

***A global report on online communication at work, and its effect on
employee behavior, performance and fulfillment***

*Prepared by John Smythe and Bonnie Carlo on behalf of Engage for Change,
Carlo Communications, and Engage for Success*



The deep cultural impact of tech at work

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1. Introduction

The project is jointly researched by John Smythe, founder of Engage for Change in London, and Bonnie Carlo, Principal of Carlo Communications in Sydney. The key question John and Bonnie asked:

‘Is online communication at work making things easier or just adding more tasks to the working day? Boon or burden?’

With the outcomes of this report, John and Bonnie hope management teams will carefully consider the type of workplace culture they wish to foster as a result of investing in communications platforms at work. It will also serve as a driver for employers to explore relevant technology for their businesses, and to find the right tools to improve their company’s performance and sustainability.

John and Bonnie found that too much tech is dropped into the workplace without clearly thought through commercial or cultural purpose, governance and training. Plus Baby Boomers and Generation X leaders are reported as providing poor digital role models.

The report includes a summary of what people at work want to change about their communications platforms, which could provide an agenda for developing tech at work to deliver commercial and cultural benefits.

1.1 What does the term communications platforms at work cover?

For the purposes of this report, communications platforms are defined as:

Any software and social platforms and apps designed to facilitate communication or collaboration at work.

They may also be referred to as Enterprise Social Networks (ESNs) or corporate social media.

1.2 Why measure tech at work?

The inspiration for this research – generational shifts



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This report was inspired by the unprecedented generational shifts in the current workplace. Today's workforce is possibly more diverse than at any other time in history, spanning the generation that remembers a time before television existed, to the generation that grew up in the Google and social media age. John and Bonnie were keen to see if different generations have different views on the impact of online communications on their workplace, from the Baby Boomers and Generation X to the Millennials (Gen Y) and Generation Z.



The ever-changing 'places of work' also prompted this project; it's estimated that in 2025, 75 per cent of the workforce will be technology-native millennials (2015 Deloitte Millennial Survey). And in the US by 2020, it's predicted that 46% of workers will be self employed – a pattern that is being repeated in the UK and globally, enabled by remote working tech and lifestyle preferences. The physical architecture of work is changing from city offices and business parks, to home desks and remote working.

The third theme behind this report is the blurred lines between the working and non-working day. The era of Unions advocating the '888 rule' (eight hours for work, eight for recreation and eight for sleep) is long gone. Many in the workforce are online 24/7, accessible by computer, tablet and smart phone and readily logging on at home and working out of hours. The 'rise of the machines' now means that 48 hours away from workplace technology is no longer called a weekend – it's thought of as a 'digital detox', and the different generations have conflicting views and habits in this area.

2. The participants

John and Bonnie initially struggled to recruit the first participants for this study, but once companies realised it was about analysing the influence of online communications on workplace *culture* and their competitive *market position*, interest was piqued. Following the early support of Alex Aiken at the UK Cabinet Office, participants were secured in Europe, Australasia, India, and North America.

Some of the participants so far



The study is ongoing – if you would like your company to participate see the end of the study for John and Bonnie's contact details.

3. Focus groups

Wherever possible, John or Bonnie led focus groups with representatives from each company reflecting participants from the generations; Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and a small number of Gen Z. The groups included a spectrum of roles across the business hierarchy, from those with no managerial responsibilities, to managers and directors leading teams of 50+. The focus groups were set in the context of the organisation's culture using a simple guiding device:

What we are exploring: cultural context

Autocratic	Distributed leadership / power
Hierarchical	Flatter
Secretive	Transparent / trusting
Monolithic / central planning	Distributed
Adult to child	Adult to adult
Fear culture	Safe to challenge
Status conscious	Achievement oriented
Deference	Candour
Permission culture	Initiative culture
Bullying	Negotiative
Grandeur	Self deprecating
Clubby	Open
Elitist / private	Accessible
Formal	Informal
Serious	Sensitively humorous
Employee	Partner

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Participants discussed their own experiences of the company culture, and although influential personalities and heritage have a big sway in micro cultures, there are usually common cultural themes that emerge across all. The groups discussed the diagram above and whether their culture is stuck fast, moving from left to right, or regressing right to left. They explored:

- Feelings about communication in their company
- Social media use outside of work, and the benefits it brings
- The types of electronic communication and collaboration tools that people interact with in the workplace
- What benefits these bring to individuals, teams and the organisation – do they make working life easier?
- Any complaints or bugbears about workplace tech
- Their 'magic wand' changes that they believe would bring personal and organisational benefits

3.1 Focus group themes

Key themes emerged from the focus groups:

- *Challenges in managing multi-generational teams*

All generations, from Baby Boomers to Gen Z, are now in the workplace together – but increasingly they're not at a common place of work. Managing people takes on a different dimension as people need and expect managers to be digitally fluent. Managers may also be leading staff who work remotely, and therefore need to utilise digital tools for briefing but also build relationships without the usual face-to-face interaction. Usually everyone in the team needs digital influencing skills to engage with others in collaborative ventures.

- *A new spin on employee engagement*

It could be time to re-evaluate the founding presumptions of employee engagement. In the emerging tech workspace, there may only be 'us' trading in a 'market of ideas', rather than 'them' (managers) trying to engage the team. The message becomes more inclusive, with the final glory shared with everyone. Online communication allows people to reach down and up, across, inside and outside the hierarchy; power and influence is defusing and constantly re-arranging new spheres of influence. Therefore, it has never been so critical for everyone to have a handle on the demographics of their organisation and an understanding of the generational mix represented.

- *The end of the traditional workplace*

Remote and flexible working in many organisations can render a physical office unnecessary, with many employers realising the negatives as well as the positives of this development.

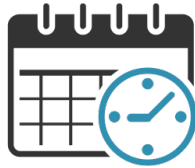
- *Strategy and change moves online*

With the high volumes of online communication in action, change and strategy origination and execution in companies is now beginning to be run online. This is significant as change and strategy used to be the preserve of elites. Those elites must learn to govern change and strategy digitally to capture the wisdom of the many. Move over Boomers and Gen X.

4. The quantitative study

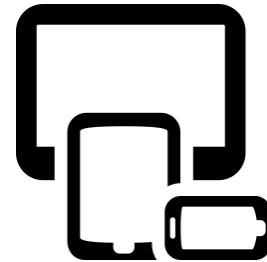
John and Bonnie also ran a Survey Monkey poll, with approximately 1,000 responses from companies of all sizes and global locations. The headline findings from this study are summarised here.

What we are exploring: quantitative study



How many hours per day are our participants online for work?’

We asked which devices people were using for work



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- Most people are online 3-4 hours per day
- 1 in 4 Millennials are online 7+ hours per day
- 52% of Gen X are online for 4 hours or less per day.

Research showed it's easy for employees to spend time in digital bubbles, only interacting with similar people (often referred to as the echo chamber).

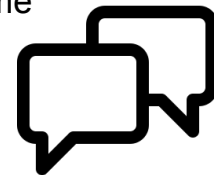
- Gen X possess more than 40% of all company-owned laptops, tablets and smartphones and dominates in terms of private smartphone and tablet ownership
- Boomers lag in all categories, except for private ownership of older device types – desktops, Blackberries and standard mobile phones.

What we are exploring: quantitative study

We asked people how often they work from home

We then asked people how productive they are when they work from home

And we also asked people how much they communicate with colleagues when they work from home



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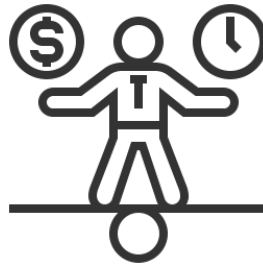
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- One in four Baby Boomers and Gen X are working from home at least one day per week – more than twice the amount of Millennials
- All generations claimed they are significantly more productive when they work from home
- However while working from home may increase productivity, it also causes around one in three to communicate less with their colleagues. This raises a red flag around companies potentially sacrificing engagement in return for productivity.

What we are exploring: quantitative study

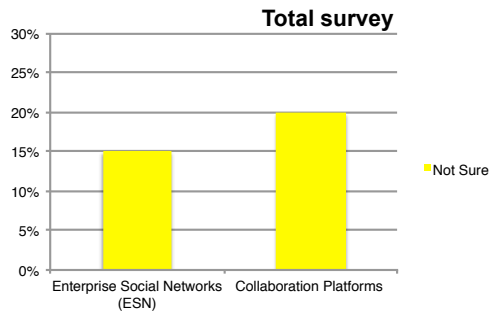
Given the increasing tendency for younger generations to work from home, we asked people about the impact of digital communications on work/life balance



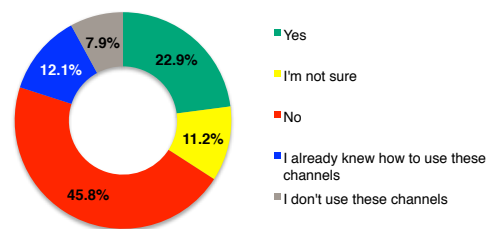
- Gen X are most positive about this effect, likely because they say they like to work from home and feel more productive when they do
- However, significant proportions of all generations experience both positive and negative effects from digital communications
- People like the flexibility tech brings and they clearly feel they are more productive
- But people also struggle with the 'always plugged in' side effects that tech brings.

What we are exploring: quantitative study

We asked 'What methods of digital communication are used at your organisation?'



We asked whether training had been provided for ESNs and Collaboration Platforms



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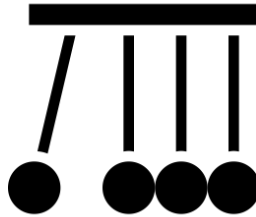
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- There was some uncertainty around the availability of networking and collaboration platforms, especially among Baby Boomers
- Only one third of people polled were set up properly with relevant training to use these technologies. Over half had had no training.

What we are exploring: quantitative study

We also asked people to rank digital channels in order of
IMPACT and USEFULNESS (for work purposes)



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- Email remains the dominant channel in terms of impact – though many participants had negative experiences
- Email also remains the dominant channel in terms of usefulness
- A significant proportion of Baby Boomers record no impact from ESNs and Collaboration Platforms, whilst, perhaps surprisingly, many Gen X and Millennials feel their impact is negative
- While a significant proportion of all generations aren't using ESNs or Collaboration Platforms at all.

This suggests that whilst there is considerable investment on tech at work, it is not as accessible as people would like.

What we are exploring: quantitative study

What is the preferred channel for providing feedback and giving recognition?



What is the preferred channel for communicating with different stakeholder groups?



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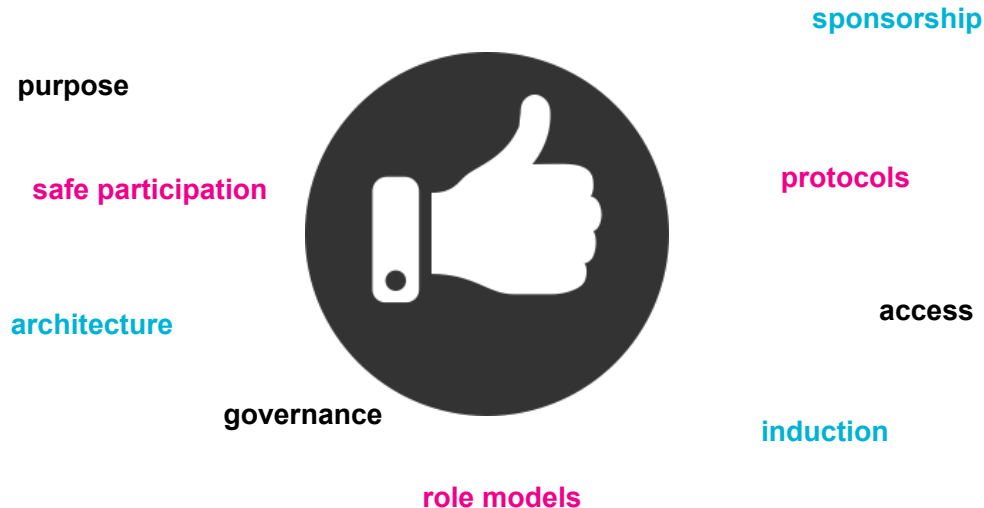
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- Face to face remains the preferred channel for providing feedback and recognition, but email is not far behind and is especially popular as the next best alternative in younger generations – despite the widespread irritation with e mail. It is at least seen as reliable and accessible
- People also use email as a backstop record/paper trail, as newer platforms may not have the facility or participation may not reach all team members
- In terms of stakeholder communication, Baby Boomers prefer to communicate face to face with younger generations but again, email is not far behind.

5. Qualitative research – what works well

Universal truths from the qualitative research: *What works well and why*



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Digital channels are credited with delivering both commercial and cultural performance, and great benefits for people, when these principles are followed:

- *There is a clearly articulated purpose for the tech*
- *Visible and respected sponsorship for its integration and long-term use*
- *Sensible protocols*
- *Safety of participation*
- *Easy access from all devices (particularly smart phones)*
- *A clear architecture of channels – ie: when to use which channels*
- *Inclusive, confidence-inspiring induction and refreshment training*
- *Robust governance*
- *Visible leadership role models*

Where these conditions are met people are generally enthusiastic about tech at work. The happiest are specialist groups who have much to gain personally and collectively. Benefits cited include:

- *Connectivity; from one to one, to one to many, and many to many*
- *Geographic reach*
- *Speed versus post and wait*
- *Generations of friends/contacts remain current, unlike in the offline world of old*
- *Hierarchy is triaged*
- *Staying plugged in and feeling connected wherever people are, and whenever they choose*
- *Tech enables people to multipurpose in long meetings*
- *Tech enables people to learn about other people's cultures*

Some participants also credited tech with allowing them to:

- Improvise using tech that may not be corporately sponsored (or authorized) – use of unauthorized tech is widespread and hard if not impossible to control
- Be more human - more visuals/video helps them know people and feel connected
- Learn from colleagues who are ahead of them
- Work flexibly and remotely and when they please – good management trusts them to ‘get on with it’
- Mix work with pleasure – work ideas come to some when they are at leisure, and they don’t resent that as they also take what is owed to them

6. Qualitative research – the issues

Universal truths from the qualitative research: *The issues*



At the other end of the spectrum, people have negative issues when the good tech conditions are not met.

A typical example: the investment decision for procuring online communications tools may be framed as a transactional tech purchase, and one which may be delegated and side-stepped by the Boomers and Gen X in the leadership team.

Another scenario: the tech purchase decision may be made by a Business Unit head or a regional figure where the focus is on features and technical details rather than delivering the organisation’s strategy and commercial and cultural performance.

In those circumstances, and other examples, people report:

- That online communication is blind to tone and thus tricky when the topic is sensitive
- There is often no discernible purpose, order, sponsorship, protocols or air traffic management in online communications and collaboration platforms - resulting in multiple campaigns and overlapping content and overload
- People are aware of leaders pretending to be digitally fluent by delegating to others the management of posts and conversations. Digital reputations are hard to build and can be and lost easily. Authenticity can only be delivered with transparency and integrity
- Tech-enabled remote working can be exploited by organisations - using it to cut down on property costs. In creative enterprises, productivity can be cut through isolation from the community
- In some cultures, older generations assume that time spent on tablets/phones is not work - thus a generational divide is created
- People state that a critical mass of participation is key to ensuring the best and appropriate team members are accessible. People are anxious to avoid being plugged in to second rate networks – one participant stated “the wisdom and idea market doesn’t always work as the wrong people are present”. This suggests that a massive effort is required to get people participating
- On a similar note, time is said to be wasted on circular exchanges that do not conclude – the conclusion is that some issues need to be addressed decisively face to face

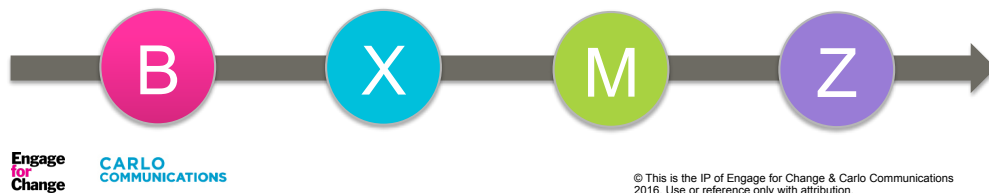
Shrinkage of ‘my’ social space



Many participants spoke of the ‘shrinkage’ of their own social space. Away from work they report withdrawing and watching, rather than risking posting content that may come back to haunt them. They also speak of the confluence of personal social space and work social. Some are also angered by employers that put them digitally in play outside work hours.

Generational nuances

- There are always exceptions but:
 - most Boomers and Gen X have to learn tech
 - Millennials and Gen Z are natives and are digitally fluent
- Millennials prefer instant digital chatter to slow email, phones and face to face meetings
 - Millennials are more transactional and less likely to affiliate with corporate purpose, values etc. Loyalty to organisations is transient. Old style engagement may fall on deaf ears.



7. Demands for Change



What would participants like to change about online communications to make working life easier and more productive?

1. Clarity of purpose, intent, strategy for technology

- The need for a very clear purpose statement, credible sponsorship and protocols
- A distinction between 'top down' communication and collaboration channels – the definition of digital collaboration
- Tech to be a core part of corporate vision and business strategy
- Employers need to understand their digital demographics and tailor the tech strategy to suit.

2. Usability, usefulness, functionality

- Usability – one click to access
- Many would like a 'one-stop-shop'; one accessible network rather than a jumble of networks draining individuals' time and energy

- Note that organisational structure influences ESN shape and functionality, therefore structure must be a factor in developing the commercial and cultural plan
- Video access was on many people's wish list.

3 Induction

- A full tech induction and training for users
- Mix the generations for inductions, and refresher training as the technology changes.

4 Governance and best practice

- Employ an 'air traffic control system' to stagger organizational projects and avoid everything landing at once – overload is a major cause of complaint
- Communicate channel protocols – i.e. when to use which channel and what for
- Define clear rules of engagement – clarity of legitimate online behavior needed
- Promote freedom of speech but also online safety
- The digital equivalent of learning to write a good letter/run a meeting
- Consider peer policing/a trusted network
- Remove old technology – a widely reported gripe of participants was companies adding to the layers of tech rather than removing and replacing.

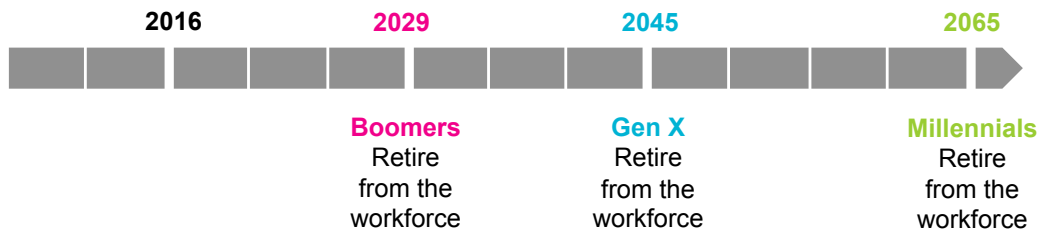
5 Role of leaders

- Online communication needs leader role models
- These leaders need to develop their own digital authentic voice; no corporate/PR jargon
- Leaders must also have an insight about their own digital presence/footprint
- People want digitally fluent leaders who understand the demographics of the organisation
- Develop a cultural and commercial plan for tech before a penny is spent on it.

These five themes can form the foundations for a commercial and cultural plan for tech in your organisation

‘So what’ for leadership teams?

The issues are here to stay for a while



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The last Baby Boomers won't exit the workforce for 12 years and Gen X will leave in 28 years; these groups will continue to adapt, but will always remember a time before digital communications.

Leadership teams need to understand their organisations' demographic makeup and reflect that in day to day working relationships and communication. They should recognise that 'command and control' will be impacted by technology at work. Online communication triages through command and control.

GE CEO Jeff Immelt: “disrupt yourselves before others disrupt you”

Involve all generations in designing communications platforms at work

Involve incoming and existing generations in a vision of the work place experience. Digital communication and collaboration platforms should be considered as a core business resource rather than a semi-detached transactional IT resource.

There needs to be a commercial and cultural plan developed across functions and business units

Throughout this research, the people who are less enamored with online communications at work are those who don't believe there is a commercial or cultural outcomes plan for the technology investment. They state that the tech simply 'turns up' often with no context or purpose, and with little governance. Or at the other end of the spectrum, far too much governance/micro-managing. And in many cases, people report multiple platforms (especially in federated or conglomerated organisations) which adds to their tech burden. There needs to be a commercial and cultural plan developed across functions and business units. IT cannot do this alone. Nor can any other single function or business unit.

Few other investments would be made without a commercial and cultural strategy being developed as part of the overall business strategy of an organisation.

Once the tech is up and running the chaos can often be hard to fix – particularly with Baby Boomers and Gen X leaders not seeing the issues first hand, or understanding when life is being made harder for their teams.

\$3.4 trillion will be spent on tech in 2017*, yet since the Internet revolution productivity in the West has actually declined.

*Forecast by analysts Gartner, on global IT spending. October 2016

8. Messages to the big technology providers



Most respondents feel that the tech revolution at work is just beginning. Observers note that a new period of enlightenment will emerge, with tech creating a powerful market of ideas through cultural evolution in organisations.

From this project, John and Bonnie sense that big tech companies can take more of a lead in the up front planning – potential customers should be much more demanding of their tech providers.

Tech providers need to equip themselves to help corporates to deliver a commercial and cultural plan for tech before selling tech. In turn corporates must discipline themselves to lead commercial and cultural planning for online communications platforms involving neutral third parties to facilitate this process.



- Balance between governance and laissez faire
- Who owns it/air traffic
- M gen – a new employee engagement model?
- Remote work - impact on creativity/collaboration
- What accessible tech means
- What boomers & X gen need to love tech
- Can you stick it onto a Kremlin and stimulate cultural change or does culture eat tech?

9. Phase two

In many ways this study has simply thrown up the next questions that need to be addressed.

John and Bonnie are now considering moving on to phase two of the research, exploring the themes above and digging deeper with participants to explore:

- The balance between governance and laissez faire – what does that mean?
- The good online communications environments have well judged levels of governance. The poor tech environments have too little. John and Bonnie aim to discover more about the right balance. Overdoing it risks strangling tech in command and control. Under doing it results in underperformance and at worst, chaos
- Who needs to own tech and run air traffic to avoid blinding people with content and interaction?
- Is there an engagement model for Millennials – the 'we to we' idea vs the 'them to us' model?
- Looking further at the intended and unintended consequences of tech enabled remote working
- At a practical level, exploring what can be done to make tech at work easier to access
- Providing cases where organisations have benefited from the development of a commercial and cultural plan before tech is invested in

10. Contacts

For more information:
Contact us via our digital channels!



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John Smythe
johnsmythe@engageforchange.com
www.engageforchange.com

Linked in <https://uk.linkedin.com/in/johnsmythe>

Bonnie Carlo
bonnie@carlocommunications.com
www.carlocommunications.com

Linked in <https://au.linkedin.com/in/bonniecario>

Or telephone John Smythe on +44 7710 130755