

# Addressing the digital divide

Paul Roberts, Managing Director, Ibis Communication

*Insights is an occasional series of articles in which we take a look at some wider trends impacting on internal communication. In this article, Paul Roberts, Managing Director of Ibis Communication looks at the growing digital divide inside organisations and why internal communicators should take it seriously.*

Technology as we all know is advancing at a rapid pace. Yet the adoption of new technology rarely happens evenly across a population so when it comes to the take-up of increasingly sophisticated communication tools inside organisations, the inevitable consequence is that employees adopt them at different rates. This creates what we call a digital divide and the question for communicators is whether it matters.

## How can the digital divide come about in your organisation?

So why might a divide happen in the first place? One reason is access. Office-based staff tend to have better access to digital channels such as the Intranet than those based in the field. Interestingly, with the advent of mobile technology the main barrier is no longer technical (staff could easily be given Intranet access via their mobile phones, data card or from home). Instead, it is increasingly cultural with organisations nervous about providing online access citing concerns around cost, productivity and potential misuse.

Then there is need. Certain types of job role simply require greater use of technology, providing the user with better access to tools and equipping people with the skills to exploit them.

A third and increasingly important factor is comfort. Employees can be categorised in two ways: digital natives, people who have grown up using technology and are very comfortable with it and digital immigrants, those who have had to adopt it as part of their adult life.

## Why does the digital divide matter to you?

So nothing to be alarmed about so far as people will always adopt technology at different rates. But that is not to say communicators can sit back and allow the divide to grow. It matters and for three very important reasons.

The first is that there is a growing disparity between the way we communicate inside organisations versus how we communicate away from work. A decade ago, the communication environment we experienced at home was generally inferior to that at work. Nowadays the opposite is true, with a host of digital brands enabling us to be more connected than ever before whilst the majority of Intranet sites continue to be one-way information repositories. The disparity matters because rightly or wrongly internal communication risks being seen as backward and incapable of adapting to contemporary trends.

The second reason concerns the attraction and retention of key people. For now, digital natives tend to be young and less senior than their immigrant counterparts. Their communication demands are shaped by their inexperience and reluctance to challenge organisational norms. But as the native population grows and becomes more experienced, digital natives will increasingly reject old 'analogue' methods and judge organisations accordingly. By the same token, an organisation risks alienating its larger and more experienced immigrant population if it embraces new technology in the wrong way.

And thirdly there is productivity. Ask most senior managers how they describe the sharing of knowledge inside their organisation and they will probably tell you there is room for improvement. In a world, where people are developing increasingly specialised knowledge, the sharing of this knowledge and the productivity gains it delivers will increasingly become a source of advantage. Conventional knowledge-sharing techniques can play their part but the real opportunity for communicators is to learn from how people exchange information outside organisations and create an environment internally in which they can do the same thing.

How to begin closing the divide in your organisation

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Accepting that an ongoing digital divide is undesirable, how might an organisation seek to close it? Our experience of working with a number of organisations facing this challenge suggests five important stages.

- **Assess the level of risk to the organisation of allowing a divide to grow.** Every organisation is different and its exposure to the risks associated with a growing divide will vary. So identifying and then assessing the risk is vital. Key factors to look at here are the demographic make-up of the employee base, the reliance on remote or field-based workers and the extent to which expert knowledge needs to be shared.
- **Articulate the problem you are trying to solve.** Assuming the risk assessment highlights potential or actual problems, these need to be articulated to create a business case. A simple statement that demonstrates clear strategic benefit if resolved is ideal. For example, an organisation in the technology sector may conclude that it simply doesn't reflect well on their brand to have such a gap between communication methods internally and externally.
- **Consider the strategic options.** The digital environment inside an organisation is substantial and will have many owners. So options for change may be immediately limited for political reasons. Other factors are cost and the attitude of senior leaders. Belonging to the immigrant population, they may not fully appreciate the benefits of narrowing the divide so options have to be well-thought through and backed by a compelling business case.
- **Select an appropriate strategy.** This is the crucial part and getting it right requires proper consultation with employees most directly affected. If providing Intranet access to field-based staff at home is an option, then understanding how this will be received and the assessing likely take up is essential. Learning from the experience of other organisations is also valuable. Collaboration tools are for example being used increasingly by management teams and specialist groups meaning that relevant experience is growing all the time.
- **Engage your audiences appropriately with the tools you'd like them to use.** Clearly, the right approach will be determined by the degree of audience comfort with technology. But broadly, this will involve helping the audience to understand the change and what it means for them, engendering a positive attitude towards it, equipping them with the skills necessary to use it and then monitoring and managing take-up.

It's a safe bet that a growing digital divide exists in most organisations. It's also highly likely that this divide is making the challenge of the communicator even greater. Risks associated with the digital divide may not yet have transferred to strategic threat but increasingly it looks like a matter of time before they do. All of which means that addressing the digital divide is a priority for any internal communicator.