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Why you should consider infecting the employees in your organization

Melcrum event explores the concept of viral communication in the workplace with Dr Leandro Herrero

After much anticipation, Melcrum hosted its third members only event in London this week. Members from all over Europe joined their peers for breakfast at London's New Connaught Rooms, to network and learn more about research into peer-to-peer communication in the workplace.

The audience heard case studies from the new report [Viral communication in the workplace](#), on how organizations including [easyJet](#), [Pfizer](#), [Sun Microsystems](#) and [Deloitte](#) have "virally infected" employees with enthusiasm and interest in process/culture change programs and various other new initiatives.

Members heard from 3 experts in this area of research:

Kieron Shaw, internal communication specialist and former head of research at Melcrum;
Dr. Leandro Herrero, CEO of The Chalfont Project consultancy and pioneer of Viral Change™; and
Nigel Edwards, UK internal communication manager, Pfizer.



A radical change in internal communication

Having worked on Melcrum's research reports from 2000-2005, Kieron Shaw (pictured, right) felt he'd covered every aspect of internal communication had reached all his conclusions about it. Thinking that there was nothing new left to explore, he went traveling for a year, only to return to what he called "radical change".

"When I left Melcrum, they'd just launched a new report called [Top 10 New Technologies](#)

[for Internal Communicators](#), which explained in very basic terms what a blog was and what a wiki was and so on.

When I came back a year later, I saw a radical change in the way people communicated with each other, and everyone was going crazy over [social media](#). It was an exciting time. There was democratization of communication, and no more hierarchy," said Shaw.

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He went on to look at various case study examples of viral communication being used in organizations, including the [Deloitte film festival](#), which saw employees making their own creative video clips about how it felt to work at Deloitte. These were distributed around the organization and published on [YouTube](#). The clips were used as a recruitment tool, as well as to build the employer brand.

Social media is not essential to viral communication

Shaw also highlighted that while viral communication has been pushed or even facilitated by social media, the two shouldn't be confused. Like Novo Nordisk has demonstrated, messages can be communicated virally without any use of technology at all. The Dutch Pharmaceutical company created three "secret societies" to build influence and engagement. The communication team deliberately kept information from the workforce, bar members of these 3 small societies, who were under strict instruction not to disclose information – even if asked by colleagues. This secrecy aroused employee curiosity and interest to a level that a standard corporate email or strategy meeting would never be able to attain.

We've always known about the employee grapevine - so what's changed?

Both Shaw and Herrero agreed that employees *have* always been talking, and communicators have indeed long been considering how to tap into their conversations. But they said that the tools that now exist make it both easier and

more urgent to understand informal employee conversations, and pick out the key influencers to help spread messages about organizational changes.

A question of credibility

Shaw drew on research from [Edelman's Trust Barometer](#), which highlights that employees are most likely to trust and be influenced by their peers - or "people like me" - than the CEO or managers. A finding which could build the case for some kind of peer-to-peer communication program. But how credible is the information carried by colleagues?

According to Shaw, the initial message still needs to come from the CEO, but it then needs to be discussed, peer-to-peer, in order for the message to stick, and be internalized by employees. This, he said, is what the viral method is all about.



Make accountability fashionable

Herrero (pictured, left) argues that employees communicate in clusters. He likened the way they influence each other and the way messages spread, to how fashions spread – by just a small number of influential people.

In an organization, it's easier to reach more people with a small number of influentials, than thinking that everyone is the same and will process messages from the top in the same way.

"Within organizations, we need to aim to make things fashionable. We want employees to think 'hey - it's fashionable to be accountable, innovative, and work as a team!'," he said.

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Talk less do more

Herrero ended his presentation with a key thought: "Organizations need to talk less and do more. The best culture change management program is where the words 'culture', 'change', 'management' and 'program' are silent."

Video diaries

Finally, Nigel Edwards (pictured, below) described how Pfizer armed selected employees with cameras to make video diaries of how they felt during a major culture change program.

Ten employees were selected with geographical spread, job roles and seniority all taken into account. They were asked to record their feelings and thoughts in a very informal, frank and simple way, over the first three months of this change being put into practice.

Event chair Kelly Dyer with Nigel Edwards.



These diaries were published on the intranet and also put on DVDs and distributed to the entire organization, just before a conference was held to formally discuss the changes and the progress so far. The whole concept was carried out in a very non-corporate, informal manner, with very little editing and moderation done to the video.

Trust needs to be mutual

"We trusted this to grow and it did. The diarists were like soap stars at the end of the 3 months. Employees felt reassured that someone like them was going through similar challenges and difficulties during the change," said Edwards.

"The fact that we were confident about making their criticisms public within the organization, and were giving them the freedom to honestly say what they felt, encouraged other employees to trust the organization, and also to talk more about their concerns. It was also an extension of an important aspect of the culture change, to be rid of hierarchy and be more transparent and flexible."

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But Edwards warned that if yours is a command and control organization, then you should probably avoid a technique like this. "There has to be will and freedom to operate if this is to be successful," he said.

The next London members-only event is planned for early 2009.

Have your say

Peer-to-peer communication is a vast area of internal communication that has come under the spotlight, with the help of new collaborative communication technology. But it throws up many questions.

What are your thoughts and concerns about communicating corporate messages and new initiatives in a viral way? How do you feel about senior executives taking a step back and passing to employees the control over how messages spread? Would this work in your organization?

If research shows that employees trust their peers more than formal corporate messages, how does this alter the role of the internal communication function? Can a command and control organization evolve to become more trusting of employees?