

Reaching the unreachable workforce: Adopting a mobile-first communication strategy to retain employees

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programming, while also supporting business development and client retention efforts.

ABSTRACT

Ineffective communications cost companies more than just safety and productivity issues; they are a direct cause of turnover. While corporate leaders feel their communications are relevant and the way they are delivered is effective, research shows their employees do not feel the same way. In a tight labour market, businesses cannot afford to overlook this fact. As an integrated facilities management (IFM) company that distinguishes itself in self-performing more than 80 per cent of the hard and soft services it provides clients, ESFM depends on an engaged workforce to deliver on its client promises every day. As noted in its bi-annual employee engagement survey, the company recognised its internal communications were missing the mark with respect to hourly employees. Deskless workers, spread across the country and covering multiple shifts, were challenging to connect with. To address these challenges, ESFM inverted the traditional top-down communication cascade as the first IFM company to leverage the Nudge app, originally designed for retail workers, to implement a mobile-first communication strategy for frontline personnel. Adapting the app's capabilities for the FM space was a process, but ultimately empowered ESFM to digitise critical learnings and best practices to efficiently equip its employees



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with the knowledge and tools necessary to execute on their clients' highest priorities. Business outcomes following the first year of implementing this communications approach earned ESFM the George Graves Award for Facility Management Achievement from the International Facilities Management Association (IFMA) in 2020. This paper shares business outcomes from this award-winning communications programme, as well as steps any company can apply on their journey toward developing a more intentional, engaging and effective communications strategy.

Keywords: retention, employee engagement, strategic communications, corporate culture, internal communication, organisational communication, mobile applications, facilities management

INTRODUCTION

The challenges of engaging and retaining employees, particularly hourly, are not new. In recent years, however, a global pandemic followed by historic economic impacts have exacerbated these challenges. 'Business as usual' has changed and will continue to change.

A tight labour market means employees have more choices in where they work and what roles are available to them. One cannot fault good employees for wanting a better workplace experience and desiring respect, the feeling of being engaged, heard, valued — in a word *seen* — by their leadership.

Parallel to that, however, is a sobering reality for employers. Voluntary turnover remains at a near-record high.¹ Frontline worker dissatisfaction is reflected in the fact that 42 per cent would like to leave their job — an even higher figure in facilities management (FM) at 51 per cent.² Corporate leaders and managers alike have burnout and staffing/retention top of mind.

Turnover is costly: replacing one associate tallies up expenses totalling one-and-a-half

to two times an associate's annual salary³ — and that is a conservative estimate. But being an employer of choice, cultivating an environment that engages and invests in your employees, is not just good for business; it is the right thing to do.

Taking care of employees so that they, in turn, produce exceptional results is the core of ESFM's success; as an organisation that differentiates itself by self-performing integrated facilities management (IFM), retaining the frontline is critical. To safely deliver a consistent, elevated workplace experience to end-users requires stability in its workforce.

Employees at every level have the same basic needs. Besides compensation, three of the highest drivers for frontline workers' employment satisfaction are a strong sense of community (46 per cent), empathetic leadership (41 per cent) and recognition (39 per cent); however, only 39 per cent of frontline workers say these needs are being met.⁴ This reflects how ineffective the traditional, top-down, communication model is. How and what a company communicates to its field personnel directly affects how they view their leadership, company culture and the value they bring to the organisation.

Effective communication begins with a defined strategy that will help reach desired outcomes. Prioritise communication that will engage and inspire associates, while also equipping them with important company information, best practices, education and career development opportunities. Even the most well-intentioned, employee-focused communications will remain ineffective, however, if they do not reach the intended audience. In the world of FM, the structure of the labour force poses a challenge.

DISRUPTING THE PARADIGM

For ESFM, client locations are spread across the country and are as different internally as their geography, ranging from corporate offices to controlled environments,

lab spaces, regulated manufacturing facilities and technology hubs. Associates cover every inch of client properties, executing a portfolio of soft and hard services that includes mechanical engineering, energy optimisation and hospital-grade cleaning, while supporting clients' site-specific needs. Employees have different work schedules, and hourly associates do not typically have a company mobile phone or computer. Still, it was a must for the organisation to engage all of them in business-critical conversations.

Research shows there is a disconnect in how corporate leaders think about the effectiveness of their communications and how it is received by their employees. The 2022 Deskless report revealed that 65 per cent of corporate leaders think their communication is effective while only 35 per cent of front-line workers agree, and while 86 per cent of leaders believe that they are sending meaningful communications, only 59 per cent of workers say they find communications useful or somewhat useful. Furthermore, 70 per cent of managers feel in the know about what is going on in their organisation, but that figure drops to only 51 per cent of hourly workers.⁵

ESFM realised it was relying too heavily on regional leadership to cascade communication to site level management, who were then expected to relay the information to their team. The game of telephone is not an ideal communications process in any setting; however, corporations often find themselves relying on sharing a message in a closed circle at the top and expecting that message will be correctly articulated as it is relayed along the chain. As e-mails are passed around among salaried associates for months, front-line team members become the last to know even when the business decisions have a more significant impact on their day-to-day.

To disrupt the paradigm, the organisation leveraged mobile-first communication and the nudging behaviour theory to deploy strategic communications directly to hourly

associates, and then capture the business impact of those communications to evaluate how effective they were. To deploy communications relevant to all associates, regardless of location or job duties, topics are universal and measurable, focused on driving education and engagement around workplace safety (see Figures 1 and 2), corporate culture and benefits, best practice sharing, employee recognition and career growth.

The strategic shift yielded tremendous results; even while app adoption peaked at 40 per cent in the first year, voluntary turnover of hourly personnel had decreased

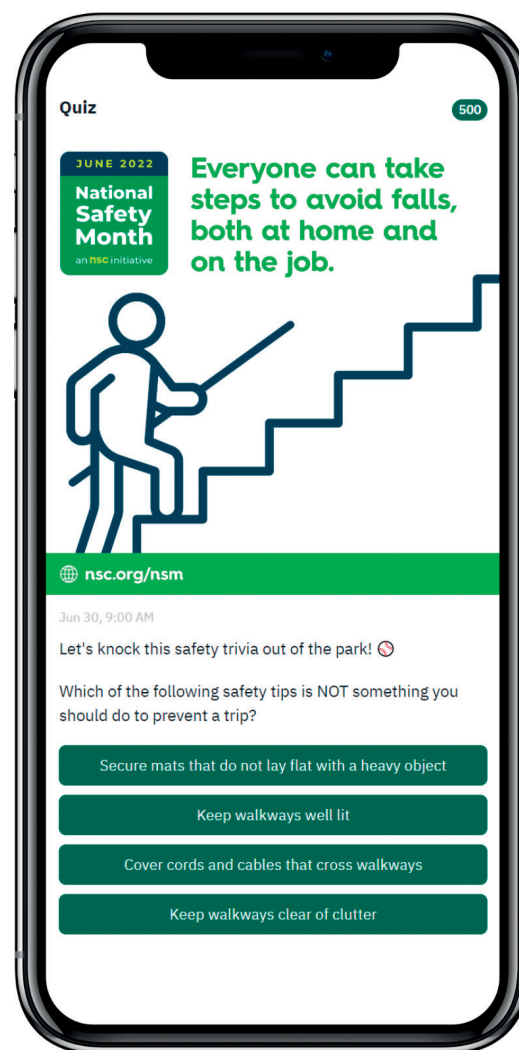


Figure 1 Safety knowledge check question

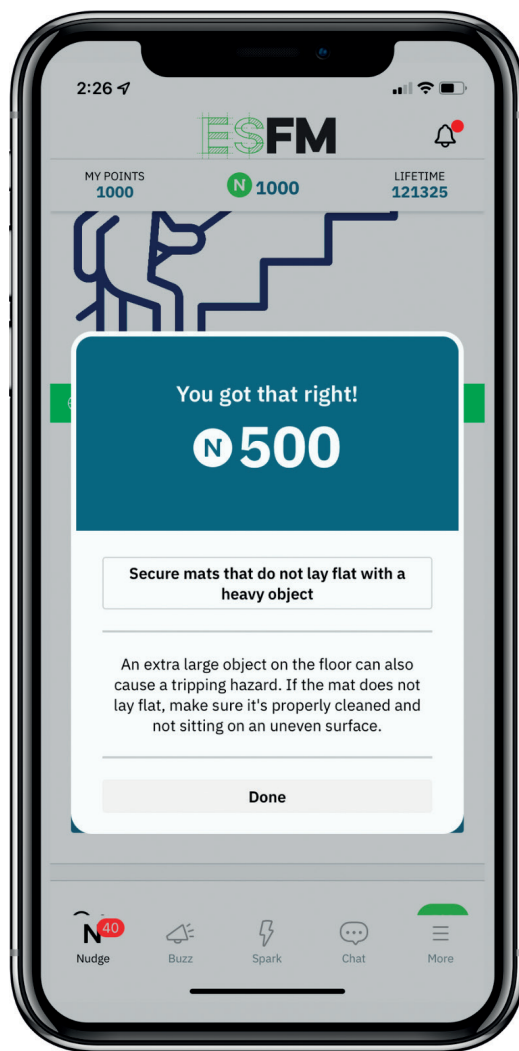


Figure 2 Safety knowledge check answer

7 per cent, while safety incidents decreased 28 per cent company-wide. These metrics are among a data set that have continued to improve — and during a global pandemic, no less — bucking trends of ‘The Great Resignation’. Steps along the implementation journey are shared that can be applied to any internal communications initiative.

STEP ONE: PERFORM A COMMUNICATIONS AUDIT

How your organisation speaks to and receives feedback from the frontline is powerful.

Before setting goals for success, it is important to audit the communications process, understand where the field is getting information, if any, and identify where the communication breakdown is. Ask questions like:

- What medium are you using? Does everyone have direct access to it?;
- Who is communicating with your associates? Who might want to? Who do they need to hear from?;
- Is anyone reading your messages?

The tipping point for ESFM was understanding that the company needed to speak directly to the field, inverting the traditional communication model to inform hourly associates first. Not every associate has a company computer within an organisation, but nearly everyone has a smartphone. Even in environments like manufacturing where individuals may be required to keep personal devices tucked away during their shift, their phone is the first thing they reach for during a break. No one is required to utilise the communications app; however, even today communications distributed through it have an 80 per cent open rate. For internal e-mails 50 per cent is a high benchmark.

STEP TWO: TIE COMMUNICATIONS TO BUSINESS OUTCOMES

Communications deployed without a strategy mean nothing. To understand the success of any communications programme, measurable goals have to be set. It is not enough to know simply if a message is received, but rather how the information is being applied.

After selecting the best medium for your internal audience, set measurable goals to inform data-driven communications. This requires measuring the business impact of your communications campaign. Even if there is no data required for a communication, think about framing it in such

a way that you can capture the impact. For example, sharing benefits enrolment information is often a ‘check-the-box’ communication, but deploying in a new way should yield a higher enrolment percentage year over year.

ESFM focused on two critical areas: employee retention, which requires engagement, recognition and opportunities for growth; and workplace safety, a foundational pillar on which all procedures and programmes are built. With the targets in sight, the nudging behaviour theory was utilised for app-based communications to improve outcomes.

‘Nudging’, in practice, is based on principals of behavioural science applied to communication with the goal of encouraging specific behaviours. While you give employees a choice in whether to respond, by nudging you use ‘motivational techniques most people respond to’,⁶ such as the desire to fit in, to stimulate positive change. This influencing of group or individual decision making is accomplished through positive reinforcement and indirect suggestions, in contrast to other approaches to achieve compliance such as education, legislation or enforcement.

The communication model breaks down complex ideas and delivers them in simple messages, intended to be a 30-second read. To be effective, messaging cannot become oversaturated. Business outcomes need to be prioritised so that a person is not being messaged more than one to two times per day during the work week.

This communication style proved to be effective in an unexpected way — enabling peer-to-peer education. While app adoption peaked at 40 per cent in the first year of deployment, the business outcomes were measured across all employees. This meant that employees were either sharing or modelling the communications received.

A successful content calendar requires a communications professional to collaborate with department stakeholders, including

quality assurance, safety, human resources and business development, to identify core messages that apply to almost any associate, with a business impact that can be measured. Topics such as avoiding slips, trips and falls on the job site are then introduced, reinforced, tested (gamified quizzes that call back to earlier messages) and opened for discussion within the app over a defined period.

The business outcome, like the example of reducing the number of slips, trips and falls, proves the effectiveness of the communication campaign. In the case of ESFM’s initial slips, trips and falls campaign, 43 per cent of users demonstrated increased knowledge around the topic and when asked if the information helped associates stay safe, 95 per cent confirmed that the communications were helpful during their day-to-day tasks.

STEP THREE: INCENTIVISE PARTICIPATION

Unless you can supply company devices or technology stipends to your entire workforce, receiving company communications on a personal device has to be optional.

To drive participation, you want employees to view it as an *experience* that cannot be found elsewhere. Gamifying the content with prizes for high scores can help incentivise employees to read the communication and participate in related conversations.

When used effectively, app-based communication platforms become a community for employees — even those who would not otherwise interact with one another. Silos and walls are broken down because messages are universal and available regardless of what time of day an individual is working. Conversations sparked by discussion threads create buy-in across the field for key programmes and initiatives. Associates are connected to the greater organisation community and encouraged to speak with passion about topics that interest them. Peers are encouraged to recognise one

another with ‘cheers’, boosting engagement, strengthening employee-to-employee relationships and kindling a positive business culture that creates a sense of belonging.

Regardless of the platform, leverage it to share direct links to company resources, training opportunities, and job postings so that team members feel ‘in the loop’ and equipped with access to what they need to pursue their individual career goals. This will connect people to a larger purpose above their day-to-day tasks.

CONCLUSION

In just one year, ESFM realised the positive impacts of the inverted communication paradigm. Within the first year of launching, overall favourability of the company was 100 per cent among app users, a 23 per cent increase from the prior year. In that same time-frame, nearly 1,600 peer recognition ‘cheers’ were shared (see Figure 3), and 97 employee

spotlights featured (see Figure 4), driving a culture of recognition. That cultural shift was felt beyond app users, with 85 per cent of associates company-wide either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement, ‘my department takes the opportunity to recognise associates and celebrate team successes’.

The success of ESFM’s self-performed model is built on a single moment of truth: the interaction between the associate and the client or end-user. The organisation is only as good as that moment. By prioritising time and talent to invest in frontline communications, associates are informed, engaged

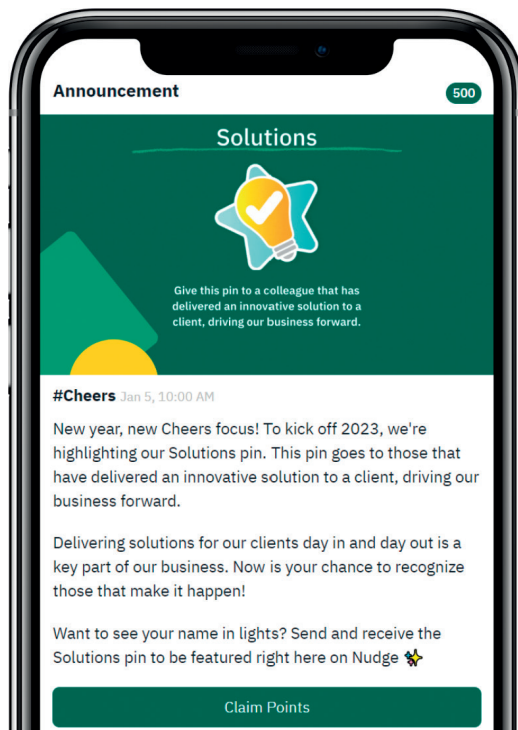


Figure 3 Peer-to-peer recognition

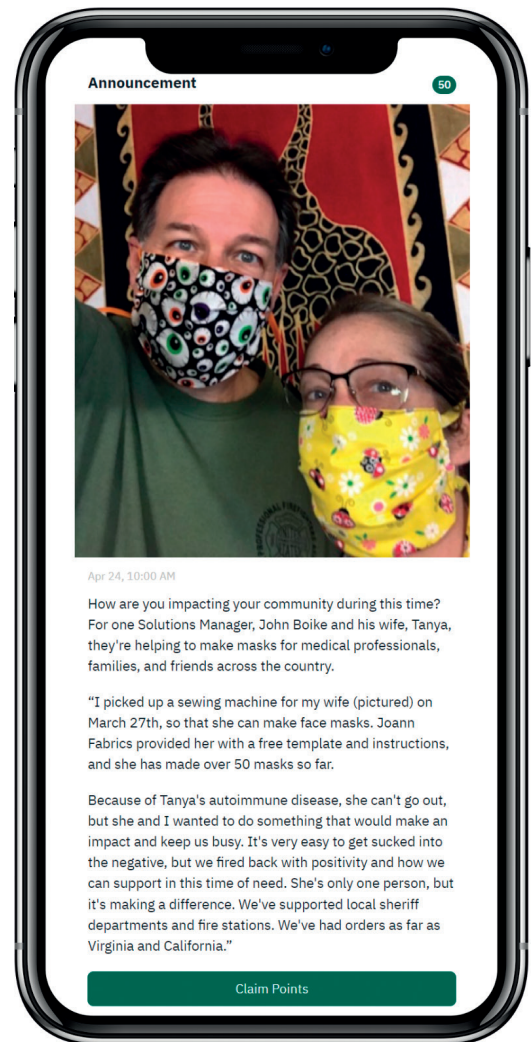


Figure 4 Employee spotlight

and motivated to deliver in that moment of truth. The fiscal year wrapped in September 2022 with 99.1 per cent client retention and a voluntary turnover less than one-fifth the industry average. Regardless of industry or operation type, strategic frontline communication can be your best employee retention and performance improvement strategy.

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