Internal Communications

It's Not Rocket Science!

Internal
Communications

It's Not Rocket Science!

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Communication matters.

In fact, communicating with employees is one of the most important things you do as a leader.

Scads of research shows that people derive greater satisfaction from their jobs and perform to a higher standard when they are engaged in their workplace. Effective communications is an essential feature of engagement.

Communicate effectively and you'll have a more fully engaged and more productive workforce. (Then you'll be promoted to deputy minister.)

This guide provides very practical suggestions to help you decide how best to communicate with staff in different situations. Keep it handy. Feel free to discuss these approaches with your nearest communications director or advisor.

And remember, while the stakes are high, the hurdle isn't.

You can learn to communicate effectively with your staff. It takes some planning. It takes practice and commitment. It's a skill you can continue to hone.

Internal communications is critically important, but it isn't rocket science. ✦

"The art of communication is the language of leadership."
— James C. Humes

INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS POLICY STATEMENT

Recognizing that its employees are its most valuable resource and are entitled to quality internal communications, it is the policy of the Government of Nova Scotia to keep government employees informed and up-to-date about government initiatives, departmental plans and progress, human resource developments, and overall government progress through a comprehensive internal communications process.

STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLE

Preamble

Any organization's greatest resource is its people. The Government of Nova Scotia is no exception. The some 10,000 people who make up the government's workforce are responsible for turning decisions made in the Cabinet room and on the floor of the Legislature into something real, something tangible for the people of this province. Our government workforce makes it possible for Nova Scotians to enjoy paved roads, good health care, public education, clean air, criminal justice and a myriad of other essentials.

It is in the interest of all Nova Scotians that provincial government employees are committed, productive and conscientious. For employees to actually be committed, productive and conscientious, they must feel valued. A combination of factors contribute to the employee's sense of value, and one of these – effective communication – is absolutely essential.
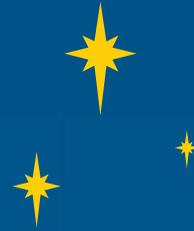
From a communications perspective, employees feel appreciated and valued when

- they are the first to hear important news
- they are regularly consulted
- they are listened to
- their suggestions are acted upon.

Principles of effective internal communications

- Internal communications is essential to the government's overall effectiveness.
- Internal communications is a responsibility of a department's management; not its communications section. Communications can, however, provide managers with guidance and coaching.
- Internal communications is meant to help inform decision making and influence employee behaviour in ways that benefit government, the public, and employees themselves.
- Internal communications consists of accurate, consistent, and timely information.
- Internal communications is always two-way communications. Employee feedback helps managers decide if the communication has been received and understood. As well, employees have important operational information that can help to make the government more successful in achieving its goals.
- Internal communications never stops. It is a continuous interactive process. ✦

Why Communicate?

Effective managers and supervisors already know a few things about communicating with employees. Communication helps to build relationships, promotes mutual understanding, and enables employees to contribute to organizational success. Moreover, it's a skill that can be learned – but it takes practice.

Effective managers and supervisors also know that communicating with employees is not solely the responsibility of the organization's professional communicators, any more than managing their office's budget is the sole responsibility of the organization's finance professionals. The communications folks can help and can provide advice, but the "heavy lifting" remains the manager's responsibility.

THE ROLE OF THE MANAGER AND SUPERVISOR

Studies have long shown that employees prefer to receive information from their supervisors. They like to get the "big picture" information from the organization's leaders, but they want to hear the impact on their work-group directly from the people to whom they report.

For many types of information, employees also prefer to receive news face to face. This allows for interaction and a chance to close the communication loop: the supervisor "sends out" the message, the staff receive it, and their reaction or response shows if they understand and accept the information.

COMMUNICATION THAT WORKS

After studying 10 international companies and conducting an exhaustive literature review, Deloitte & Touche identified four communication-related factors that help organizations achieve their goals.

1 Clarity of purpose

Successful organizations and initiatives focus on a few key messages. Leaders in successful organizations are consistent in their messages and ensure that everyone involved understands the goals and how to achieve them.

2 Effective communication methods

The level of trust and openness in various key activities is also critical for success. Employees at all levels can ask for information and receive honest, useful answers.

3 Effective sharing of information

Information sharing is effective when systems and networks enable managers and employees to have the right information at the right time to do their jobs, to share opinions and discuss ideas, and to circulate best practices and learn from each other.

4 Walking the talk

Leaders must also be good communicators themselves, so they can convey their ideas convincingly. Their behaviour must be consistent with what they are saying, both formally and informally. ✦

"All your people must learn before you can reach for the stars"
— Capt. James Tiberius Kirk

Research by international consulting firm Watson Wyatt identified key communication differences between high-performance and other organizations

- High-performing organizations do a better job of explaining change. Fifty per cent of the respondents in high-performing organizations were satisfied or very satisfied with how effectively their downwards communications programs explained and promoted major changes in the organization, compared to 39 per cent of respondents from all other organizations.

- High-performing organizations focus on communicating with and educating their employees. Communications programs in high-performing organizations place a greater emphasis on helping employees understand their business, its values and culture, its progress toward goals, and how employees can improve performance.

- High-performing organizations provide channels for upward communication and listen to what employees say. More respondents from high-performing organizations than from all others rated their upward communication channels as effective and reported that employee input was used in decision making.

Communication between you and your staff can play an integral role in the success of your organization. Invest some time in improving communications and reap the benefits. Your organization's communications staff can help you if you need further information on developing and implementing an employee communications program. ✦

How . . . and When?

The challenge for managers and supervisors is to find the time and the most effective methods for communicating information in a timely and open way to their staff. When faced with a specific message to convey, managers must decide which internal communications tool(s) will be most effective. First, consider the following:

- **The nature of the message**
  How important is it? How complex is it? What impact will this information have on operations? What impact will this information have on employees? Will it have any impact on employees' families? When will these impacts be felt?

  Generally, the more complex or the more important the message, the more likely that face-to-face communication is warranted. This should almost always be supplemented by a printed or electronic version for clarity and consistency of message. E-mail or voice broadcast can be used as a reminder or update.

- **The messenger**
  Who is the most appropriate source of this information: the employee's supervisor, manager, director, executive director, deputy minister, or minister?

  Employees generally prefer to hear from their direct supervisor, but "big picture" news may be more appropriate coming from senior management or the minister.

- **The timing of the message**
  When should the message be delivered? The cardinal rule on timing is that employees should always know about something that affects them before anybody else knows it. Employees feel more valued if they become aware of information before it is public knowledge.

> **"The basic building block of good communication is the feeling that every human being is unique and of value."**
> — Unknown

The following pages contain a Communications Toolkit to help you assess your communications needs and find the right way to communicate with your staff. The Quick Guide is an overview in table form of the communications tools available, with a brief description of why each tool should be used and when and how often to use it. This is followed by more detailed descriptions of each method, including the pros and cons of using it and technical considerations.
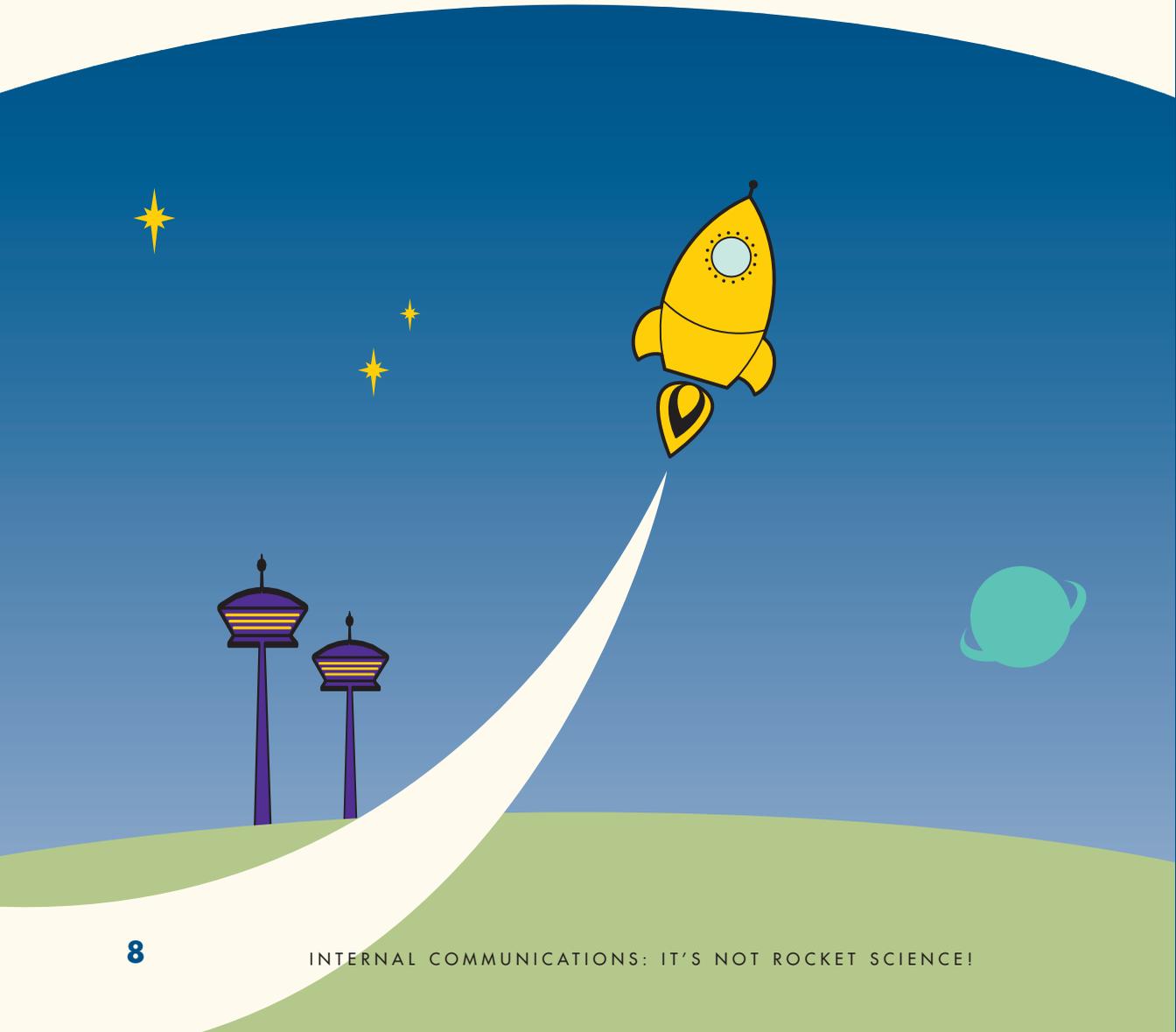
Internal Communications Quick Guide
"How can I best communicate with employees?"

Description	Why?	When or How Often?
All-Staff "Big Picture" Meetings *(Page 19)*	To help employees understand their department's goals and how their work fits into the big picture.	• On an annual basis to communicate business plan information • To communicate information with department-wide implications such as a reorganization, auditor's statement, or accountability report
Department-wide meeting In larger departments, it may be more appropriate to break this down into regional meetings *(Page 22)*	For regular and routine communications; may be necessary to convey an unexpected but important message that has a broad impact.	• On an annual basis for routine communications • On an as-needed basis for important sudden and/or far-reaching news
Workgroup or staff meeting *(Page 24)*	For information sharing, updating, assigning tasks.	• Weekly or bi-weekly

Internal Communications Quick Guide

FORMAL FACE-TO-FACE

Description	Why?	When or How Often?
Small-group cross-divisional meeting *(Page 25)*	As a vehicle for informal chat. Participants share information about their various areas and get to know colleagues in other parts of the department. The deputy or director gains insights, listens to concerns, and is able to answer any questions that arise.	• On a regular basis. Monthly or bi-monthly • Particularly good to gauge reaction to new programs or initiatives
Management forum *(Page 27)*	Half- or full-day gatherings of all managers in the department or agency to discuss management issues. It provides the opportunity to refocus as a management team on departmental goals and strategies.	• Once or twice yearly; perhaps as much as quarterly in bigger departments
Senior management meeting chaired by the deputy or agency head	For information sharing and decision making.	• Weekly or bi-weekly

Internal Communications Quick Guide

INFORMAL FACE-TO-FACE

Description	Why?	When or How Often?
Director/manager walkabout *(Page 29)*	To stay in touch with front-line employees and front-line operations.	• On a regular basis. Every few weeks or even more frequently as needed
Deputy walkabout *(Page 29)*	To stay in touch with employees and on top of operations in all sections and divisions.	• Depending on the size of the department it may be monthly or as infrequently as quarterly
Ministerial walkabout *(Page 29)*	To stay in touch with the people who bring ministerial decisions to fruition.	• Once or twice a year
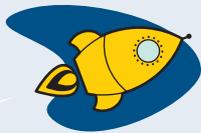
Technology is making us more efficient than ever at sharing information, yet over-reliance on technology can actually result in lower quality communications.

Communication is about relationships as well as information.

And sometimes, an e-mail isn't enough.

Internal Communications Quick Guide

VOICE

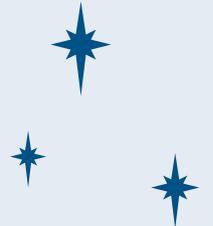| Description	Why?	When or How Often?
Telephone: call in The employee calls in *(Page 31)*	For employees to have easy access to vital information from any location.	• To update employees on labour disruptions; workplace closures (storms, hazards, etc.); project roll-outs; etc.
Telephone: call out *(Page 32)*	For employees to be alerted to department news. A primary method for routine messages, updates; a secondary method as a follow-up or reinforcement of an important message delivered earlier face to face.	• To update employees on labour disruptions; workplace closures (storms, hazards, etc.); project roll-outs; etc.

PAPER AND DISPLAY

Description	Why?	When or How Often?
Mission statement display *(Page 33)*	To serve as a reminder of both corporate and the department's raison d'être and to provide focus. The departmental mission statement should be prominently and conspicuously displayed.	• Should be a permanent fixture in common areas across the department

Internal Communications Quick Guide

PAPER AND DISPLAY

Description	Why?	When or How Often?
Vision and values statement display *(Page 33)*	To remind employees where the government and their own department is headed and by what values this will be accomplished. The departmental vision and values should be prominently and conspicuously displayed.	• Should be a permanent fixture in common areas across the department
Handwritten or typed letter or note	To convey a personal message of appreciation to an individual employee or to a workgroup. This should be key to any employee recognition program.	• When the situation warrants – and the situation is often warranted
Newsletter *(Page 35)*	As a team builder and morale booster than as a news source. Profiling employees and offices or sections and including features on initiatives in all areas of the department of agency helps build team spirit and provides informal recognition. Paper as a medium allows the employee to take it home more easily to share with the family.	• Depending on the size of the department, could be weekly, monthly, bi-monthly, or quarterly

Internal Communications Quick Guide

PAPER AND DISPLAY

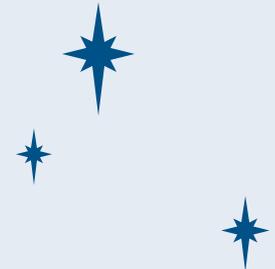| Description	Why?	When or How Often?
Bulletin board *(Page 38)*	Primarily, as a source for routine news and upcoming events and a secondary source for more important information initially conveyed face to face or by other means. Lunchrooms, water coolers, and elevator lobbies are ideal locations for bulletin boards.	• Should be used on an ongoing basis
Suggestion box *(Page 39)*	To allow employees to make suggestions for operational improvement; to give employees a voice in deciding how to make things work better.	• Should be used on an ongoing basis
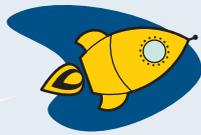
We're all bombarded with a blizzard of data during a typical day at the office. Key information needs to be repeated to make sure it gets through.

If it's important, say it more than once.

Internal Communications Quick Guide

ELECTRONIC

Description	Why?	When or How Often?
E-mail *(Page 40)*	Primarily to convey routine messages, updates. It can also be used as a secondary method for follow-up or reinforcement of an important message delivered earlier face to face. Users should take care not to abuse or overuse e-mail, and avoid using it for sensitive or complex matters. When in doubt, pick up the phone or go visit.	• Whenever needed
Intranet *(Page 42)*	To provide information that is routine or operationally important. This is essentially, a private Internet. The tools used to create and to view content are the same; any type of material that can reside on the Internet can live on an intranet. The main difference is that the intranet can be accessed only from a computer that is behind the corporate firewall, meaning that people outside of government do not have access to the material.	• Should become a routine information resource for employees

Internal Communications Quick Guide

ELECTRONIC

Description	Why?	When or How Often?
Online video *(Page 44)*	For an important message that has department-wide or government-wide significance. This is an embellishment on e-mail. The audience is either directed to a website where they watch a video message from the minister, deputy, etc., or the file is attached to an e-mail. The former approach is preferred because it puts less strain on the government computer network.	• Only for extremely important announcements
News bulletin *(Page 46)*	To ensure that employees learn departmental or government news before they hear it through the media. This can be done through e-mail or bulletin boards.	• Just before or simultaneous to issuing a news release
Podcast *(Page 48)*	To convey a direct, personal message from an interesting personality; the message doesn't get filtered	• When there is something interesting to say or on a regular schedule like a radio program

Internal Communications Quick Guide

ELECTRONIC

Description	Why?	When or How Often?
Blog *(Page 50)*	To keep teams or clients informed, to create a culture of information sharing, to facilitate two-way communication.	• Must be kept current • Twice a week if not daily
Wiki *(Page 52)*	To produce a collaborative product: everyone has input, so everyone should be able to agree on a finished product.	• Whenever many people have input on content • Whenever consensus is important, for example on internal policy
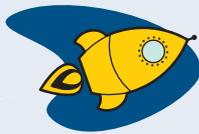
If it's really important, say it more than once.
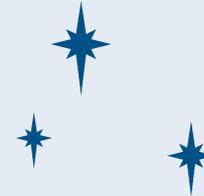
There are many ways to communicate with your staff.

One approach, or set of approaches, will be more suitable in some workgroups, or some situations than others. But there is no substitute for a personal, face to face exchange.

No matter what else you do, you should hold regular meetings with your workgroup.

Internal Communications: The Details

All-Staff "Big Picture" Meetings

It is crucial that staff members understand the overall goals of government, their department's goals, and how their work fits into that big picture. In a 2004 government-wide employee survey, one in three staff members said they didn't know how their work contributed to the department's over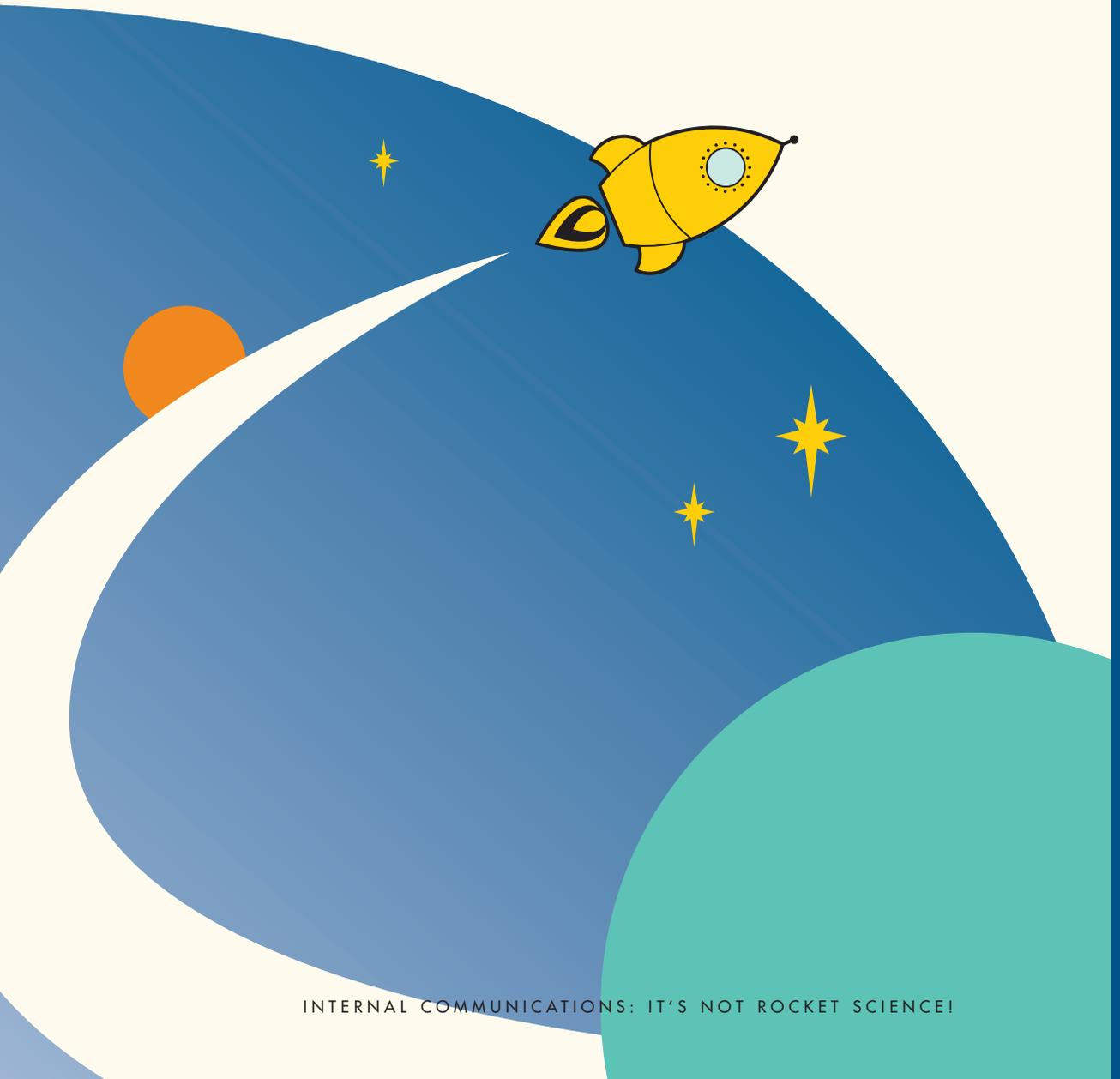all purpose and priorities. Half said they had not received communications about their department's business plan in the past 12 months.

Good For
- all departments and agencies

Pros
- It shows staff how they and their department/agency help the government to meet its priorities and commitments.
- It helps to break down silos.
- Staff feel part of the solution.
- Staff are better able to explain government's actions in unofficial, social settings.

Cons
- It takes time and commitment from management.
- Buy-in can be affected if staff disagree with government's priorities and commitments (minimal, but a factor).

THE DETAILS
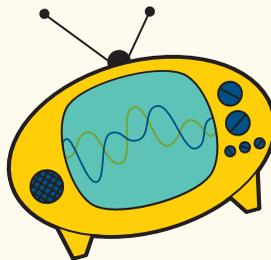
All-Staff "Big Picture" Meetings

Details

Please note: For brevity, this section talks about communicating with staff about the business plan. The steps outlined below could equally apply to an accountability report, an auditor's statement, or any other major document or initiative that would have department/agency-wide implications.

A department or agency's business plan should be developed with input from staff. Once it's complete, you can then figure out how you will share it with all employees. Steps to communicate business plan information will vary from department to department, depending on the number of staff involved, when and where they work, etc. However, the following approach should work in most situations.

It consists of four steps:

- broadcast message to staff
- department/agency-wide or regional meeting (optional)
- managers' meeting
- small-group meetings

Broadcast message to staff

To start, all staff should receive an e-mail from the deputy minister on the morning of the day that plans are made public. The message should include a link to the online version of the business plan or an electronic copy of the plan. Print copies should be available for staff members who do not have access to a computer. The message should also state that senior managers will meet with staff to explain the plan and answer questions in the near future.

Department/agency-wide or regional meetings (optional)

Department-wide meetings are described below. This step is optional because small-group meetings will probably best serve the needs of management and staff.

Managers' meeting

Managers should meet with their deputy and business planning committee to prepare for meetings with staff. Communications will prepare talking points for the deputy and planning team and use the feedback from this meeting to fine-tune talking points and support materials that will be made available during the meetings with staff.

Small-group meetings

Within two to three calendar days of the business plan's release, senior managers should meet with staff on an office-by-office (for field offices) or divisional/branch basis (for larger offices) to provide more detail and to answer questions as a follow-up to the deputy's earlier e-mail message to all staff. (This is also an opportunity to have a walkabout; see that toolkit topic for more details.)

Communications will provide talking points for the managers. Employees' questions that cannot be answered at the meeting should be addressed through e-mail, an intranet site, or in future meetings – but they must be addressed.

The meeting should be led by the senior manager for the group (regional manager, executive director, assistant deputy minister, etc.) and should include the group's representative in the planning process (if it is not the senior manager). During the meetings, managers will explain the rationale for the plan and how the unit fits into the plan, explore priorities that pertain directly to the unit, and answer questions.

Next Steps

Business reports are published at budget time (March/April); plan the meetings as the business plan is being finalized. (Accountability reports are usually released in December; plan meetings for early January.)

Management and staff should meet at least on a quarterly basis to stay abreast of progress being made on the business plan. Preparing for these sessions will also help management to prepare progress reports to submit to the central agencies. On an ongoing basis, new projects and assignments need to be tied to achieving the departmental/agency business plan and to the government business plan. ✦
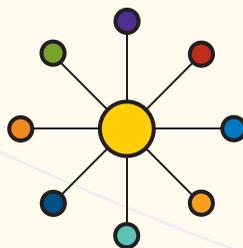
Department-Wide Meeting

This is a short meeting (30–60 minutes), hosted by senior management, that is intended to provide high-level information about a significant event or about big-picture progress.

Good For

- major events that have department-wide results (business plan or annual budget, restructuring, etc); could also be division-wide, region-wide, etc., as the situation warrants

Pros

- The audience hears the same message at the same times.

- It puts senior management in front of staff.

- Information can be delivered personally, to a large audience, in a relatively short time.

- Staff have an opportunity to ask questions and receive answers.

- Senior management have an opportunityt to update staff on organization-wide issues and reinforce links between their efforts and government goals.

Cons

- There is an impact on service delivery while staff attend the meeting: fewer staff at work, longer waits for clients.

- Large groups can intimidate some people, preventing them from asking questions.

- Some people like to grandstand.

- It can be expensive: renting a hall/theatre, travel and accommodation, etc.

Details

Staff often want to receive information from the people they perceive are driving significant events or changes in an organization. This is usually the deputy minister or executive director(s) and sometimes the minister.

Department-wide meetings are usually scheduled to announce or communicate a significant event, such as a fiscal year review , office move, or government restructuring. The information shared is usually "big picture." Sometimes the details surrounding the event are still unclear.

It can be tempting to wait until more information is available before communicating, but staff may perceive this as avoiding the issue or a lack of respect or concern for staff. Often, staff want to hear their department's leader acknowledge their information needs and concerns and to get assurances that they will receive more information at a later date. Sometimes they need to vent frustration, although they are expected to be civil and professional towards management and other members of the audience.

Staff come to a central location, usually away from the workplace, for a presentation. The information shared should address issues that will affect the audience directly. Often, there is a question and answer session. Q&A sessions are usually less confrontational when the information is not controversial (the introduction of a business plan as opposed to job losses). Light refreshments can be available; the meetings usually run 30–90 minutes.

Meetings should take place during the audience's normal working hours because staff have other after-work commitments. In larger departments, or where client service needs warrant, meetings can take place on a regional or organizational level (e.g., all staff from the southern region or all department staff from highway maintenance). When these smaller meetings are held, it is best when they are held within a short time span (on the same morning/afternoon or at least on the same day). Otherwise, the rumour mill ramps up, e-mails are exchanged, phone calls are made, and management loses the communication lead.

Handouts or information kits should be distributed or posted on an intranet so that staff can later review the information they receive at their own pace. This also increases the accuracy of "pass-along" information to those staff who may not have been present. Handouts should be distributed after the meeting; otherwise, the audience is more focused on reading the handout than on listening to the presentation.

Consider staff with special needs. Does anyone need an American Sign Language interpreter? Are venues accessible for people with mobility challenges?

Next Steps
Follow-up department-wide meetings may occur, but it is preferable that managers and supervisors deliver additional information when it becomes available. This reinforces middle management's role in the organization as a two-way conduit of information between senior management and staff. Talking points or presentations should be provided so staff would receive consistent information. ✦

Workgroup or Staff Meeting

Staff meet regularly to discuss internal and external operational issues facing the unit or section.

Good For

- small- to medium size groups: a branch at head office, a team, or all staff at a field office
- committees (occupational health and safety, etc.)

Pros

- Management and staff stay abreast of existing and pending issues.
- Management and staff stay abreast of progress made on corporate initiatives.
- Decisions and directions are communicated.
- It allows for exchange of perspectives and knowledge.
- It provides opportunity to ask questions and clarify understanding.

Cons

- In small locations, there could be client service implications.

Details

Staff meet to discuss the issues of the day, department news. Managers share information they have received from senior management about major government and departmental initiatives. Operational decisions can be made, and tasks may be assigned.

Frequency is variable and should be set by the workgroup. In very fluid situations, daily meetings lasting 5–10 minutes may do the trick. In other situations, the team may need only to get together on a weekly or biweekly basis.

The traditional agenda would have the team leader speak first to share information with staff. Then, a roundtable gives staff a chance to speak to tasks they are working on, pending issues they see on the horizon, etc. Colleagues take their cues and adjust their workload accordingly. For example, a policy analyst might note that a discussion paper will be in approvals this week and is expected to be distributed in two weeks' time. Support staff would then agree to arrange to print the discussion paper and mailing labels, order envelopes, etc. At the next meeting, the support staff might point out that all is ready for distributing the discussion paper, etc.

The benefit of this tool is that it reinforces the sense of team; it keeps people informed about issues and project management; it opens the door for other levels of communication. Management and staff are all in the loop on issues and projects, and their information came directly from the source.

Small-Group Cross-Divisional Meeting

A program designed to exchange information both vertically and horizontally across the department and delivered in a format that strengthens team spirit and fosters morale

Good For

• all departments

Pros

• There is a common format: e.g., breakfast with the deputy/executive director.

• The program builds visibility of senior management; attendees meet with senior management and put names to the faces

• It can build understanding of why some decisions are made: attendees see their personal role and their unit's role, in the big picture;

• It builds understanding that senior management is aware of issues facing staff.

• Attendees become acquainted with others in the department and hear the viewpoints of colleagues in other sections.

• Attendees express their views and alert senior management to issues.

• The program builds team spirit and fosters morale.

Cons

• Some say that these sessions weaken middle management, that staff go around their managers to the top. Others counter that staff do not go around middle managers who address – or at least acknowledge – issues raised by staff.

• Senior management gets involved in operational minutiae, things that middle management is paid to deal with. ✦
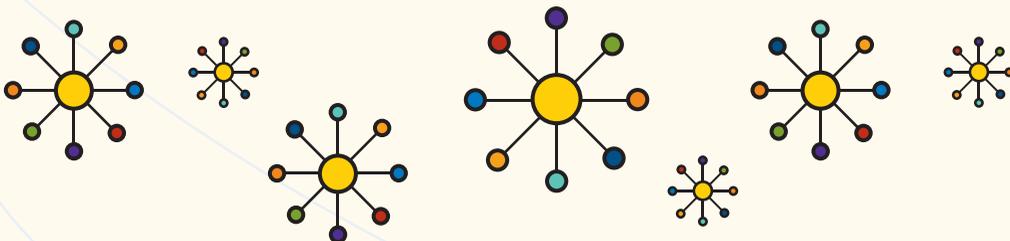
Details

This tool has been used in a number of organizations, in both the public and private sectors, with good results.

A common scenario is breakfast or lunch with the deputy. It would also work with an ADM or an executive director, someone whom staff do not normally access informally on a regular basis. The refreshments are light, so the dialogue remains the focus, not the meal. (Consideration must be given to dietary, religious, and cultural factors when choosing dates and menus.)

The meeting is informal; attendees are encouraged to share their views, to raise issues, etc. A typical session would last 45 minutes to an hour and occur on a regular basis (weekly, monthly, quarterly).

The leader has a dual role, as host and as facilitator. They can't just walk into the room, sit down, and expect conversation to flow. They need to ask open-ended questions, which are difficult to answer with a simple yes or no, and try to draw out attendees who are not forthcoming with their thoughts. If your executive feels awkward hosting these sessions, add a staffer who can moderate.

The number of attendees should be kept small (6–12), so no one feels intimidated. The one steadfast rule is that a no one attends the same session as someone who reports directly to them, again to reduce the intimidation factor. Still, some people may not speak their mind because they suspect their views will could get back to their supervisor/manager and be held against them.

Most often, attendees are randomly selected from across the organization; there is no set topic. Sometimes, there is a common tie between the attendees that forms a "theme" for the meeting. For example, the executive may want grassroots feedback as to how a recent reorganization is affecting operations and client satisfaction.

If the organization is going through change, it is important to approximate where the organization and the attendees are on the change cycle (denial, resistance, negotiation, acceptance). ✦

Management Forum

All managers from across the department, including the deputy or CEO, come together to discuss strategic management issues. Depending upon need, these meetings could be held bi-monthly, quarterly, semi-annually, or annually.

Good For
- departments of all sizes
- most effective in departments that have a lot of locations or diverse clientele

Pros
- It builds a sense of professionalism and comradeship among management.
- The forum diminishes the isolation that some managers can feel, especially if they are in the field.
- It provides a chance to refocus on – and examine the validity of – business plan goals, priorities, and strategies.
- It promotes "higher level," more strategic thinking and discussion

Cons
- It takes management out of the workplace for a day.
- It involves travel, accommodation, and refreshment costs.

Details
Managers often feel a need to meet with other managers to discuss issues facing the organization. Sometimes managers feel that a lot of effort is made to keep staff in the loop, at the expense of keeping management informed. These meetings provide an opportunity to refocus management on strategic issues and to hear from the minister and deputy minister/agency head.

Managers travel to a central location, usually away from the workplace, for their meeting. Meetings usually last a day and offer a mix of presentations and interactive discussion.

Management meetings may be timed to coincide with the start of the business planning cycle or a significant event, such as a government restructuring. Compared to shorter department-wide meetings, management meetings often explore the most up-to-date information to develop action plans and how this information will be shared with staff.

Handouts or information kits may be appropriate, because the meetings can be long and can cover a lot of topics. Managers might duplicate the handouts and share them with staff or use the information in them to deliver consistent messages to staff about issues and events. Staff do communicate between offices, so consistent messaging is critical.

As with department-wide meetings, appropriate accommodation must be considered for managers with special needs.

Next Steps

The deputy minister or agency head should follow up with managers to ensure that the meeting met both their needs and those of the organization. ✦

Walkabouts

As the name implies, leaders tour a facility or work site to gain first-hand experience in the operation of their organization. Staff can "strut their stuff" and share ideas and concerns with leaders in less formal situations

Good For

• all departments

Pros

• A walkabout acquaints the new executive with their department and introduces them to their staff.

• It allows executives to demonstrate understanding of the work and pressures facing staff.

• It is informal, inexpensive and involves only a short time commitment.

• It keeps executives in touch with front-line staff.

• It can be spontaneous and unscheduled.

• When a minister or executive is travelling, a walkabout can be added to their agenda.

Cons

• Some dispute the value of walkabouts, saying that they do not always accurately represent the work environment. Too much "tidying up" can be done if the walkabout is scheduled.

Details

Ministerial walkabouts occur most frequently after a new minister or deputy minister has been appointed and are scheduled over the initial three or four months in their new responsibility. Walkabouts are less common with a new executive director who is more likely to meet with operational staff during the course of the day. Ministerial walkabouts happen more frequently in Halifax than in the regions, because ministerial and deputy offices are there. However, it is important to get the minister and deputy outside of metro, because operations and clients may be very different than they are in metro. Directors and managers should make every effort to be in the workplace with staff.

Walkabouts are not exclusive to ministers and deputies. It is important that executive directors and managers keep in touch with front-line operations, and brief, unscheduled walkabouts are a good way to do that. The manager is given an opportunity to see what is happening first-hand, and employees are given an opportunity to explain their jobs, to pass along, information or concerns, and to ask questions. These walkabouts should occur every few weeks.

Scheduled, more formal, walkabouts are brief; the executive is given a 15- to 30-minute tour of the office or facility. Depending on the circumstances, they may meet clients. Some walkabouts are more inclusive. In addition to the tour, the executive may meet with management, with staff, or with stakeholders from the area. ✦
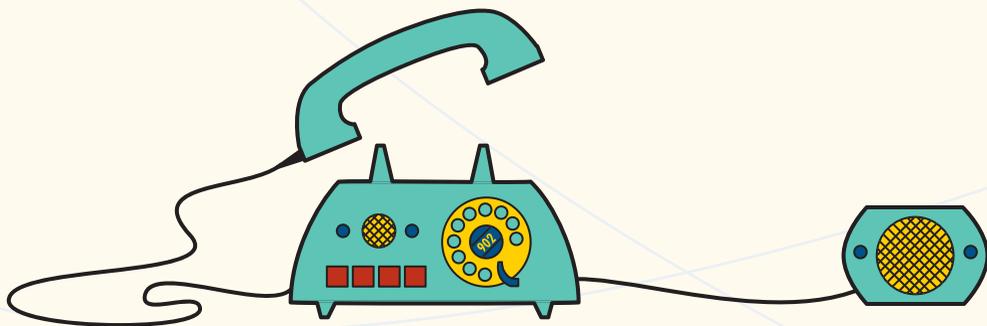
Telephone: Call In

Staff call in to a central number for the latest news on a program or situation.

Good For
- emergency situations (storms, floods, fires, etc.), especially after a workplace is closed.
- work stoppages
- program roll-outs

Pros
- Staff have access to current information when personal messaging (e-mail, face-to-face dialogue, etc.) is not possible.

Cons
- The program depends on management making timely information available and on staff taking the initiative to access the information.
- Information may change after someone calls in; they won't know this until the next time they call in.
- A concentrated promotional effort must be made to ensure that staff know there is a central number to call.

Details
All management and staff are provided with a telephone number they can call for information. This can be either a general practice or an arrangement that addresses a pending situation such as a storm warning. All staff may be calling one number, such as a call centre, or they may be calling a supervisor or manager. The information could come from a live operator or from a voice mail message.

Callers receive the latest information available at the time (e.g., The storm has closed the office until 12 noon; please stay off the roads to give crews a chance to clear the way. Call back at 11:00 a.m., to confirm that the office will open at noon.) In all cases, callers should be advised when to call again for new information.

In non-emergency situations, such as a program roll-out, telephone information or help lines can be established. Again, the information may come from call centre staff or from a voice mail system (Press 1 to find out how to apply to a program, Press 2 to track your application, etc.). ✦

Telephone: Call Out

Managers and staff receive a telephone call with the latest news on a program or situation.

Good For
- emergency situations (storms, floods, fires, etc.), especially after a workplace is closed
- work stoppages
- program roll-outs
- notification of further communication in a different format, such as e-mail, meetings, news media, etc.

Pros
- Staff have access to current information when personal messaging (e-mail, face-to-face dialogue, etc.) is not possible.

Cons
- This method will not reach staff who do not have telephone service (power outage, service outage, cell phone batteries dead, etc.).
- The call may not be taken (call screening) or received on time (voice mail), and the desired action (come back to work . . .) may not occur.

Details
This communications program can work through a call tree (call two people, ask each to call two people, etc.) or through a voice-mail distribution list. In the latter case, home or cell phone numbers would be programmed into a distribution list, and the system could be activated from a remote location.

Regardless of whether the information is delivered by a person or a machine, each message should advise the recipient when more information may be available and when they will receive a follow-up message.

You can develop voice-mail distribution lists that are similar to the distribution lists that you use in e-mail. It is a pre-programmed list of phone numbers that will receive your voice message; the phone system will automatically handle the dialling, the calling back of numbers where a connection can't be made, etc. Contact your office's telecommunications coordinator for directions about how to establish a voice-mail distribution list. ✦

Vision, Values, and Mission Statements

Vision and values statements state how an organization sees itself or wants others to see it.

A *mission* statement explains why the organization exists or what it does.

Good For
- any department or organization

Pros
- They build cohesive direction within an organization.
- They crystallize the purpose, direction, and values of an organization

Cons
- They can be considered to be meaningless if not reflected in the leaders of the organization.
- Developing a vision, a values statement, and a mission statement can become a complicated process.

Details
- An effective mission statement is best developed with input by all the members of an organization.
- Keep them short but comprehensive enough to be of value.
- Avoid saying how great you are: what great quality and what great service you provide.
- Examine other organizations' statements, but make certain your statement is yours and not that of some other organization.
- Make sure that the majority of the organization truly believes in its vision, values, and mission statements.
- The organization should communicate its mission, vision, and values statements to all employees through media such as newsletters, bulletin boards, intranet, etc.
- Professionally printed and framed copies can be displayed, so staff and management are constantly reminded of the organization's vision, values, and mission. These can be placed in staff rooms, boardrooms, main entrances, etc.

Elements of a Mission Statement

- The Purpose Element clearly states what your organization seeks to accomplish: Why does your organization exist? What is the ultimate result of your work?

- The Business Element outlines the "business(es)" (i.e., activities or programs) your organization chooses in order to pursue its purpose. Specifically, you must answer, "What activity are we going to do to accomplish our purpose?"

- The Values Element lists beliefs that your organization's members hold in common and endeavour to put into practice. The values guide your organization's members in performing their work. Specifically, you should ask, "What are the basic beliefs that we share as an organization?"

The public service values for the government of Nova Scotia are:

- respect
- integrity
- diversity
- accountability
- the public good

Departments may want to add others that focus specifically on the mission and goals of the department. ✦
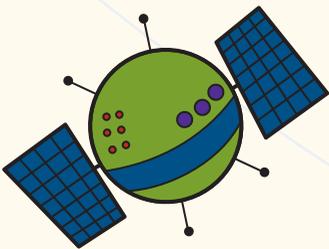
Newsletter

A regular department- or organization-wide publication, to which employees are encouraged to actively contribute, that can be used to provide general information to all employees.

Good For

- any department

Pros

- A consistent message reaches all employees, regardless of classification or location.
- Employees can contribute.
- Employees can learn about other units in the department.
- Employees can see their role, or their unit's role, in the big picture.
- Employees can learn about each other, professionally and personally.
- A newsletter can be a recognition/incentive tool.
- It can be a team-building tool for the people involved in putting it together.
- There is no technology demand for the audience; a newsletter can be consumed at the reader's convenience and stored for future reference.

Cons

- Production requirements make this a time-consuming option.
- Employee buy-in and participation may be slow to develop (or might never develop).
- It can be time consuming for the editor; other work responsibilities must be taken into account.
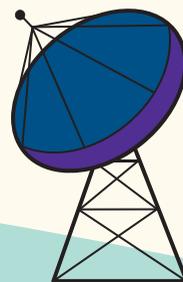
Details

In basic terms, this tool resembles an employee newspaper or magazine. It can be produced in a variety of formats, in colour or black and white, and the frequency can vary. Traditionally, these are monthly or quarterly publications.

The publication can be simple or complicated, considering the audience and the content; both have their pros and cons. For example, a manager may want to publish a simple newsletter to minimize cost and staff time; staff may interpret this as meaning that they are insignificant. On the other hand, a glossy colour publication may be resented by staff, who say that the money would be better spent on training, program support, etc. The needs and desires of the audience must be gauged before committing to a format.

Content is usually feature-oriented, people-focused, and light. It can be used to reinforce or expand on other communication tools (e-mail, bulletin, etc.). Content options include, but are not limited to, the following:

- human interest stories, involving employees: e.g., hobbies, vacations, pets
- profiles of workgroups or individual employees
- new/departing staff, promotions, transfers
- employee recognition: e.g., long service awards, training, graduation
- general announcements
- new policies or procedures
- departmental accomplishments: e.g., the response by TPW's snowplow operators during White Juan
- corporate sports and social events
- promotion for United Way or other charitable projects
- health and wellness information
- marriage, birth, and death announcements

Newsletters can be perpetually ongoing, or they can be tied to a significant event such as a reorganization or special project.
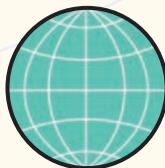
Content must always reflect public service goals of tolerance and inclusivity and remain apolitical. Never assume that a newsletter is an "internal" document. Material that is confidential or potentially embarrassing to the department, its staff, or its clients will likely find its way outside.

Photographs and illustrations are powerful communication tools and should be included in a newsletter whenever feasible. They do not need to be professional caliber, but they do need to be "readable."

Newsletters are traditionally printed and distributed; in many cases, electronic copies in pdf format are archived on an intranet. It is less costly to print and distribute a newsletter than to e-mail it to staff and expect them to print it. Electronic distribution is even less effective when staff have limited access to technology. It is preferable to deliver a copy directly to each employee; but delivering sufficient copies to central sites (one per floor, one per field office, etc.) is also acceptable.

Resource Issues

Technology
As mentioned earlier, newsletters can come in a number of formats and levels of sophistication. At the low end, a simple newsletter can be developed using a word processing program. At the high end, bells and whistles such as colour, illustration, page size, etc., may call for a design professional. Even a low-end newsletter requires skills over and above day-to-day word processing, so training will be a factor. Additional techniques and technology such as scanning, digital cameras, duplex printing, tabloid printing, etc., must also be taken into account.

Staffing
Many newsletters are produced by communications staff in a department or agency, but this is not mandatory. In some cases, communications may act solely as an editor or advisor to a publication. By all means, keep communications and senior management in the loop about content and issues facing the newsletter. In most cases, a newsletter committee is a good option. A committee ensures regional and divisional representation in the publication and serves to share the production workload.

Next Steps
Regardless of the style, format, and frequency of the newsletter, it should be evaluated on a regular (annually, every two years . . .) frequency. Communications can provide guidance on audience surveys. ✦

Bulletin Board

A bulletin board is used to post information in a way that is accessible to most staff members; it is a source for routine news and upcoming events and a secondary source for more important information initially conveyed face to face or by other means.

Good For

• any department

Pros

• It is a good place to share required information (WHMIS/OH&S, emergency procedures, etc.) that is of interest to most staff.
• A consistent message is provided.
• Emergency information is easily accessible.
• It informs all employees, including those without computer access.
• Timely information can easily be communicated to staff.

Cons

• Inappropriate information can be posted.
• If you post safety information – like fire exit procedures – on the bulletin board, reinforce this communication in other ways. No one will look at the bulletin board when the fire alarm starts to sound.
• It can quickly become out of date and cluttered.

Details

Information on a bulletin board usually falls into one of two categories:

• long-term information of interest to all staff (health and safety, fire exits, etc.)
• short-term information (United Way events, community events, etc.)

In many cases, a bulletin board can be located in a public, high-traffic area. In other cases, it is better to have it in an area that is accessible only to staff (lunchroom, near elevators or entrances, etc.). Regardless, the information should be short and concise, easily understood in passing. As well, there are issues about privacy/confidentiality. For example, an employee may feel uncomfortable leafing through employment opportunities if the person they report to might see them.

Someone should be delegated to manage the content on a bulletin board to ensure that the postings remain relevant and appropriate. Unless the information must be posted to comply with legislation, each document should have a "take-down" date.

Suggestion Box

Management and staff suggest how the organization can improve its service, morale, etc.

Good For

- environments where management and staff are in an adversarial situation; although suggestion programs also work in collaborative environments

Pros

- Participants feel they are part of the solution.

- Participants work to improve their work environment.

Cons

- The program loses validity if suggestions are not acted upon.

- Participation can suffer if the project is implemented in too small a workplace or if people believe that the program is not anonymous. In the private sector, employers sometimes share savings with the staff member who makes the suggestion. For example, if an employee recommends a process change that would save the firm $100,000 a year, the employee would receive a cash reward; the more saved, the larger the reward. Obviously, this could not be an anonymous program.

- It can motivate frivolous suggestions.

Details

Such a program can be very low tech, where suggestions are literally dropped into a box. On the other hand, they can be as sophisticated as an intranet-based database.

Suggestions need to be positive, respectful of others, and feasible. For example, "Fire the boss!" or "Close the offices and let everyone work from home; saves rent and child care expenses" are examples of negative or disrespectful and unfeasible suggestions, respectively.

The "box" should be emptied on a regular basis, and the suggestions should, preferably, be reviewed by a management/staff committee. Optionally, all suggestions could be tallied in a conspicuous place that is accessible to staff only. In this situation, everyone can see the quality of suggestions that come forward and management's record of acting on suggestions. ✦

E-mail

E-mail is the easiest way to deliver consistent, timely information to staff – and often is the most misused.

Good For
- departments where most staff have regular access to e-mail

Pros
- A consistent message about an issue can be quickly shared with many staff.
- It is fast and inexpensive.
- The message can be prepared in advance and scheduled for delivery at a later time or date.
- Attachments can be included or links provided to additional online information.
- Recipients can respond to the message (this can be turned off as circumstances warrant).

Cons
- It can be perceived as TMI – too much information – or corporate spam.
- E-mail is impersonal.
- It is easy for the sender, not always appropriate for the audience.
- It benefits only staff who work in close proximity to a computer; a highway worker might hear news on the radio before seeing an e-mail on the topic.
- Some managers like to hide behind e-mail.
- It is easy to use e-mail to be, or appear to be, rude or discourteous.

Details
E-mail is a two-edged sword. On the plus side, it's cheap and it's easy to quickly send the same information to a lot of people. On the minus side, it's cheap and it's easy to quickly send the same information to a lot of people.

E-mail is excellent for sending concise, timely information; it is not appropriate to send e-mail that includes two or more lengthy attachments that must be read online or printed for reading later. The sender often believes it is cheaper to send information electronically to avoid printing costs. In fact, the cost of printing tens or hundreds or thousands of individual copies on laser printers can be higher than the cost of photo-copying and distributing the document.

Like web pages, e-mail is scanned rather than read closely, and the writer needs to keep that in mind.

Subject lines should be concise and provide enough detail to let the recipient quickly assess the importance of the message and how it should be handled. "Corporate Restructuring Update" is much more informative than "Message from the Deputy." "A Message from the Deputy Minister to Update Staff on Corporate Restructuring" is too long; only the first half would show up in an e-mail inbox.

If you are writing to many people who do not know one another, especially people outside of government, consider using BCC instead of CC. The reader of a BCC will know to whom the message originally went, and that they got a copy, no more.

Writing in capital letters is considered SHOUTING; as well, it makes your message harder to read. Read the following sentence over six times, placing the emphasis on a different word each time: "Now is the time for change."

See how the meaning changes, depending on where the emphasis was placed? E-mail readers cannot hear your phrasing or your tone or read other clues such as expression or body language. If you're saying something funny, let the reader know by adding <grin> after the comment so they will know that you're not being serious.

Inform the reader what, if any, action or response you desire, or when more informa-tion will be forthcoming.

Consider that the person on the receiving end may not be the only person reading your message. It may be read by any staff who have Read access on the recipient's e-mail account or by family, friends, or strangers if e-mail is accessed away from the office.

And yes, spelling counts. ✦

Intranet

Intranet is a website available only to staff and generally available only in the office, because it is behind the firewall.

## Good For
- staff who have access to a computer

Pros
- Intranet provides consistent, up-to-date information in an appealing visual format.
- It provides information that serves a jumping-off point for further discussion.
- It can be an information resource, where common notices, policies, etc., are kept, reducing the need for online storage because one copy serves many people.
- It is an inexpensive medium.

Cons
- There is ongoing debate about ownership. Is the intranet site managed by IT, by communications, or at an operational level; if not communications, who checks information to ensure that it is on message?
- Staff must seek out the information; it is not delivered, as in an e-mail.
- It misses staff who do not have easy access to a computer: highway crews, vehicle inspectors, etc.
- It usually requires some technical ability to prepare content, although some software is very user-friendly.

Details
Intranets use the same technology to communicate with staff that departments and agencies use on the Internet to communicate with their stakeholders around the world.
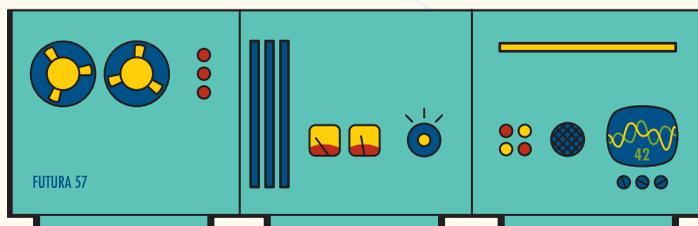
This tool, like anything Internet-related, is constantly changing. Early intranets tended to be glorified online newsletters; today, intranets should be key business tools. Staff should use them in this way. Most departments have intranets (see iweb.gov.ns.ca for a list of Government of Nova Scotia intranets).Take special care with crafting and publishing information that goes on an intranet. (This applies to all electronic communication: e-mail, intranets, blogs, and Internet websites.) That is because people read online much differently than they read printed materials. People scan online documents, looking for significant words and illustrations – "bite-size" nuggets of information. (If you *had* to read *War and Peace*, would you prefer to read it for free on a computer screen or spend a few bucks to buy the paperback? That is how your audience feels as they scroll through screen after screen after screen . . .)

Use the intranet to put forth salient points, the *Reader's Digest* version, and provide references to more complete information that staff can access online or in print, or tell them how or when they will receive more information.

Short approval chains work best to keep information fresh and timely. Empower the knowledge experts to make the information available.

"Tease" your audience to your site with a broadcast e-mail that offers a glimpse (first paragraph?) of an article and provide a link. An update every two to four weeks should suffice; otherwise, people will treat it as spam.

A good practice is to designate that your intranet home page be the default start page when staff start their browsers. IT can set this – and lock it – as computers are configured or repaired.

Next Steps
Keep the information current; otherwise staff will not feel compelled to use the intranet, and its effectiveness as a communication tool wanes. ✦

Online Video

Instead of sending e-mail, an executive tapes a message, and this is posted online, preferably on an intranet. Staff view the message at any convenient time.

Good For
- workplaces that have high-speed Internet connections

Pros
- One-way online video provides a more personable message from senior management. The "face time" with senior management has more impact and more personality, compared to e-mail. (Two-way online video chats are possible, but require additional hardware and considerable bandwidth.)
- It reduces travel/accommodation costs for divisional or department-wide meetings.
- It is easy to add text captions for hard-of-hearing employees.

Cons
- Quality takes time; timely, on-the-fly productions may look amateurish.
- For best results, use a professional crew through CNS (which adds to expense).
- Bandwidth needs put a strain on the computer network and may slow other applications.
- Access is awkward to impossible for locations on dial-up connections.
- There is little interactivity.
- It may be viewed as management self-promotion.

Details

Although this approach can be used for spur-of-the-moment, timely messaging, it is best suited to scheduled events such as launching a business plan, opening a new facility, beginning a new service, retirements, seasonal greetings, etc. Supporting visuals such as charts and stock footage can be added to provide background information or greater clarity for complex topics.

Staff log on to an intranet (or another online location). A shared folder on a local server will do in a pinch but could slow e-mail, printing, opening, and closing files, etc. Staff view the video presentation using a web browser or video player software on their computers. Internet browsers and media players are normally built in to computers; others are freely available online. It would not be necessary to purchase new software to view the presentation.

Some productions play live; others are prerecorded. The deciding factors are usually the executive's comfort level on-camera and the circumstances prompting the production.

Writing for spoken word is very different from writing a report, so it is imperative that professional help is sought from communications staff.

A production can be developed using a consumer-grade video equipment and departmental staff, but for best results, call in Communications Nova Scotia. Their video production team can provide the service or contract the work to an external production company. Using in-house staff reduces cost at the risk of having your message look like a home video. As well, professional crews can coach the speaker on tone, pacing, locations, etc.

The entire production should run only a few minutes to minimize the strain on the computer network. For longer complex topics, the production can be transferred to VHS, CD-ROM, or DVD and distributed to offices. ✦

News Bulletin

Occasional department- or office-wide publication that provides urgent information to all employees. It is used for timely announcements, as a precursor or supplement to other communication, to ensure that employees learn departmental or government news before they hear it through the media

Good For
- any department or section

Pros
- Information is timely (regional office closing early for storm, etc.).
- A consistent message reaches all employees, regardless of classification or location.
- Employees learn about important events before or as they happen.

Cons
- Not everyone has computer access, so several modes of delivery are required.
- Staff who work away from the work site will not see the bulletin until they return to the work site.
- More than one medium may be required (e-mail, bulletin board posting, copy for each employee).
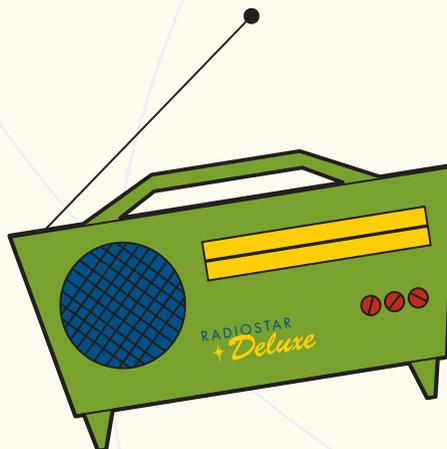
Details

Bulletins are meant to convey timely, urgent information. They may be used alone or as a supplement to other communication. They may be transmitted electronically by e-mail, by fax, or even by telephone, or they may be copied and distributed.

Generally, they should be the precursor to more complete information. For example, a bulletin may say that the Sydney office will not open today because of flooding. Follow-up information would explain when normal operations will resume, how service will be affected, whether equipment or documents have been damaged, etc. Sharing this supplemental information is as critical as the original bulletin.

Bulletins should be clear and concise, with only the most relevant, timely information – strictly what staff need to know right now. Anything more should follow in a memo, newsletter, e-mail, meeting, etc. Whenever possible, include in the bulletin how and when more information may be available.

Consideration must be given to how the information in a bulletin will be conveyed to staff away from an office or work site, for example, case workers or plow operators. In some cases, they can be contacted by cell phone or radio; in other cases, the information will be received when they next visit the office or work site.

Only a select group of people should have the authority to issue bulletins; this will vary from organization to organization. This usually includes a senior official such as a deputy, ADM, regional manager or director, although they may delegate this authority.

All staff should receive departmental news releases at the same time as they are issued to the media. Deputies should ensure that communications does this routinely. There are very few exceptions; one might be weekly road advisories, which could be issued solely to staff in affected regions. ✦
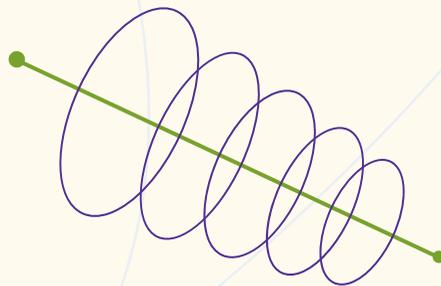
Podcasting

A short "radio show" distributed over an intranet or the Internet (originally referred to the iPod digital music player; now more generally defined as "personal on demand broadcasting").

Good For
- delivering messages that are more personal than "an e-mail from the Deputy" attachment buried three levels down in a forwarded message

Pros
- The audience hears consistent messaging at a time of their choosing.
- It puts senior management – or at least their voices – in front of staff.
- Information can be delivered personally, to a large audience, in a relatively short time.
- It is a good way to solicit/share feedback about initiatives in the department.
- It is an opportunity to mix the spoken word with music, sounds, etc.
- RSS feeds let subscribers know when a new podcast is available.

Cons
- Some people do not like the sound of their voice when it's played back: it's not what they thought they sounded like.
- Some training in preparation, delivery, and editing is required, or the podcast will sound amateurish,
- It can be distracting for co-workers if someone is listening to a podcast through their PC's speakers. Headphones are available for about $10 and up.
- The technology consumes bandwidth; one option is to mirror the podcast on local servers.

Details
A podcast is a lot like a radio show that is produced internally. In most, there is a host, a theme song, recurring features, etc. Some run between one and one-and-a-half hours; ideally, it should run about 15 minutes or less – a daily update could be as short as 3 minutes.

Technically, you need a means to record the program and a means to deliver it to the audience.

On the production side, the technology can be as simple as recording files on a PC, using software that comes with Windows, and a headset/microphone combo. If you wanted to include a remote interview (e.g., interviewing a long-service award winner on their career), the interviewer could use an MP3 player that has voice-recording capability or a standard cassette recorder. At the other end of the spectrum, you could produce a podcast in a fully equipped studio at Communications Nova Scotia.

Care must be taken to ensure the right measure of "personality" in a podcast. It needs to be professional without being slick. Sounding homespun is not always a bad thing, but it can be a turn-off for some audience members if they think it is unprofessional or condescending. At the other end of the spectrum, the host(s) and guest(s) should be conversational and engaging; it should not sound scripted or be wooden, bureaucratic, or laden with jargon.

Once the interviews, sound bites, audio, and music are gathered, the elements are "mixed" into a file using software and saved as an MP3 file. This file is posted on a website, and the audience is notified through e-mail or an RSS subscription. You don't actually need an iPod to listen to a podcast, although this is where the word came from. Listeners download the file to their PCs to listen to right away or at a later time

After your first podcast is released, you need to alert your intended audience that it is available. You can do this by e-mail and be sure to tell them they can ensure they stay up to date on your podcasts by "subscribing." They can do this by right-clicking on the RSS or XML logo on your podcast.

Communications Nova Scotia uses this technology for news release distribution. An environmental reporter might subscribe to Energy, Environment and Labour, and Natural Resources releases and avoid receiving irrelevant releases from Community Services, Education, Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations, etc. A RSS feed for a podcast would alert subscribers when a new program is posted to the podcast website.

Next Steps

This is a relatively new medium, and many people will not be aware of it, although it has gained enough popularity that editors of the New Oxford American Dictionary selected "podcast" as the word of the year for 2005. Because of its newness, it should not be tried once and discarded because it didn't work. There needs to be a lot of planning before a podcast is launched, addressing why this medium is the way to go, production issues, etc. ✦

Blogs

An online (intranet or Internet) journal that subscribers use to get news ("blog" is a contraction of "web log").

Good For

- keeping teams, clients informed
- building a culture of information sharing

Pros

- It is informal.
- It is a quick way to share consistent information.
- RSS feeds let subscribers know when a new entry has been posted.

Cons

- It is not as appropriate in offices where staff do not have access to technology or, for an Intranet blog, are infrequently in the office.

Details

Blogs have been getting a lot of "buzz," meaning that a lot of people – from the *Harvard Business Review* to online news reports – are talking about them. Businesses are increasingly turning to blogs to keep clients updated about new products and services. (Note: Blog is both a verb and a noun: *I blog by publishing a blog.*)

While individuals publish personal blogs on Internet-based service providers, the technology can also benefit internal communications programs.

Blogs tend to support other communications efforts rather than being a stand-alone product. For example, a project team might blog to keep its members informed about new developments between more formal monthly update meetings.

During the 2005 sittings of the Legislature, one MLA published a blog that kept readers informed about how the House operates.

The person writing the blog posts a message, and subscribers can comment on the original post. These comments can be moderated, meaning they won't show up until they are approved by the original blogger. This control is more common on public blogs.

After your first blog post is published, you need to alert your intended audience that it is available. You can do this by e-mail and be sure to tell them they can ensure they stay up to date on your messaging – and reader feedback – by "subscribing" to your blog. They can do this by right-clicking on the RSS or XML logo on your blog.

Communications Nova Scotia uses this technology for news release distribution. An environmental reporter might subscribe to Energy, Environment and Labour, and Natural Resources releases and avoid receiving irrelevant releases from Community Services, Education, Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations, etc. A RSS feed for a blog would alert subscribers when a new entry is posted to the blog website.

As well, a "trackback" can be used to alert the original blogger when someone refers to his or her blog. For example, if the Department of Health's IT support group in Halifax has a blog about network security and the Department of Community Service's support team has a blog that mentions and links to the Health blog, the Health blog will show a trackback.

Some people read blogs through their web browsers; others use special software (aggregators) to search for updates to the blogs to which they subscribe. Browser-based users can access their subscribed blogs wherever they can connect to the web; software solutions offer more subscription-management options.

In the blog "culture," the individual must write their own blog. If the deputy minister is to have a blog, the deputy minister must write it.

Software installed on the server can simplify the blogging process, making it pretty straightforward for those without technical skills. Open your program, type your message and save it to the server. The server software automatically sends out an "alert" that lets readers who "subscribe" to your blog.

Bloggers have the option of turning comments on or off on their blog. If comments are on, readers can respond to what they've read and other readers will see their comments. If comments are off, readers can only read – and not respond to – the original post. In the blogging "culture", it's preferable to have comments on but it's not mandatory.

Next Steps

Ask staff/team members about their experiences with blogs and how they might be applied at work to share information with others.

Subscribe to a free, Internet-based service such as www.bloglines.com and get a feel for the technology.

Contact your IT team before installing software on your computer; and ask for their guidance on which software is approved for installation and on how to set up the server software.

Remember that blogs – like e-mail and v-mail – are subject to Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy policies and legislation. ✦

Wiki

A live document that anyone (who can access it) can edit (from the Hawaiian *wiki* meaning "quick").

Good For

- collaborative documents such as policies, agendas, reports

Pros

- It simplifies the task of producing a document that many people compose, review, and/or approve.

- It reduces the to and fro of document review.

- It eliminates the need for version control.

- It promotes collaboration and dialogue.

Cons

- Not everyone is comfortable with having their work edited by their peers or superiors in an open environment.

- Not everyone is comfortable with editing the work of someone superior to them in an open environment.

Details

Almost everyone has heard someone introduce a draft document as a "living document," meaning that it is a work in progress. A wiki is a true living document in that it is constantly being edited and tweaked by anyone who has access to it.

For example, if the Public Service Commission wanted to develop a health and safety policy on cell phone use while driving, it could post a draft version on its intranet site and then open it to the public service for comment. Instead of sending suggested revisions to the PSC, employees would go to the wiki and make the changes to the document itself.

To launch a wiki, one needs to have software installed on the server. This software links to a database that tracks who edits the document, who further revises those edits, etc. This ensures that changes can be undone, and that no one's contribution is lost. Some software is available through open source (free to download), and some is available commercially. It is important that you work with your IT folks to roll this technology out; they need to be aware of anything that is installed on a server and will be great resources if you need help setting up the database, etc.

Once the software is in place, a project team should meet to experiment and learn about wikis.

Next Steps

Try out some existing public wikis to get a feel for how they work. A good example is the Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page), an online editable encyclopedia. Find a topic of interest to you – either professionally or personally – and look it up in the Wikipedia. Add to or revise the entry.

Invite a project team to do the same, to determine if a wiki is a technology the team wants to use. ✦
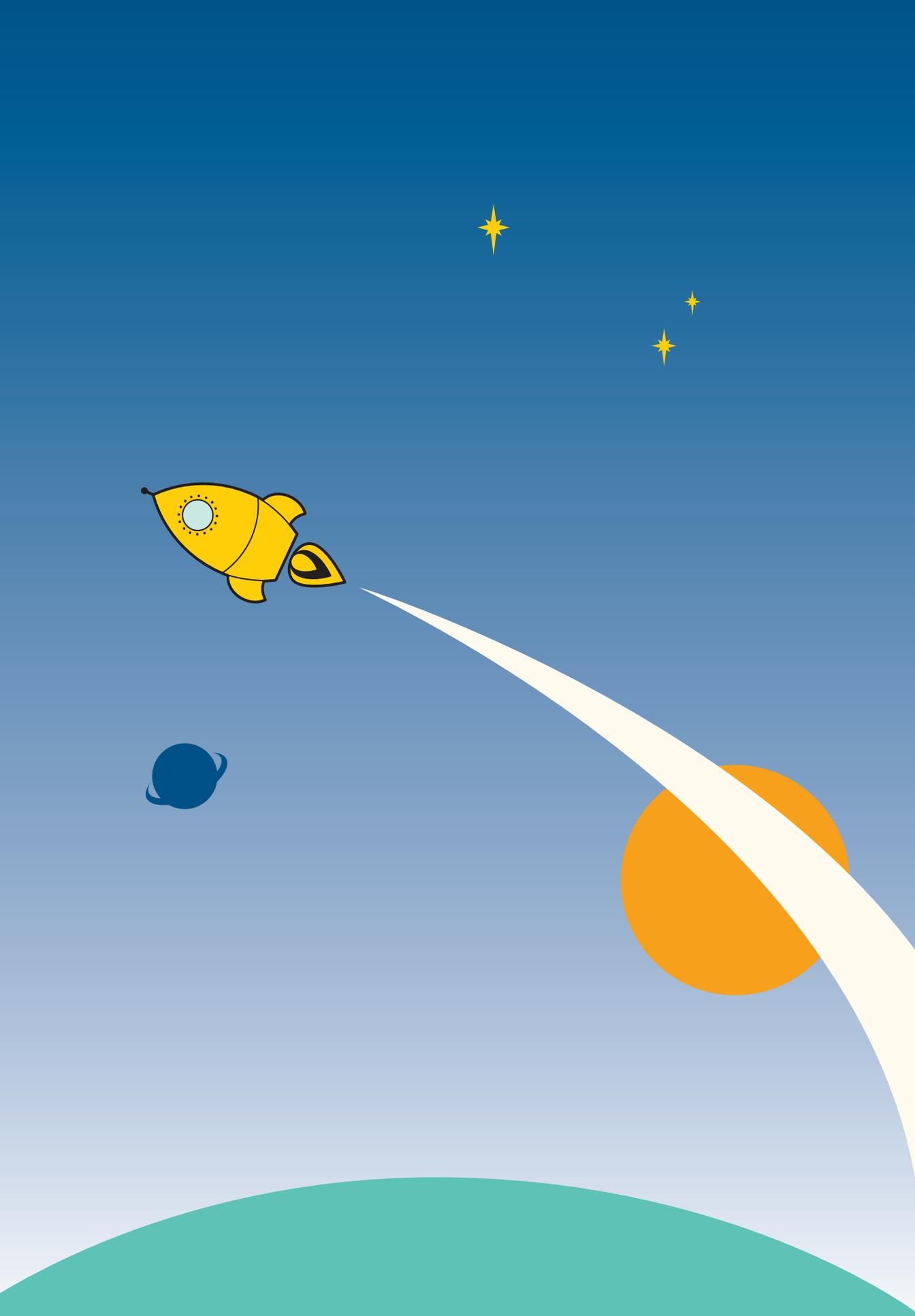
Effective Meetings

We spend so much of our time in meetings, it is important that we use them effectively. The following notes should help you do just that.

Plan

What do you want the meeting to achieve, what decisions need to be made at the meeting? What information is needed to achieve the desired results? Who needs to be at the meeting? Is the meeting necessary? (Some meetings take place regularly simply because they are on a schedule; no one checks to ensure that there is anything to discuss.)

Inform

Share the answers to the above questions with the people who will attend the meeting.

Prepare

Develop a logical agenda, allotting an appropriate amount of time for each segment. Remember that what's urgent isn't necessarily most important, and conduct your meeting accordingly.

Structure

Structure the discussion in separate logical stages: information, discussion, decision. Control the meeting to keep it on track.

Summarize and Record

Summarize and record decisions and action points; secure consensus from attendees before they leave the meeting.
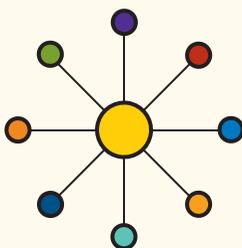
Meetings Checklist

KEEP YOUR MEETINGS ON TRACK

	No	Yes
1 Clear agenda circulated in advance	○	○
2 Information circulated in advance, where necessary	○	○
3 Attendees/presenters on time	○	○
4 Note-taker arranged before the discussion begins	○	○
5 Room arranged to promote discussion; visual aids available where necessary (overhead, laptop, projector, etc.)	○	○
6 Arrangements for managing interruptions	○	○
7 Positive structured discussion: information, discussion, decision	○	○
8 Each agenda item positively concluded with action points	○	○
9 Everyone knows what has to be done	○	○
10 Date for next meeting fixed, if one is required	○	○
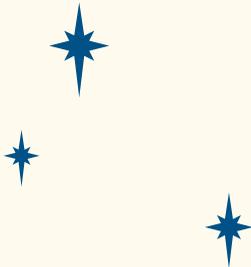
Oh, One More Thing: Plain Language

There was, not long ago, a very senior civil service manager who would regularly send e-mail and memos that were so convoluted, so vague and bloated with jargon that recipients struggled to find meaning – any meaning – in the missives they received. Sometimes they would call the manager to ask for clarification; other times they would take a guess at what he meant and act on their interpretation; sometimes they would just ignore the e-mail and hope that it wasn't important.

That manager was no friend to plain language.

Plain language is clear communication that is clearly understood by the intended audience. Using plain language does not mean "dumbing down" your message or making it less precise. What it does, however, is result in everyone with whom you're communicating understanding exactly what you mean. And if they hear and see you talking and writing in clear language, they're more likely to do the same when they are communicating with clients, partners, and citizens.

So, how can we write more plainly?

- Write in the active voice. Sentences written in the active voice are more direct and concise. They identify who is responsible for what actions.

  Passive: *The use of plain language is being recommended by government.*

  Active: *Government is recommending the use of plain language.*

  Passive: *A failure to follow reporting procedures will result in an absence being recorded as leave without pay.*

  Active: *If you don't call in, you won't be paid.*

  See the difference?

- Use straightforward language without a lot of embellishment. Adjectives and adverbs enrich the language, but sometimes they dilute the message. Which of the following sentences sounds more powerful? "We will actively promote the regular use of clear communication." "We will promote clear communication."

- Avoid ambiguous or outmoded terms. Words like "deem," "prior to," and "shall" are ponderous and frequently imprecise. "Shall," for example can mean "must"; it can mean "is"; and it can mean "will." Use the meaning you want to convey rather than leaving it up to the reader to choose.

The use of plain language requires some planning – what you want to say and the best way to get that message across – organizing, writing in plain words and clear sentences, and designing for readability. Like everything else you've seen in this little book, it takes a bit of effort, but it's not rocket science.

Where can I find out more about plain language?

The Editorial Services section of Communications Nova Scotia has a plain language specialist on staff: Diane MacGregor, 424-5455.

Registry of Regulations has a *Style and Procedures Manual* that is subtitled "A Guide to Drafting Regulations in Plain Language." It contains excellent information on using plain language in government. See **www.gov.ns.ca/just/regulations/styleman/index.htm** for a PDF version of the manual.

There is a wealth of information on the Internet. The Plain Language Association International site at **www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/** provides plain language articles, writing tutorials, web links, and news.

*"Any fool can make things bigger, more complex, and more violent.
It takes a touch of genius — and a lot of courage — to move in the opposite direction."*
— Albert Einstein

NOTES

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