Cerulean's expert guide to business communication

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Introduction

Business communication has been directly linked to profit, motivation, productivity, performance, innovation, employee turnover and more.

In short, it's crucial that you do it well. Given the recent (and inevitable) shift towards remote and hybrid work, it's actually become even *more* important. Dispersed workforces can seriously suffer from a lack of effective communication, so it's now a requirement rather than a bonus to have a flexible, watertight comms strategy.

Who are we to tell you how to communicate, though? We're calling this an expert guide, but do we walk the walk? We can't blame you for asking. It's a complex subject, after all, and its impact – positive or negative – reaches every corner of your business.

Here's the 'why you should listen us' elevator pitch:

- We provide a tool that makes business communication possible.
- We've been at this for a while. Twenty years, to be exact.
- Over that twenty years, we've gathered, processed and acted on feedback from our clients and the industry at large.

We've got a front-row seat when it comes to the pros, cons, dos and don'ts of business communication. From the essential tools to communication best practices, this is how we see things:

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The tools you need

In-person meetings aside, you won't get very far without platforms to communicate on. Try making a phone call without a phone and you'll see what we mean. There are a few channels that modern, flexible businesses should provide at a minimum. If you're looking for a short answer and don't need to know the reasoning behind our choices, scroll to the end of this section for a checklist.

Whether you're need to embrace remote work or not, it's become a necessity for any businesses interested in remaining adaptable, flexible, and up-to-date. Some conversations need to happen in a face-to-face setting, and video conferencing software makes that possible whether you're in the office or halfway around the world.

Instant messaging

You'd be forgiven for taking this recommendation with a grain of salt – we are, after all, an IM software provider. So don't take it from us. Take it from the *billions* of people that use one IM platform or another at work and outside of it. Take it from your own smartphone. If you own one, there's a 75 percent chance you've got some IM software on it.

Video conferencing

Real-time video communication has played a starring role for businesses throughout the quarantine. It's a viable alternative to the in-person meeting, providing a means for remote collaboration and problem-solving without sacrificing interpersonal communication.

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When it comes to efficiency, it's hard to beat IM. It's faster than email, and demands less time and attention than video conferencing. It's not as hard-to-update as an intranet, nor as formal as project management software. Like email, it provides a searchable archive of conversations and shared documents, and like video conferencing software, it's as real-time as you need it to be.

Thanks to its flexibility – and the fact your staff are already familiar with the medium outside of work – it'll likely become your go-to for day-to-day communication. That's why it's on the list of essentials.

Email

We probably don't need to convince you of email's importance. Chances are, we sent a copy of this very guide *to* your work email address. As of late 2019, around 3.9 billion people use email actively. It's still one of the most reliable communication tools at your disposal as a business, because you can be pretty certain that any external stakeholder or link in your supply chain both has an email account and checks it regularly.

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It also comes in handy for more formal internal communications that don't require a meeting, or for file-sharing (if you don't have a dedicated platform for it). There's not much to say about email that hasn't already been said. If you don't have a dedicated email client for your business, get one.
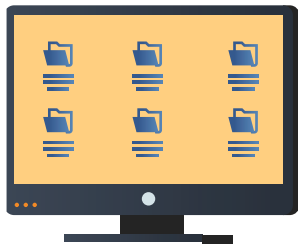
Intranet

How do you broadcast company-wide updates, create a forum for open discussion of internal issues and provide easy access to important documents like employee handbooks, FAQs and onboarding materials? With a dedicated intranet.

Intranets are often an afterthought, but they're an essential part of the internal communication equation. 74 percent of employees say that they feel they are missing out on valuable company updates. They should act as a hub to keep staff in-the-know about organizational news, and should be the first place they go when they have a question about their role or a company policy.

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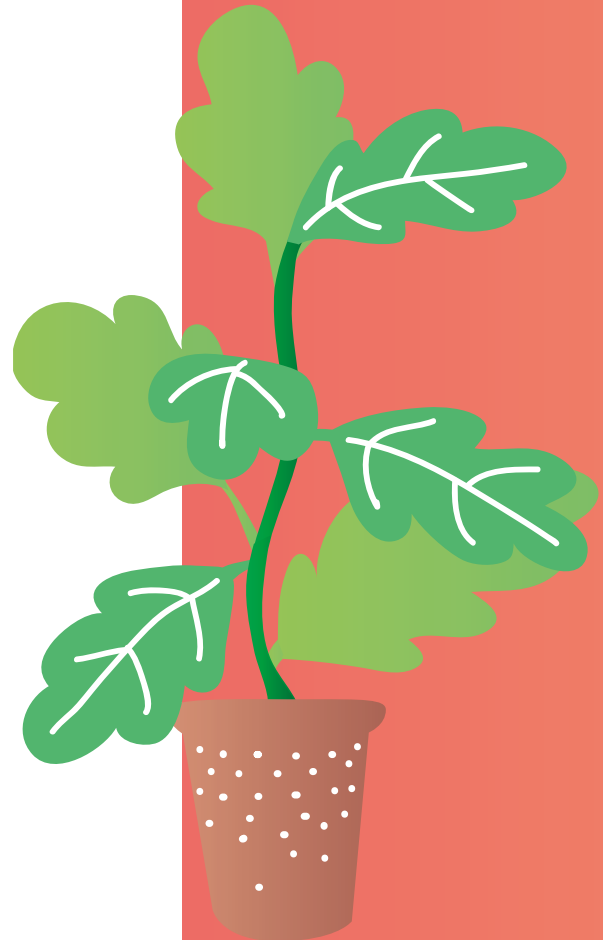
Project management software

If providing your product or service involves more than two or three moving parts, chances are you'd benefit from adopting project management software. This is especially true with an uncertain future and the possibility of a continued increase in remote working. Just because people stop coming into the office doesn't mean your business can stop operating.

Think of this kind of software as a virtual manager, or as a well-deserved helping hand for your real-life managers. Plan projects, assign tasks to individual staff members, track progress, ask questions and comment on work. Many allow you to invite clients as guests, allowing for external collaboration. When it comes to communicating about the work itself, project management software is a must.

File-sharing

You *can* share documents via email and IM, but if you're going to be sharing a lot of them, a dedicated file-sharing platform is worth the investment. They're not expensive, and provide a centralized location for work-related files. You don't have to worry about file size in the same way that you do with email, and documents won't get lost in the flow of daily messages like they can with IM.
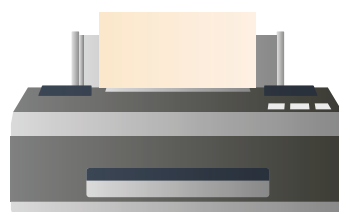
Fax machines

Just kidding.

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The essential business communication toolkit:

Tool type	Status (adopted/researching options/not yet)
Video conferencing software	
Instant messaging	
Email client	
Intranet	
Project management software	
File-sharing platform	

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What should you look for?

You know what the basic tool categories are, but how can you tell a 'good' video conferencing platform apart from a 'bad' one? Why does one instant messaging platform provide value, and another increase your risk of non-compliance?

Just as there are certain fundamental communication tools you should adopt, there are certain fundamental standards you should have for those tools. The following standards don't just apply to communication software, either – they should act as the guiding metrics for your entire comms strategy. Check every process against these criteria. As before, there's a checklist at the end of this section. There's also a bonus list of the comms strategy KPIs you should be measuring.

Security

Why: Protecting sensitive information belonging to your business, your employees and your clients is a no-brainer, but it's especially important as more businesses 'go digital' and cyberattacks reach an all-time high. Nobody knew what 'zoombombing' was in 2019, but it may go down as the word of the year for 2020.

What to look for: In tools, look for end-to-end encryption. Don't take claims of end-to-end encryption at face value, though. Many that claim to offer it actually offer much less secure services, so it's worth doing some research and looking for a platform that gives you as much privacy control as possible. Hosting software on your own servers is one way to circumvent the issue. In processes, ensure that privacy measures are clearly outlined in your comms policy. That includes the use of password managers and any employee confidentiality agreements.

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Compliance

What: There's some overlap between compliance and security, as the latter is almost always one aspect of the former. Depending on your industry, there may be certain standards that a regulating body expects you to meet. HIPAA compliance in the healthcare industry is one example.

Why: The costs of non-compliance are severe. Ensure that any tool you adopt meets the minimum standards of your industry's regulating body (if it has one), and do the same for your processes. Perform an audit of your tools and processes with regulations at hand, and identify areas for improvement.

Interoperability

What: Put simply, 'interoperability' is the ability of different software to communicate with one another. It enables the seamless sharing of information across platforms.

Why: It'll significantly improve the efficiency of your communication. Transferring information from a file-sharing platform to your project-management software shouldn't be difficult, it should ideally take a couple of clicks. Apply the interoperability ethos to your processes, too. Any new strategy should integrate smoothly with existing processes, improving the whole rather than existing in a vacuum.

Scalability

What: In this case, scalability refers to the ability of a tool or comms strategy to serve your business as it grows or becomes smaller. It's about the flexibility of a tool or process to adjust to *your* needs, not the other way round.

Why: Adopting a new tool costs productivity. The same goes for new processes. There's always going to be a learning curve, and if you have to switch to a new IM platform because your old one couldn't grow with your headcount, you're sinking unnecessary costs. Find flexible solutions when it comes to both capabilities and pricing structures.

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The communication strategy criteria

Perform an audit of your tools and processes, rating your strategy in each of these key areas:

What to ask	Priority level 1-5 (specific to your business)	Current rating 1-5
Are my tools and processes secure?		
Are my tools and processes compliant with my industry's regulations?		
Are my tools and processes well-integrated?		
Are my tools and processes able to scale with my business?		

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The future of business communication

We've covered the basics here: the essential tools to make your business communication strategy possible, and the essential criteria to judge things by. They represent the tip of the communications iceberg, but without handling them first you won't get very far.

As media academic John M. Culkin put it:

'We shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us.'

Choose the right software and processes, and you'll have created a strategy that shapes your business for the better.

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