

The Brief

The problems and opportunities to be addressed

Tallaght Hospital was a landmark development in Ireland's acute hospital service and is one of Ireland's leading healthcare providers. It is a public, voluntary, university teaching hospital and a member of the Dublin Academic Teaching Hospital's group. The Hospital has a staff of 3,000 and a budget in excess of €156m annually. Since opening in 1998 activity levels have increased over 32% to 320,000 patients a year.

For such a large organisation with a diverse staff, working across 58 departments, some with routine access to computers and some with very little computer access, internal communications is challenging. Improvements had been made with the introduction of a monthly staff newsletter and the development of the Hospital intranet but research undertaken in 2006, to establish how internal communications was perceived among staff, demonstrated that more needed to be done.

Research undertaken included an independent external communications audit, communication focus groups and a whole hospital evaluation conducted by an independent external company. Based on the results of this quantitative and qualitative research, the communications department developed an extensive internal communications strategy and worked to convince Hospital management to adopt the strategy. This submission covers the development and successful implementation of the internal communications strategy.

Internal Communications Research Findings

The research highlighted a number of problematic areas to be addressed.

- 49.8% of staff felt communication was good – this however, showed that 50.2% of staff did not believe that internal communication was good.
- There was a difference between how the management believed they were communicating and the amount of information staff felt they were receiving.
- A communication system believed by management to work effectively, to inform staff about management issues, was shown to be ineffective with 79% of staff unaware of the system.
- The methods of internal communications being used were one way asymmetric. There was little opportunity for staff to avail of two-way communication. Where it did exist it was inconsistent and unstructured.
- Critical information was not being distributed effectively or in a timely manner to staff. This was facilitating the growth of the grapevine and leading to staff frustration.

The research also highlighted positive areas which presented opportunities for the organisation.

- Results from all the research demonstrated that staff embodied the mission, vision and values of the organisation and their suggestions for improvement were focused on service improvement, delivery and development rather than on personal benefit.
- 78% wanted to learn about future hospital developments and how they could contribute to the hospital achieving these aims.
- Staff were more interested in finding out how they could develop the hospital as opposed to requested improved communication in relation to matters that would impact on them personally e.g. pay issues, car parking, office space etc.
- Staff requested the development of two-way communication systems.
- The internal communications initiatives that had already been put in place such as the staff newsletter and the development of the intranet were experienced positively by staff. 78.5% of staff found them beneficial and effective.
- Managers in the hospital were interested in networking across departments to learn from the management experience of other managers.

The Internal Communications Strategy developed, based on the research findings, presented a structured, measurable, achievable, realistic and targeted method of improving internal communication. It detailed communication initiatives to be undertaken across three communication mediums including:

1. Print,
2. Electronic and
3. Face to face.

The Communications Strategy is attached as appendix 1.

The Statement of Objectives

Definition of objectives and goals

Our principle goal was to maintain and build on employee goodwill towards the organisation by developing an internal communications strategy that provided effective communication channels to enable staff to take a more active role in the future development of the hospital and correspondingly improve the hospital's high performance culture.

As there had been no overall internal communication strategy prior to this, it was essential that this strategy worked effectively. The ground work undertaken during the developmental and introductory phases of the project were planned, monitored and measured to ensure that we could confidently move onto the implementation phase. Objectives and measurements were set for each phase of the project. These objectives are detailed below.

The main measurable objectives:

Phase 1 – Development Phase

Achieving management commitment to the strategy. The internal communications strategy was leader led and executive leadership endorsement was critical to its success. The management team had to agree to operate as an integrated group looking at communication from a macro perspective - not just from the perspective of their division or portfolio. They also had to agree to block out dedicated time to facilitate the initiatives detailed in the communications strategy. This commitment was measured by the communications department at management meetings.

Phase 2 – Introductory Phase

The objective of the launch was to alert staff to the new strategy and the initiatives contained within it. It was also to develop an understanding among staff of the commitment management were making to communicating more effectively with them. This objective was measured by the number of staff who attended the launch and the take-up of the initiatives detailed in the communication strategy.

Phase 3 – Implementation Phase

Each initiative within the strategy had an objective to be measured. The initiatives were broken down into print initiatives, face to face initiatives and electronic initiatives. The objectives of each are detailed below.

Print initiatives

- To consolidate messages coming from management team meetings a one page newsletter was to be circulated electronically and in hard copy to staff after each management team meeting. This ensured that staff received one, trusted source for organisational news. The newsletter replaced the existing variety of methods used by senior management to communicate management team information. It also addressed the bottleneck inherent in the inclusion of such issues in the monthly newsletter. The success of this initiative was measured by the ability to circulate the newsletter within 3 days of the meeting taking place.
- To ensure that A4 notice boards were placed at all internal swipe access areas in the hospital and that relevant information was posted in them and removed when no longer relevant. This was measured by the communications department.

Face to face initiatives

- The objective was to achieve an 80% satisfaction rating with the staff briefings. This was measured by satisfaction surveys circulated at the start of each session and collected at the end of each session.
- The objective was to achieve an 80% satisfaction rating with the managers forum. Measured as above. The aim of this forum was to encourage managers to stop operating in silos and to come together across the various departments to benefit from each others management experience. This aim was reflected in the staff satisfaction surveys.
- The objective was an 80% satisfaction rating for the CEO access days. It was measured by the use of feedback forms by all participating staff members.

Electronic Initiatives

- The objective was to establish a consistent flow of information on the electronic Q&A forum. The forum enables staff to anonymously put questions to the management team. A hit counter was put on the forum to monitor traffic to the site. A target of 1,000 hits during the first month of the forum's operation was set.
- The objective was to ensure that all queries posted on the Q&A forum are answered by management within a two week period. This was monitored by the communications department.
- The objective was to develop the communications intranet site and increase traffic on the site by 20%. The target of 20% was set as this site was already quite developed and had one of the highest traffic rates of all sites on the intranet.

Programme planning and strategy

A description of techniques and approaches used to achieve the objectives and goals.

Phase 1 – Development Phase

Measuring management commitment to the strategy.

Executive leadership endorsement of the strategy was critical to its success. At the initial pitch to the management team the main internal communication research findings were presented along with the details of the proposed communications strategy. Highlighting the research findings emphasised the need to adopt a targeted strategy to deal with communications.

Some members of the team were reticent about elements of the strategy. However, data gathered by the communications department from other companies, using similar initiatives, helped to convince the team that the initiatives presented were manageable and achievable. Moreover, the CEO, had been briefed prior to the presentation and was therefore in a position to add further weight behind the strategy.

Method used to communicate event: Management team agenda.

Phase 2 –Introductory Phase

To ensure staff were made aware of the commitment made to communication the strategy roll-out proceeded according to a carefully crafted approach. The roll-out time table was as follows:

Week 1: Lunchtime briefing for Personal Assistants

As the strategy involved an increased work load for the PA's it was essential they were briefed on the strategy before general hospital staff were informed.

Method used to communicate event: Phone contact and email.

Week 2: Middle managers lunchtime meeting

The middle managers forum, one of the communication strategy initiatives, was developed in response to managers requests. We used this presentation to highlight this initiative and offer managers the opportunity to book presentations on the strategy for staff in their area, at times suitable to their clinical areas.

Method used to communicate event: Direct emails and a hard copy invitations.

Week 3: Staff briefing

To alert staff to the internal communications strategy and encourage them to participate in the initiatives detailed in the strategy.

Method used to communicate event: Posters, staff newsletter, email, intranet and notice boards. See appendix 2 for copies of the staff newsletters that publicised the strategy.

Week 4: Follow up

Handouts on the strategy and the Q&A forum were distributed at key locations throughout the Hospital. See appendix 3 Intranet traffic to the communications site was monitored.

Laminated handouts detailing the strategy and the essential communication dates for 2007 were sent to every department in the Hospital.

All the elements of the strategy were initiated.

Week 5: Departmental Presentations

Presentations were made to individual departments at times suitable to their particular clinical area.

Phase 3 – Implementation Phase

Once the official launch was complete the focus moved towards the strategy itself and the fulfilment of commitments made within it. All the individual initiatives were initiated. These included:

Print:

Management team summary document
Positioning of notice boards at all swipe access areas

Face to face:

Staff briefings
Middle manager's forum
CEO access days

Electronic initiatives:

Electronic Q&A forum
Monitoring of responses on Q&A forum
Development and monitoring of intranet

The Measurement Stage

Monitoring and evaluating progress and results.

Phase 1 – Development Phase

Measuring Management commitment to the strategy.

There was 100% support for the strategy following the initial presentation to the management team. This support was maintained with a 100% attendance at the launch of the strategy to middle managers and a 100% attendance at the staff launch. Support from top executives continues to be high with an 80% attendance rate at strategy initiatives to date and a 100% response rate when requested to provide information for the strategy briefing sessions.

Phase 2 – Introductory Phase

We exceeded our targets with the launch of the strategy with the following measurements:

PA briefing: There was 100% attendance and 100% adoption of the strategy.

Middle manager briefing: There was a 50% attendance, well in excess of normal strategy launches within the organisation. Managers also requested laminated strategies for their departments and four departments requested individual briefings for staff in their area. This exceeded our expectations.

Staff briefing: Approximately 100 staff attended and the feedback forms were positive.

Departmental briefings: These briefings took place at 7am in clinical areas. Attendance was high and feedback positive.

Phase 3 – Implementation Phase

We again reached all targets set in relation to the individual initiatives detailed in the internal communications strategy.

Print:

Summary documents have been circulated within three days following each management team meeting since the launch. Feedback on the Q&A forum demonstrates that staff are receiving and reading these briefings.

Notice boards were placed at all swipe access areas and are maintained by the communications department.

Face to face:

Staff briefings: Feedback has been extremely positive. 253 staff attended the first briefing, far in excess of expectations. Over 50% of attendees filled in feedback forms and 90% of comments welcomed the initiative. A sample feedback form and a summary of the feedback forms from the first staff briefings are attached in appendix 4. Attendance at subsequent meetings remains consistent at an average attendance of 150 staff. Modifications have been made to the format of the briefings as requested by staff in the feedback forms.

Middle manager's forum: Attendance was high with 30 managers attending. Management team members attended and the satisfaction surveys were 82% positive.

CEO access days: Take up of these slots is above 80% and the feedback forms completed were 80% positive.

Electronic:

Electronic Q&A forum: In the first month there were 4,700 hits to the forum. This exceeded expectations.

Monitoring of responses on Q&A forum: The targets set for responding to questions have been met, following email reminders issued from the CEO's office and communications department.

Development and monitoring of communications intranet. Traffic to the site increased by 25% again exceeding expectations.

Budget

There was no budget set aside for this strategy at the outset, as it was a continuously developing project within the communications department. However, on adoption of the strategy a new appointment was made in the communications department in order to facilitate the effective management of the strategy. The research which formed the basis of this strategy was funded separately to the development of the strategy. The initiatives within the strategy were all managed in-house utilising in-house knowledge and expertise. Overall cost: €12,500 to €32,000 for recruitment of staff to facilitate the implementation of the strategy.

Conclusion

The internal communications strategy was developed to address identified deficits in internal communication. To ensure the success of the strategy the project was approached in three stages. Each phase was measurable. The initiatives within the strategy were structured, measurable, achievable, realistic and targeted and to date have met or exceeded our set targets. Staff feedback on the individual initiatives is overwhelmingly positive and positive results will be expected when the next hospital wide communications audit is undertaken.