



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.

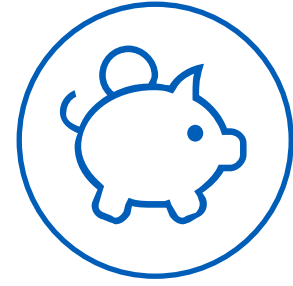
Your question set should include information about them as people rather than just them as staff. Questions such as 'what do you consider to be a good work/life balance' and 'how do you best consume information' are great examples of this.

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 the staff you are targeting.

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.

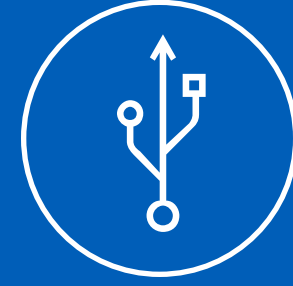
But as difficult as it is, juggling expectations vs budget is an essential part of an NHS internal comms strategy.

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 each segment. 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(s) 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 staff 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

Show 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.	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.

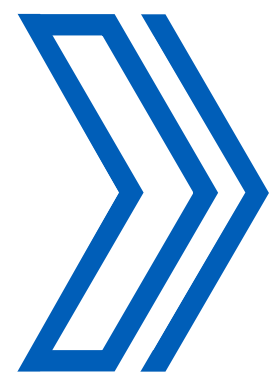
Pros	Cons
Valuable source of insight if questions relate to internal comms.	There may be bad feeling on departure which could influence opinion.

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; it just needs 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

Once your strategy is in place you 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. 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.

Download our free Internal Communications
Content Plan template

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Conclusion

There's no point sugar coating this - as an NHS internal communicator you have a tough gig!

Over 9,000 staff to communicate with, overworked staff with dented morale and limited budgets. But you're in this job because you want to make a difference.

If you just focus on one thing after reading this report make it data. It's the one factor that will make the greatest difference because improvement is only possible when we learn. Without data you are working blind. You cannot identify improvements or evidence how effective your internal comms are.

By measuring what you do, you can make a difference.

About Trusted Delivery

NewZapp Trusted Delivery is an internal email communication solution purely for NHS Trusts and Partners.

- Our intuitive email editor enables you to create eye catching emails that stand out from the crowd.
- Our segmentation feature helps you create groups to ensure your staff only receive relevant communications.
- Our engagement stats show data for each email so you can make informed decisions that continually improve your internal communications.

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

