

Communication audit: The starting point for improvement

Poor internal communication has been pinpointed by independent reviews as a significant contributory factor in failings within the health service. But how can healthcare organisations improve if they do not know exactly what they are already doing (or have done previously) and where things are not working as well as they could be?

A comprehensive audit of your internal communication is a worthwhile investment of time and effort. It should help you:

- Clarify the aims and objectives of your communication activity
- Gauge where communication is effective in achieving its purpose
- Assess what resources are being used for communication and if these offer value for money
- Identify barriers to meaningful communication
- Identify gaps in communication and missed opportunities
- Identify training needs

What should an audit look at?

This should be a thorough investigation, with as much detail as possible, which challenges assumptions about who does what and how effective it is, and assesses **every** aspect of how you communicate with employees.

Your audit should involve talking to a variety of staff (including managers and consultants) about their experiences of communication, both as providers and recipients of information.

The following provides an outline of what an audit should cover; inevitably there will be some duplication within these areas, but the end result should clearly show all formal communication activity within the organisation at different levels.

Audiences

Who are you communicating with? People working in your organisation are not one homogenous mass. What specific groups are there? Do they face any particular issues relating to communication e.g. limited access to IT, shift work?

Policy and plans

Do you have a communication policy, strategy and/or plan? What do these cover and who is responsible for implementing, monitoring and updating them? Is communication specifically included in other policies and plans?

Products

Look at individual communication products and tools such as newsletters, videos, guidance and instructions, leaflets, handbooks and reports. Who is each one for? What is its specific purpose? How is it accessed? Who is involved in its production, including decisions on content? How much does it cost?

Channels

Look at what specific channels are available for communication and how they are used. This could include your website and intranet as well as team meetings, management briefings, online and face-to-face networks, social media, email, handheld devices (like beepers and mobiles) and notice boards.

Roles and responsibilities

Who has specific responsibility for communication, and is this in their job description? Who makes decisions about communication, including development of channels and products and approval of content? Who is involved in implementation (including distribution)?

Processes

Can you track the processes behind your communication activity, such as how board decisions are cascaded through the organisation, new guidance is developed or staff concerns responded to? Are the different steps and responsibilities clear? Do you have specific processes in place e.g. for crisis communication or incident reporting?

Resources

Is there a budget allocated to communication and what does this cover (e.g. staff costs, ongoing print, regular events, one-off activities)? What human resources are available in terms of specialist skills and knowledge, and how are these used (e.g. involvement of communication team at board level or in major projects)? Are any communication tools (e.g. templates) and training available? Who are these aimed at and how widely are they used?

Coherence and consistency

Does the actual content – information and messages – match up across the organisation, however this is delivered? Are there inconsistencies or unnecessary duplication?

Measurement

What tools are available to measure how effective your communication is? Can you identify the purpose of each communication activity (including long-established newsletters and specialist information like guidance or instructions)? Is there a way of capturing this (e.g. feedback, notable reduction in queries or errors) and using it to monitor each activity's effectiveness?

Wider communication

Look at wider communication, especially recruitment material and information on your website, which will affect how new and existing employees view your organisation and their role within it.

This may seem a very long list, but really drilling down into your communication, and asking the right questions, will generate fresh thinking on what is communicated and how. Ultimately this will help you make improvements and save wasting time, effort and money on activities that do not really make a difference to staff or your organisation as a whole, ensuring that all communication supports better internal engagement as well as high standards of behaviour and practice.