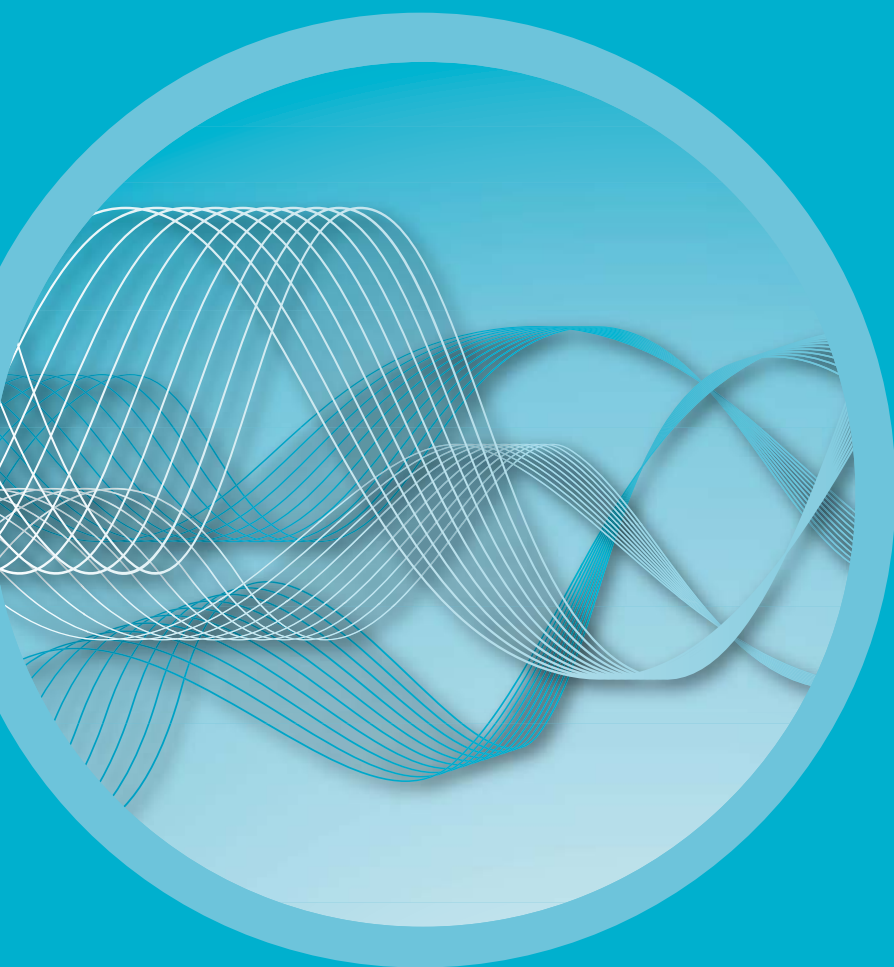


Internal Communications for Law Firms

By Joanna Goodman



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Contents

Executive summary	1
Part 1	3
Chapter 1: The internal communication challenges	5
External challenges: The changing business environment	5
Internal challenges: Structure, ownership, roles and responsibilities	6
Chapter 2: Developing a strategy	11
Identify the key deliverables	11
Evaluate existing communication channels and media	12
Identify the gaps	12
Develop and implement an internal communication strategy to overcome barriers and deficits	13
Measure the impact of communication strategies and initiatives	14
Chapter 3: Leader and teams	17
Communicating strategy	17
Partner communication – promoting genuine dialogue	17
Practice group/line manager communication	18
Bridging the gaps between different practice groups	18
Reaching lawyer and non-lawyer audiences	19
Communicating change	19
Establishing shared values	19
Equipping and incentivising managers to become good communicators	20
Engaging a new generation of lawyers	20
Chapter 4: Setting the direction	23
What makes a good law firm leader?	23
FAME: An overview of leadership communication responsibilities	24
Moving away from the traditional paternalistic culture	24
A consultative approach to strategic communication	25
Interactive channels enable people to question the leadership	25
Leading by example	25
Profile – Neville Eisenberg: Embodying the firm’s vision and values at Berwin Leighton Paisner	27
Profile – Bringing strategy to life at Eversheds	30
Chapter 5: The value of internal communication	35
Linking communication to strategic goals and objectives	35
The value of values	35
Using communication to solve problems and manage change	36
Taking a process measurement approach	36
Underpinning integrated client service	37

Recognising the dangers of getting it wrong	38
Realising the value of effective internal communication and a one-company approach	38
Chapter 6: Tools and tactics for effective internal communication	41
A champion at the top	41
Dedicated communication roles	41
Creating messages that resonate.....	41
Avoiding information/message overload.....	42
Continual evaluation and consultation.....	42
Developing an ongoing dialogue.....	42
Acting on feedback	43
Looking outside the firm	43
Internal branding	43
All politics are local	44
Building cultural capital.....	44
Part 2.....	47
Expert opinion	
1. Common communication challenges facing law firms.....	49
Common challenges	49
Identifying specific needs	50
Assigning responsibility.....	50
Facing up to the issues.....	51
2. Establishing a communications formula for professional services firms.....	55
Why are partners in professional services firms such poor communicators?	55
The structural barriers to successful communication	56
Distractions in the modern professional services firm.....	57
Adopting the right formula for successful communication	57
Conclusion.....	59
3. Leading the way: Leadership communication in professional services	63
4. Measuring internal communication in professional services firms.....	67
Keeping high performers engaged	67
Avoiding internal competition and promoting a client-centric culture.....	68
A strategy for controlling the information deluge	69
Addressing specific communication needs.....	70
Communicating strategy to different audiences	70

5. Communicating for change.....71
 Introduction..... 71
 Why do effective internal communications play a major role in professional change? 72
 What do we mean by effective internal communications?..... 73
 How are internal communications relevant during a merger or acquisition? 74

6. Communication’s Holy Grail77
 Set-up..... 78
 Delivery..... 79
 Investment..... 79

Case studies

1. Four principles for success..... 81
 The firm’s strategy 81
 Commitment to internal communication 81
 Reviewing performance 82
 Good intentions..... 82
 Flat pack communication 82
 Developing a plan 83
 Principle 1: Establish a rhythm 83
 Principle 2: Tell one story..... 84
 Principle 3: Make time for feedback 84
 Principle 4: Create ‘agreements to receive’ 85
 The success 86

2. A communication strategy for firm-wide engagement at BDO Stoy Hayward89
 Let’s SUS it out 90
 Improving line management communication..... 92
 The critical role of top level buy-in 93
 Next steps 93

**3. It’s a wrap: A stylish communication channel that defines and reinforces Clarke
 Willmott’s core values 95**
 Show me don’t tell me..... 96
 Values – the movies 96
 On the day 97
 Result..... 97
 Views from team leaders 97

4. Communicating service excellence at Robert Muckle LLP..... 99

5. Developing a communication framework for integrated client service at Harbottle & Lewis LLP.....	103
6. Strategic communication in an expanding market	107
The audit	107
Internal communication.....	107
Channels and vehicles	108
Controlled external publications.....	109
External media.....	109
Index.....	113

Executive summary

This research was conducted in response to the significant changes proposed in the Legal Services Bill 2006/07 which will open up the legal services market to corporate investment. Alternative business structures will enable UK law firms to incorporate and raise money. Therefore, the more successful firms will benefit from an influx of funds, enabling them to buy the best talent and fund takeover bids for their competitors. Consequently, the legal services marketplace, which is already highly competitive, is likely to consolidate even further, leaving behind those unable to adapt.

More than ever, effective internal communication has become a critical success factor. Firms increasingly recognise the importance to their survival and success of minimising uncertainty and retaining the confidence and commitment of their clients and valuable fee-earning professionals. Firms need to ensure that their internal brand reflects the external brand that attracts and retains their clients. Forward-thinking firms have already established a more open corporate culture aimed at engaging and retaining the best people and becoming 'a great place to work'. This translates into client satisfaction and increased business.

This report aims to provide managers and practitioners with internal communication responsibilities with information and guidance on developing a strategy to succeed. It examines a selection of the key communication challenges and explores some of the latest thinking on adapting best practice from the corporate world to the rapidly changing legal and professional services market.

Chapter 1 looks at the new external and the existing internal challenges. The opening up of legal services presents both threats and opportunities. As top consultant

Alan Hodgart observes, even firms that do nothing will find their position altered by shifts in the business environment in which they operate. It's absolutely crucial to give partners and fee-earners clear communication on the firm's strategic direction. Operating in a climate of uncertainty risks losing high performers and their clients, so internal communication has become a matter of survival.

Structure and ownership present further internal communication challenges. Because of the expert services they provide, professional services firms tend to form a matrix structure divided by line of business. There is also the historic divide between fee-earners and management support functions. As a result, many partnerships lack the necessary communication infrastructure to put key messages across to all stakeholders and to receive their input, buy-in and feedback. But where is the best place to start? Chapter 2 outlines the key elements underpinning a workable internal communication strategy.

As the partnership is required to vote on strategic decisions and elect the senior leadership team, partnership communication is naturally a high priority. However, commonly there is a significant communication gap between practice group leaders and their teams. Chapter 3 examines the critical role of line-manager communication and suggests some solutions aimed at giving everyone in the firm a clear line of sight to its overall strategic direction. People need to understand their part in the big picture.

A key challenge is turning top fee-earners into good communicators, given that the traits and training that make a good lawyer sit uncomfortably with an open and

collaborative corporate culture. Examples from law firms and other sectors around the world show how giving practice group leaders training in people skills, as well as communication materials and support, can transform line-manager communication. As well as ensuring that key messages reach their intended audiences, this helps knowledge and information to pervade the matrix structure and keep people involved in what is going on in the business.

Chapter 4 explores leadership – key to the success of any partnership. We focus on law firm leaders, whose role is shifting and expanding in response to consolidation and competition in the legal services marketplace. What makes a good law firm leader? Should law firms appoint their best fee earner as leader, given that leadership has become a full-time job? The new generation of law firm leaders is overturning the traditional hierarchical structure and taking a more business-like approach. We profile two visionary leaders who acknowledge that effective internal communication is a critical success factor: their styles are very different, but they both achieve exceptional results within this changing environment through a consultative and facilitative approach.

Chapter 5 presents the clear business case for effective internal communication, emphasising the importance of continual measurement and evaluation, demonstrating how to maximise the return on investment (ROI) on internal communication resources. Good end-to-end internal communication contributes significantly to a firm's ability to retain its high performers, provide better client service and increase its growth and profitability.

Chapter 6 outlines some of the best practices recommended by top consultants and adopted by forward-thinking firms.

Find out how leading professional services organisations and law firms have developed internal communication programmes which underpin their position as industry leaders and great places to work.

Part 2 comprises best-practice examples of internal communication in action with practical, up-to-date case studies from leading firms that have successfully developed comprehensive programmes which demonstrate the outstanding benefits that they have derived from investing in firm-wide and local communication initiatives and activities. Participating organisations include Berwin Leighton Paisner, BDO Stoy Hayward, Clarke Willmott, Eversheds, Harbottle & Lewis, Robert Muckle, and Shearman & Sterling. This is combined with expert guidance from internationally recognised consultants, including Paul Gilbert, James Harkness, Julie Harrison, Alan Hodgart, Nick Jarrett-Kerr, global communication consultant Paul Sanchez and communication measurement specialist Angela Sinickas.