Your Journey to a Successful Employee Communications App

8 steps to follow to revolutionise your app

Step 1
Talk to Your Staff

Step 2
Your Content

Step 3
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thrive

eBook
Employee Communications

By Ian McCutcheon
Client Success Manager

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Setting the scene

When it comes to introducing an employee communications app and platform to your organisation you can give yourself the biggest chance of success by embarking on a journey of planning, getting the right people involved, reflecting on your business' culture, and most importantly – listening to the needs of your employees.

Because we have a wealth of experience in helping our clients to revolutionise their employee communications, we've put this plan together based on what works.

Whether you're a seasoned digital professional, or making your first steps in the world of digital communications, following these steps will ensure that your employee communications app doesn't just launch well, but is sustainable and makes a real impact on your organisation.

Step 1 –
The Journey begins
– Speak with your teams

Before you begin your journey, you will want to be clear about why you are investing in an employee communications app in the first instance. Your app shouldn't just solve a problem for you as an Internal Communications or HR professional – it should solve problems for your employees also.

Speaking with your teams before you start to plan content reaps great benefits. Conversations will highlight to your employees that their opinions matter and are important, this creates a grassroots buzz among employees, and pays dividends later, when you want to increase the number of employees using and engaging with your app and content.

When speaking with your employees, you should ask them what information they would make use of in an employee app, and then you can figure out if it is possible to share this. Some people may ask for functionality that isn't feasible, but this exercise is about finding as many features and information as possible that your employees will find useful and be engaged in.

Tip!

Be open to discussing every idea without dismissing it immediately

Ask Questions & Actively Listen

Tips!

There are many ways to approach this stage of getting feedback from your employees. You can hold workshops and focus groups, or you can approach a cross-section of different employees for a brief chat.
We recommend that you don't carry out online surveys for this particular exercise. Getting out and about, and talking to people to get a true sense of what they would find useful in an app is crucial for its success.

One of the most common trends we hear from employees across all sectors, is that they get frustrated by finding things out 'on the grapevine' because they are on the shop-floor or they work remotely without access to email, or because their Team Leaders forget to mention it in the morning brief. When you are speaking with your teams, ask them questions about their frustrations, the repetitive tasks they have to do, and whether there are any particular types of information that they find themselves having a hard time finding.

Note: The answers to these questions will inform the next step, which is your content planning!

Let's Put Plans Into Action

Before you do anything else, and certainly before you start to plan your employee app content, get out there, get on the road and talk to your teams. These teams will most certainly be the people you will want to download and use your app, so it's key that you're listening to their needs from the beginning! If you get ideas and feedback from your staff about the types of content they'd like to see in their app, but you aren't sure how to make it happen, we'll be able to advise you on the best way to go about implementing it on our platform.

Quick Exercise!

Step 2 –
Plan Your Content

Now that you've spoken with and listened to your employees, and you have a good idea of what they would like to see, you can put those together with your own requirements to create a content plan.

Note: Every individual is different when it comes to planning. If you have a content management system already, we recommend that you don't rush straight to building content within it straight away.

We recommend drawing up the structure of the app. Choose what your 'top-level' sections are going to be, and what kinds of content are going to sit inside each of those.

Exercise 2 - Ask yourself two questions...

Now that you've got a list of sections that you want to include in your employee communications app, we have a second exercise for you:

Of each section that you have planned, ask yourself two questions:

Question 1. Does the existence of this section in the app either solve a problem for someone, or support the core reason why we need the app?

It's not about 'filling space'. It's important to reflect on the core reasons for your organisation needing an employee app in the first place, and on the feedback that you got from talking to your staff, to decide if there's real value in putting that information in your app.

Question 2. Why are our employees going to come here (to the app) to get this information?

This question will encourage you to reflect on the various comms channels already in use in your organisation. For example, you might already have an intranet that hosts various policies, documents and staff handbooks. If all of your staff are office-based and at a PC all day, then it's not likely that there's going to be much value in duplicating those documents in your app.
If, however, you have a portion of staff who are remote, deskless or on shop-floors and don't have any way to access your intranet – that would be a good reason for the duplication, to allow those staff access to the documents also.

Building a Rationale for Your Content

– The Message Palette

Here's an easy exercise that you can do for each of the 'sections' that you have planned for your app. Create a message palette using the below template. *(Credit to Fitzpatrick & Valskov (2014) Internal Communications: Manual for Practitioners).*

Essentially, you're posing a series of questions to get to the heart of what you're trying to achieve, and think about the usefulness of that content to the business, and to the employee using the app.

The message palette can help you to build a rationale for including a specific type of content in your app.

Why are we doing this and what result do we want?

Our Objective

What's the single compelling idea we want remembered?

The Master Takeaway

Who are they and what will shape their reactions?

The Target Audience

What outcomes do we need?

Comms Outcomes

Do	Feel	Know
What specific behaviours or actions do we need for this audience?	What beliefs or attitudes will help people do the actions we ask of them?	To shape the attitude of the auidence, what info will they need?

What are the benefits to the audience and the business?

Supporting Messages

| WSIC?	Rationale	What Changes?
Why should I care? What's the impact on individuals?	The case of change - factual and emotional	What changes practically and what stays the same?

How and when can the audience find out more?

Find out more

For example, see a completed palette below which builds an argument for including our Peer to Peer recognition feature in your app.

Your app is going to have its own identity, and it's likely to be sitting alongside other comms channels. Having a strong sense of 'what the app is for' and 'what the app is not for', is going to help you to decide what content is useful and provides value to your business and to your employees.
Now you've made a plan and you've reflected on it to trim the fat; you can start to build that content in Content Management System/platform.
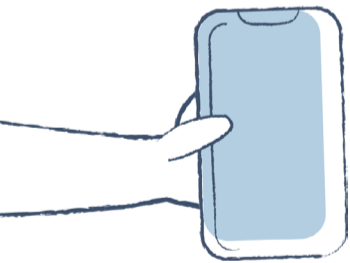
Why are we doing this and what result do we want?

To give staff a way to say thanks. To give visibility to the positive things going in the business. To make staff aware of our company values

What's the single compelling idea we want remembered?

That living our company values is noticed, recognised and valued

Who are they and what will shape their reactions?

All staff across all departments

What outcomes do we need?

Comms Outcomes

Do	Feel	Know
Act in a way that represents our core values as a business	Rewarded and appreciated when living our values	That the business will recognise great work and appreciate their actions

What are the benefits to the audience and the business?

Supporting Messages

WSIC?	Rationale	What Changes?
Managers encouraged to use recognition info in annual stagg reviews	Limited current visibility on these actions	Everyone now gets to know about what's going on

How and when can the audience find out more?

By downloading the app and viewing the recognition section. If someone is thanked they'll get a notification to tell them so

Step 3 –
Involve Stakeholders

Don't try do this alone!

Whether you're the only Internal Comms person in your organisation, or you have a giant Internal Comms team, you're still going to need key people across your business to get involved, and to take a stake in the app's promotion and success.

If we go back to Step 1 of our 'Steps to Success' plan "Talk to Your Staff" – if you have already completed this step, you have already engaged with a range of people, so this step is easy, because you've already taken the first step to getting these people on board.

You've listened to them, and you've taken what they had to say into consideration when planning your content at step two. Now it's time to get them involved in helping you to make your employee app a success.

You'll need stakeholders from various departments for a few reasons:
- Technical Input
- Senior Management Buy-In
- Creating 'Champions' to drive usage

Technical Input

It's always a good idea to involve the IT department in the process. If you want to have your own branded app available for your staff to download, your IT team will be able to give advice and guidance on what Apple and Google accounts your business already holds, what policies are in place that govern the distribution of apps for employees, and assist with integrating your Active Directory for logging in to the app.

If you are a Thrive client, your Client Success Manager will be happy to speak with your IT department about how we handle things like app distribution and logins, but don't wait until you need a decision made to get IT involved.

A 30-minute meeting early in the process with your IT department to make them aware of your plans and what you want to achieve, will go a long way and will help to clear any potential internal governance roadblocks.

Senior Management Buy-In

Bringing Senior Management along for the ride can help to make your life easier. These are often people with wide influence across your business, who can act as promoters for your app. Having members of the Senior Management Team behind you, promoting the app to employees tends to make people take notice a little more than they otherwise might!

One of the great things about your app is that it allows for direct communication. Senior Managers might be used to relying on cascade briefs – but with your app, you could think about having a dedicated section for them to post so that they can be in direct contact with your teams. This is a great way to boost engagement and show staff that those 'at the top' really care about how their employees feel.

Champions

We'll talk a lot more about this at Step Five of the app success journey, but pulling in people from across the business also allows you to start creating champions that you can rely on later. When your app launches and you tell your employees that it's now available for download, you'll need these champions right across the business to encourage their peers to download the app and to engage with the content.

Step 4 –
Focus Your Content
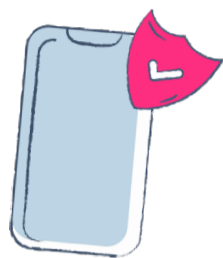
Now that you've planned your content and have started building it within the Content Management System, you can start to think about 'who sees what'.

If you are a Thrive customer, by default, any of the content you add will be visible to everyone in your organisation. However, you can give your users a more streamlined experience by using content segmentation.

You can do this by creating user groups, and then using the CMS to choose which user groups you want to be able to see that content. This allows you to create entire sections of your app that are visible only to specific people. For example, if there's information that you want to be visible only to managers, or to a specific department, you can achieve this using user groups.

This allows you to create entire sections of your app that are visible only to specific people

All Signal.
No Noise.

Content segmentation is not always about 'hiding' information that you don't want others to see though. Using this feature intelligently has big impacts on perception of your app, especially if you're in a large organisation.

There will be various pieces of content in your app that, while you don't mind everyone seeing it, is maybe only relevant to subsets of your staff – so why not just segment it so that only they see it?

If you're an employee and you're opening each section of the app to be presented with information that's just not relevant to you or your job, and you're scrolling past quite a few items to find something relevant to you, it gets a bit tiresome. However, if you open the app and the vast majority of what you see is actually something

that applies to you, then you're more likely to want to keep coming back to the app, and to engage with the content you're reading via the social features. If you're adding content to your app that's only relevant to your employees in London, why not create a user group for your London employees and segment that content so that they're the only ones who see it?

Segmenting in this way to streamline the content for end-users rather than just using it to hide 'super-secret stuff', is all about user perception.

Ideally, you'd love to be able to communicate with people individually. In the absence of that, one of the great things about your app is its ability to at least dive a little bit deeper so you can communicate directly with the people that a piece of information relates to, rather than a scattered approach and hoping that the relevant people see it.

Employees are often overloaded with emails, meetings, targets, and if they perceive this app as another thing that's overloading them with information, they simply won't use it.

Step 5 –
Identify Champions

Now that you're moving towards the launch of, you're app, and you're busy getting your content ready, it's a good idea to start looking at actions you can take to grow your userbase, and get your users engaging and interacting with your content.

The great thing about having an app for your communications, is that it allows two-way communication. However, you'll often find that your staff will be hesitant to comment on your articles, and post their own content if you have user generated content enabled. This is especially true if it's the first time in your organisation that staff have had a chance to engage.

post. When you post a page using the CMS, and no one has commented on it yet, it looks like this:

♡ ◯ 　　　　　　　　4 Likes · 0 Comments

Be the first to comment…

Quite simply, no one wants to be the first one to comment or Be the first to comment? No thanks! Terrifying.

But if you, as a comms leader in your organisation can get some dedicated champions, who will consistently leave comments and make posts, you'll find that others will be happy to join in. As long as someone else has done it first.

When your users are exploring the app in the weeks after launch, and they see comments from other people on the articles – they'll be much more likely to join in, and from that point on, your growth will start to become more organic.

You really just need to plant the seeds yourself before it will grow! (Image of a plant growing). Thankfully, the process of identifying these champions and getting them on board before launch is really easy if you've already done Step 1: Talk to your staff, and Step 3: Involve Stakeholders. You've already talked to a range of people across the business. This people across your business can become your champions by making posts and leaving comments!

Step 6 –
Reflect on Your Culture

This step is all about reflecting on the culture of your organisation and your other, existing communications channels.

Having an employee app is a totally different way of communicating than emails, noticeboards or a staff magazine, so try not to approach your content in the same way.

People are used to spending 'bite-sized' amounts of time on their phone, so you need to make sure that you're getting your point across quickly and succinctly.

The main difference between an app and your other channels however, is that while someone might pick up your staff magazine in the canteen at lunch time, with an app you're potentially in that person's pocket at all times.

You have the ability to send out push notifications and alerts, to ask that person to reach in their pocket and pull out their phone to read your content at any time of the day. That's a big responsibility to have. And it might be a huge departure from what your employees are used to.

Evolution or Revolution?

Exercise - Ask yourself:

What existing channels do we have for comms?
Do any of them already allow for two-way communication?
If the answer to the second question is 'yes', and you already have a culture of two-way communication and people getting involved, then your app is a way to nurture and develop that.
If not, it's important to realise that this app represents a radical departure from the norm for your staff. You're not just leading a change in 'how you do comms'. You're leading a cultural change throughout your organisation!

Be aware that your current organisational culture might take time to adapt to an app where staff can get involved, make posts, and comment on the latest news. If it's new for them, they might be reluctant to get involved. This is why it's so important to involve stakeholders across the business, and identify people to be champions for your app. Set realistic targets for growth and engagement, depending on how 'new' this way of doing things is for your business. Every business that we work with is at a different stage of the journey. Some will launch their app and have all their staff in there on day one making posts and comments, while others need to work a bit harder to get to that stage. It's important to reflect, and recognise where your organisation is on this journey – and to think about the cultural aspects of your business that might hold you back.

What Are You Afraid Of?

An employee app is a great way for you to engage your staff, but the next thing you need to ask yourself:
Are we afraid to really let our employees engage with us?
Answering this question will reveal a lot about your organisational culture. *Are you afraid of what your staff might say if they're allowed to make comments? Are you afraid that they're going to post inappropriate content? Are you wondering if it's possible to moderate comments before they're visible to everyone? If there's a profanity filter in the app? If someone might post something negative that questions our strategy?*
These are valid concerns, and you know your own business better than we do. But our advice is – if these kinds of questions are at the forefront of your mind, and you're afraid of what staff might say, now that they have the chance to say it – you need to be the one to break the cycle.

You have a chance here to create a real sense of community amongst your employees. Encourage and nurture that, and try to place trust in them.

With Thrive you have moderation tools at your disposal – you can delete comments, you'll know who posted each comment, and the community can report objectionable comments to you using the 'report' function in the app.

Be the Leader of Cultural Change!

If someone is complaining or being negative in the comments – reply to them and engage with them. Be the leader of cultural change! Imagine that you've spent a few years working for a company that doesn't hear your voice, and has no vehicle for engagement. Now you get an app and let others know about your frustrations, and someone simply deletes your comment. It's not a good idea. Now imagine that instead of having your comment deleted, someone actually replied to it – a manager, or someone from the comms team has read what you had to say, and is using the app to respond and explain. You now feel like your voice is being heard, your attitude is likely to improve, and other employees will read it too. They realise that the business really is making a shift towards openness, and they feel more comfortable about engaging.

This is just one small example of the type of cultural shift that you need to lead to make your app a success.

An app for your employees – or any kind of two-way comms channel, will only be as successful as the mindset of your business allows it to be.

> Don't let fear hold you back! In the words of Susan Jeffers – Feel the Fear and do it anyway!*

*Reference: https://www.amazon.co.uk/Feel-Fear-Anyway-Indecision-Confidence/dp/0091907071

Step 7 –
Launch With Purpose

A strong launch with lots of fanfare is a great way to get an initial audience. Your content, and the usefulness of the app is what's going to keep them coming back, but your launch will be the driver of the first-time downloads.
Here are some ideas to make a real event out of your
app launch.

Promotional Items
Posters, Desk-Toppers, Mugs, Pens and Banners can all be used in staff areas to generate awareness.
If you're designing your own posters, make sure to include information about:
- *Where to download the app*
- *How to Log In to the app*
- *Why you should download the app*

If you are a Thrive customer, we'll be happy to design some posters and desk-toppers on your behalf, so that you can print these ahead of your launch.

Launch Events

Launch events are a great way to create a bit of fanfare. It might be something as simple as setting up a stall in your staff canteen, or going all-out and organising a roadshow to visit your various sites. The aim here is to get out and about and talk directly with staff about the app now that it's available. You'll be there to answer questions, and to help the less tech-savvy employees to download and register.

If you've been following our advice from the beginning, you'll already have plenty of people across the business aware that the app is coming, and you will have taken their feedback onboard when creating your content. This is your chance to make a big deal of going out and showing them that you listened!

Props such as phone cut-outs for people to get their pictures taken, balloons and so on, tend to work well. You could even bake some cupcakes and put QR codes on them with the app download link!

Just don't forget to post pics of your launch events to the app. Or even better, if you have a 'User Generated Content' section in the app, get others to post them there too.

Competitions

If you have some budget, you might want to consider offering an incentive prize via an in-app launch competition.
Here are a few ideas for in-app competitions:

Selfie Competition: Post a selfie to the user generated content section of the app. Whichever gets the most likes wins.

Caption Competition: You post a picture in the app, and employees leave a caption in the comments. Either best caption is chosen by the admins, or the one with the most likes wins.
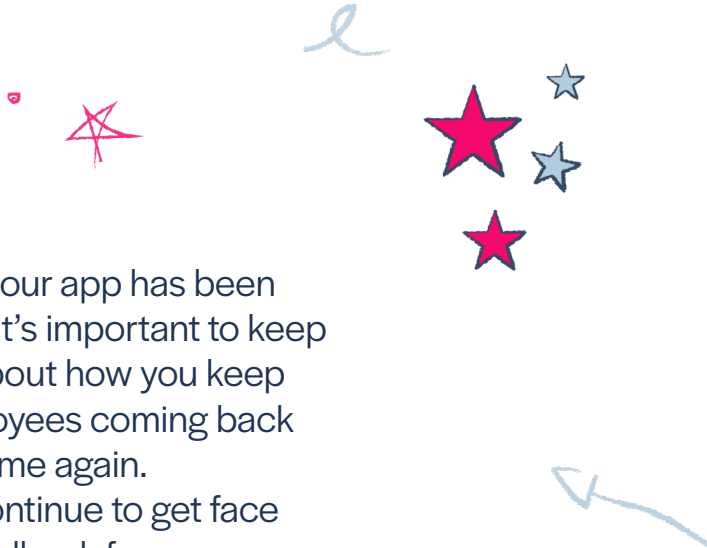
Complete Your Profile Competition: This one works if you want to encourage users to complete their in-app profile pic and contact info. 'Those with completed profiles by X date are entered in to a prize draw'.

Putting the above advice into action will ensure that your app really makes a splash!

Step 8 –
Continuous Improvement

Now that your app has been launched, it's important to keep thinking about how you keep your employees coming back time and time again.
You can continue to get face to face feedback from your users, or you might also want to consider having a feedback form embedded in to a page your app. It's easy to create web forms and embed them into your app.
The most powerful tools that you have at your disposal however, are the statistics you will get from your analytics. When your app launches, and your employees begin to download and use it, you'll start to collect valuable stats about how many users you have, how loyal they are, and which kinds of content are the most popular in your app.

This information isn't just useful for reporting to management. It should be informing your ongoing content and app promotion strategy.

Find Out What Your Employees Like

You can use analytics to find out how many employees have accessed your app during a particular date range, how they are interacting with content, what the most popular content is as well as the number of shares, likes, recognition and user generated posts created. Using these reports, you can tailor your content to your employees.

It's not however always about the 'type of content'. If you see that a particular piece of content had a lot of hits this week, ask yourself what's different about it from other content?

Various factors could be contributing to high stats:

▪ The subject matter
▪ The tone of voice it's written with
▪ Is it user generated content?
▪ The time of day it was posted

These are just examples, but look for patterns to find out what plays best with your audience. Tailoring your content in this way allows your employees to enjoy the content more, and keeps them coming back.

Important note:

We don't track individual users. You'll see how many users accessed the app, for example, but that information is not in any way associated with their unique app account.

Figure Out If They're Really That into You

User loyalty is a great metric to gauge how much your staff are enjoying the app, and whether they're finding the content useful.

You can't tell how many times a particular user has accessed the app, but there are a few reports you can use to get an average across your userbase.
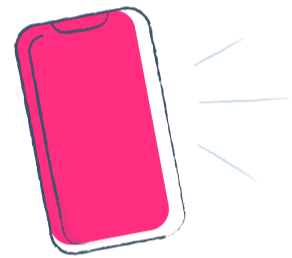
Examples

If you have a high number of users, but a low percentage of returning users, then you know that your problem isn't with promotion or letting people know that the app is available. In this case, you have plenty of people trying out the app, but they're not finding a reason to come back.

If the opposite is true, and you have a small total number of users who are using the app often – think about your app promotion efforts. Have a look again at Step 7 – Launching with Purpose for some ideas on how to effectively promote your app to your employees.

Using analytics to inform your content strategy means that everything you do is evidence-based. Take the guesswork out of app improvement!

Need More?

We hope you have enjoyed reading this eBook and the information within it has been useful to start your journey to a successful employee communications app. If you are an existing Thrive customer and need assistance with your app please feel free to contact our customer success manager. If you are new to employee communications and are interested in trying out Thrive for Free Contact Our Sales Team.

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Thank you.

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