

Communication Bulletin TM for Managers & Supervisors

A fast-read source of information to help managers communicate better within and between departments, twice a month.

July 1, 2020



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Noise, texts, meetings, etc. ... 'How do I get any work done?!'

5 keys to shut out the noise and get focused on work

Employees feel overwhelmed, stressed, distracted and unappreciated for one serious reason: noise.

Beeps, buzzes and alerts have become the norm in and out of work.

Employees get an avalanche of email, hear loud chatter, read muddled messages and attend unnecessary meetings every day.

"We think, 'This is just the reality of work in the Digital Age,'" says Joseph McCormack, author of *NOISE: Living and Leading When Nobody Can Focus*.

"We've forgotten how it feels *not* to be perpetually distracted and overwhelmed."

Leaders want to help their people cut the

"noise" – onslaughts of information and distractions – that breaks their focus and drains their brains.

"We can't change the reality of our workplaces, but we can take small, doable steps that together help us better manage the work flow of priorities and challenges," McCormack says. He suggests:

Make the problem clear

Talk with employees about how noise hurts their attention span, memory, brain function and performance.

Here are just a few stats that can drill in the point. Professionals:

Please see Noise ... on Page 2.

Sharpen Your Judgment

Worker says headaches covered by ADA

"Are you feeling OK?" Pat, the supervisor, asked her employee Laura.

Laura squinted at her. "I think it's a migraine," she said. "I can keep working – I just need a minute. I've been so stressed lately."

It was a busier time than usual at work. Everyone – Pat included – was feeling the crunch like Laura.

"I know," Pat said. "We've had a heavy workload. Kate's been helping you though, right?"

"Yes, she's helped. I appreciate getting a hand," Laura said.

"Good," Pat replied. "So you're OK?"

Laura nodded. "I'm glad these headaches

only hit now and then.

"So far I've been able to keep moving."

Does the law protect her?

A few weeks later, Laura resigned, saying the job was too stressful. But when her last day approached, she changed her mind.

"I'm sorry, Laura," Pat told her. "You haven't been performing. We can't take you back."

"What? But I was sick!" Laura argued.

When the company refused to reinstate Laura, she sued, saying she was discriminated against under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The company fought the case. Who won?

This regular feature sharpens your thinking and helps keep both you and your firm out of trouble. It describes a real legal conflict and lets you judge the outcome.

Make your decision, then please turn to Page 4 for the court's ruling.

The Purpose of Communication Bulletin for Managers & Supervisors

Communication Bulletin for Managers & Supervisors provides relevant and actionable business ideas to help managers and supervisors improve communication and increase effectiveness.

The Bulletin helps improve communication within and between departments, a major goal for most businesses seeking better performance.

All in a fast-read format, twice a month.

Noise ...

(continued from Page 1)

- are interrupted 50 times a day – and it takes many minutes to regain full focus each time
- check their phones 150 times daily
- check email (unnecessarily) 36 times a day, and
- multitask during meetings, leading to unproductive time.

Focus on what you can control

Leaders and employees have limited control on some of their work time – meetings and certain responsibilities demand exact times.

Determine your most productive time outside of the locked-in time and plan to block out the noise and work on high-priority tasks.

Follow the 7-to-7 rule

In his research, McCormack found 40% of people who *didn't* begin and end their day by checking smartphones reported having four or more hours of quiet, productive time each day.

Because they rejected the “always connected” mentality, they created time to get more done.

TECH CORNER

Zoom spurs more ineffective meetings: How to prevent it

Plenty of organizations hold meetings where there's no stated agenda, a lack of structure and a tendency to run on too long.

With Zoom and other remote meeting apps, it's gotten worse. One company we know encourages staff to dress up according to the day's theme.

The boss thinks it's a riot – his employees, not so much.

Is there a work-related agenda?

Whether you're responsible for setting up a remote meeting or deciding

Use the 7-to-7 Rule: No screen before 7 a.m. or after 7 p.m.

Try the 11-minute unplug

Before critical conversations, presentations or meetings, step away from screens and phones to think about what you plan to accomplish.

Take a walk or sit in silence to focus on the goal, and you'll achieve it sooner.

Take the Post-It Challenge

“Noise” causes most people to become distracted and try to multitask all day.

Instead, single-task your highest priority. Write each task you must accomplish on a Post-It note and throw it away when you're done. Check the trash can midday and at day's end to see all you accomplished with single focus.

Shore up communication

Simplify your messages – and seek simple messages – so you can communicate more effectively.

Before you write or speak to convey information, ask yourself, “What's the single most important thing I want to convey?” Draft your email, voicemail or call around that.

When you receive an overwhelming message, ask the sender, “What's the single most important thing I need to know?”

Source: tinyurl.com/Noise476

if you need to sit on one, ask yourself these two questions:

1. Who's the meeting really for? Unless there's important company news to relay, or attendees are working on projects that require sharing info, can the meeting.

Otherwise it's liable to be the same folks rehashing the same info.

2. Can an hour-long agenda be 30 minutes instead? Or shorter?

The goal shouldn't be to get 45 minutes of Zoom room time in – it should be about respecting people's time and cutting a meeting short of “fluff” when it's doable.

Info: tinyurl.com/meetingagenda479

COMMUNICATION BRIEFS

■ 3 keys to make yours a 'Best Place to Work'

Wouldn't you love for your company to be on the “Best Places to Work” list?

At the very least, wouldn't it be great if your employees consider it the best place to work?

Here are three ways to create a “best place” culture from Deb Boelkes, author of *The WOW Factor Workplace*:

- **Don't let jerks thrive.** Hire slow, fire fast, she advises. Get rid of toxic employees even if they're solid performers. Make collaboration and kindness job requirements.
- **Break things.** To make continuous, dramatic improvements, be willing to make dramatic changes, such as moving employees to help them thrive or tossing an entire process.
- **Set high expectations and don't accept excuses.** Help employees find their strengths and potential. Then give them opportunities to try new things, find their passion and be rewarded well for achievements.

Source: BusinessWorldRising.com

■ What's worse: Home or on-site work? Survey says ...

What's worse – working from home or in the office?

It's a toss up, according to a recent survey by SmartBriefs. A little more than 40% say home is tougher to deal with. Two of the challenges: lack of structure and co-worker contact.

To combat those two issues:

- **Maintain a schedule.** You don't have to keep the same schedule you did on-site, but create a new one that accommodates the other demands at home (*see cover story*). Hit your desk, workout and other household chores at the same time every day.
- **Create a hard break from work** to signal you're home again. Best bet: Take a walk on your normal commute time.
- **Make a point to socialize.** Set up video chats with colleagues who you regularly chat with socially.

Source: tinyurl.com/home479

Real Problems, Real Solutions

Our subscribers come from a broad range of organizations, large and small. In this regular networking feature, three of them share their successes in improving workplace communication.

1 Remote workers were feeling left out

Off-site employees commented they felt out-of-the loop.

We knew they were given all the critical info from the company. But they felt they missed out on the fun activities around the office.

Team-building games a first step

We started to look for ways to make them feel connected.

For example, at one point, we had a stress-relieving day of building gingerbread houses in teams.

In the past, we may have overlooked off-site employees – after all, how

could they participate?

This time, we put them on teams. They participated by phone and video.

Some even built their own gingerbread houses and then sent in pictures.

They appreciated being included in the activity.

Even better, they made stronger connections with co-workers.

That improved communication for the long term.

(Cathy Lawson, Consultant, Buffalo, NY, company name withheld by request)

2 How we make training a priority

Everyone knows ongoing training is important. But when everyone has to get their jobs done – meeting deadlines, getting ahead or catching up, collaborating, etc. – training gets put on the back burner.

We'd seen it happening, and we wanted to make ongoing training a priority so everyone could improve and perform at high levels.

3-pronged approach

We took a three-pronged approach:

1. Our senior executives started the initiative for on-going training and championed the movement.
2. We made ongoing training part of the operational calendar. We “baked it into” our regular calendar.
3. We made everyone accountable for training. If they didn't do their part – read the material, prepare questions, interact, etc. – they'd face some discipline.

Now, we have a vigorous ongoing training program that employees embrace and helps us improve.

(Pat Morrissey, Senior VP and GM, Upland Altify, San Francisco)

3 Communication ended the thermostat wars

No sooner did the weather warm up then the thermostat wars kicked off.

People started complaining it was too hot or too cold and would then adjust the thermostat without asking anyone else.

Problem was, they were turning down the temperature too low or turning it up too high.

'Here's the problem ...'

Solution: We sent out a mass email to all employees letting them know about the problem.

We told them it was OK to touch the thermostat, but they should only adjust it one or two degrees at the most.

Since then, people haven't been pushing the thermostat too far.

They've been keeping it within a reasonable range between 70 and 72 degrees.

After we sent out that email, people listened. Asking for their cooperation made the difference.

(Chad Harms, Maintenance Manager, Sanford Medical Center, Rock Rapids, IA)



YOUR LEGAL COACH

Employee says he's an alcoholic: Now what?

Question: A long-time employee just told me he's an alcoholic. He's getting the help he needs outside of work. Is there anything I need to do at work?

Answer: The employee might qualify for the Americans with Disabilities Act protections, say employment law attorneys Robert Horton and Lymari Martinez Cromwell of the firm Bass, Berry & Sims PLC.

Accommodate, if necessary

If his addiction substantially limits a major life activity (such as work performance), he likely qualifies.

If you determine your employee has a qualifying disability, you may need to give him a reasonable accommodation, such as a different or modified schedule to attend AA meetings or appointments with a treating physician, Horton and Martinez Cromwell say.

Source: tinyurl.com/question479

LIGHTER SIDE

Let's look on the brighter side of things ...

With so much negative news and vibes, let's look on the brighter side of things.

Here's help – because as Erma Bombeck said, “When humor goes, there goes civilization”:

- A positive attitude won't solve all your problems, but it will annoy enough people to make it worth the effort – *Herm Albright*
- That's not a gray hair, darling. That's your silver lining – *Pamela Price*
- Don't take life too seriously. You'll never get out of it alive – *Elbert Hubbard*
- Relax. Worry is infamous for being inaccurate – *Karen Salmansohn*

COMMUNICATION NEWS

4 ways to make work better for employees

Almost two-thirds of people say work is the top reason they get stressed.

It shouldn't be like that. People should get a reasonable amount of enjoyment from work.

Fortunately, managers and supervisors can help their employees enjoy work more, according to research by the American Psychological Association.

Help them work in comfort

Unless safety is a risk, let employees use headphones. Researchers found employees who want to wear headphones are happier when they can tune out and get more done.

Hold more walking meetings. Sitting makes people feel drained. Walking re-energizes people and makes them more creative, researchers say. But consider your participants: Walking isn't for everyone.

Stop meetings one weekday and halt email on weekends. Give everyone one workday to focus solely on their tasks and the weekend to focus on themselves.

Encourage coffee and laughter. Employees who take breaks together and socialize are happier and more productive at work.

Source: "9 Ways to Make Your Work Day Better," Wall Street Journal, tinyurl.com/workday479

Coaching new hires to success during the first 90 days

It can be difficult enough finding experienced, skilled employees. Once you get them on board, you want to give them the best shot at success.

Here are a few suggestions on managing a new hire's first 90 days:

Not a great fit? Cut bait sooner, not later

• **Get them acquainted with their co-workers.** Introduce the new hire to a variety of people in the department to expand their social circle. If you can do it, assigning a

mentor to the new hire can also be helpful.

- **Set up regular check-in sessions.** If performance is an issue, try additional training or corrective action.
- **Create new goals.** Keep new staffers learning by constantly setting different goals for them to meet.
- **Trust your instincts.** Sometimes it's just not the right fit. Take advantage of the probationary period and let the person go. If you allow the person to become a permanent employee, it might get worse.

Sharpen Your Judgment – The Decision

(continued from Page 1)

The company won. The case was dismissed.

The court ruled Laura's headaches didn't qualify as a disability protected by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Laura didn't feel well, but she was able to continue working and to care for herself. And her headaches were infrequent.

This decision was good news for companies because it was decided using the stricter guidelines under the ADA Amendments Act.

Analysis: Stress can lead to pain, fatigue

Although this case was a win for employers, it also illustrates the downside of pressure at work.

Laura claimed her headaches were a direct result of stress from her job. If she'd been able to handle the stress, she may have continued to be a productive employee.

While heavy workloads are often a fact of life, there are steps managers can take to help folks cope. When employees are having a tough time, direct them to resources on handling stress.

And keep in mind, sometimes it's not the amount of work that causes stress. It may be a feeling of not having control or fear of making a mistake.

(Based on *Allen v. Southcrest Hospital*. Dramatized for effect.)

Quotes

Build your own dreams or someone else will hire you to build theirs.

– Farrah Gray

Light tomorrow with today.

– Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Your talent determines what you can do. Your motivation determines how much you're willing to do. Your attitude determines how well you do it.

– Lou Holtz

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