cipd

Case study
July 2014

Putting social media to work

Southeastern

WORK   WORKFORCE   WORKPLACE

Championing better work and working lives

The CIPD's purpose is to **champion better work and working lives** by improving practices in people and organisation development, for the benefit of individuals, businesses, economies and society. Our research work plays a critical role – providing the content and credibility for us to drive practice, raise standards and offer advice, guidance and practical support to the profession. Our research also informs our advocacy and engagement with policy-makers and other opinion-formers on behalf of the profession we represent.

To increase our impact, in service of our purpose, we're focusing our research agenda on three core themes: the future of **work**, the diverse and changing nature of the **workforce**, and the culture and organisation of the **workplace**.

WORK

Our focus on work includes what work is and where, when and how work takes place, as well as trends and changes in skills and job needs, changing career patterns, global mobility, technological developments and new ways of working.

WORKFORCE

Our focus on the workforce includes demographics, generational shifts, attitudes and expectations, the changing skills base and trends in learning and education.

WORKPLACE

Our focus on the workplace includes how organisations are evolving and adapting, understanding of culture, trust and engagement, and how people are best organised, developed, managed, motivated and rewarded to perform at their best.

About us

The CIPD is the professional body for HR and people development. We have over 130,000 members internationally – working in HR, learning and development, people management and consulting across private businesses and organisations in the public and voluntary sectors. We are an independent and not-for-profit organisation, guided in our work by the evidence and the front-line experience of our members.

Putting social media to work
Southeastern case study

This case study forms part of a research project conducted in 2014. The main research report and other case studies can be found <u>here</u>.

The context

A wide strategy of employee engagement

Southeastern employs about 3,800 people and runs train services in London, Kent and East Sussex, serving 179 stations. Formed in 2006, it took over the Integrated Kent Franchise from the publicly owned South Eastern Trains, which took over from Connex when it had its franchise taken away.

When Southeastern was awarded the franchise, it signed up to significant people management obligations, including Investors in People (IiP) standards, training spend and NVQs. Two major landmarks of launching the UK's first high-speed domestic train service in 2009 and serving the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games provided particular focuses for this.

The IiP strategy has successfully seen Southeastern achieve initial recognition in 2009, bronze standard in 2010, silver in 2011 and gold in 2012, which symbolically tied in perfectly with the Olympic theme. Since then, Southeastern has gone on to become IiP champions.

Andy Bindon joined as HR director in 2008. Coming from a worker-owned social enterprise, he was used to employees having a strong voice and being involved in business decisions. Thus, employee voice and communication has been central to Southeastern's

people strategy. Examples include an annual employee survey, company councils (union employee representation for different functional areas), regular focus groups, ad hoc focus groups for specific issues, a monthly phone-in for employees to talk directly to senior leaders, and a quarterly management forum. Focus groups have covered a range of issues, from uniforms to creating a new vision statement for the organisation, which was agreed as 'Working together to bring people together'.

Through such channels, about 15% of the workforce were involved in business discussions every year. The organisation wanted to build on this because, in the words of Bindon, there was *'a hunger and an interest'* among employees to get more involved in decision-making. The development of an enterprise social network has been a core strand of this drive and very much part of a wider ongoing employee engagement and communication strategy.

Drawbacks of a static intranet and Facebook

Previously, Southeastern had a static intranet with no interactivity. It was used to post company news and provide access for staff to company policies and safety plans. Clearly this was not going to support Southeastern's ambitions for greater employee voice and it was also below what employees expected.

Indeed, around 2008, with the growth of social media, employees started to use Facebook to create discussion groups and connect with other Southeastern employees. Groups included drivers and employees working on the high-speed rail project or at the same local station. A particular drawback of this was felt to be the public-facing nature of Facebook. As Rupert Atterbury Thomas, Communications Manager, put it, there was a concern about the content of work-focused discussions that took place outside the work environment.

> *There were instances where anyone could access [Facebook groups] and some of the discussions that people would have, you thought … 'Is this the place for staff to be airing their dirty laundry?' … That not only puts Southeastern's reputation at risk, but also staff's reputation, because it [blurs the] divide between what's personal and private, and what's work.*
> (Rupert Atterbury Thomas)

The innovation

Southeastern developed an enterprise social network called 'WorkMate' with the aim of it being a single site for employees to visit to have conversations, ask questions, find resources, get live train service updates, and read corporate messages. As well as being able to form network groups, the platform has a discussion forum where people can post micro blogs of up to 400

characters, along with attachments (documents, photos, and so on).

[We] took the best from the three main well-known social media that are out there. The Twitter side of things because I think communication is a big issue within our company, and obviously we've got a lot of people spread around Kent and getting on for 200 locations, and people often working in relative isolation. Then there's the Facebook side of it, people being able to create their own profile page and share their interests with colleagues. Also the functionality of Wikipedia, as a chance to build up and share knowledge. (Andy Bindon)

WorkMate was initially made accessible through Southeastern-issued devices, including older-style BlackBerry as well as desktop computers, and later was made accessible through any Internet-enabled devices, including personally owned mobile devices.

The journey

The communications team first became aware of enterprise social networks from their use in America in late 2010 and early 2011. The communications team had clear support from the senior leadership to develop such a platform in Southeastern, despite not having a cost–benefit analysis.

[We've] got a very, very active and focused senior leadership team here on the people agenda. … There wasn't really a formal business case saying, 'We're going to reap these benefits.' I think intuitively everyone felt it could have benefits, but it was more a leap of faith, really, and the costs were fairly modest in the scheme of things. (Andy Bindon)

Potential benefits were seen to include:

- building and making use of better networks across what is a highly dispersed workforce, spread across nearly 200 sites over a substantial geographical area, and with many employees working in relative isolation
- providing a secure place for employees to congregate and have open discussions: both giving people a voice and enabling them to see what other people's views are
- sharing knowledge and learning, by enabling less experienced employees to tap into the wealth of experience possessed by other colleagues who they would normally not be able to contact
- quickly share live operational updates throughout the organisation – this was necessary to keep pace with the use of social media by passengers, who would very quickly find, share and discuss information, in particular through Twitter
- to communicate corporate messages more effectively – because WorkMate was more attractive and generally useful than the intranet, more employees would use it, creating a more receptive audience.

Ensuring that it would be gated and secure was the paramount concern, and it was decided early on that no users would be allowed pseudonyms – everyone would have to use their own real names.

Southeastern decided to work with Socialtext, a US-based company, initially to think about how an enterprise social network could help, and then to develop a bespoke platform based on Socialtext's standard product. Southeastern found that the consultants gave valuable advice on what to prioritise at different

stages of development and what not to worry about.

It took four months to properly understand the platform and translate its application to be relevant to Southeastern. The executive team approved the resulting proposal and it then took about another three months to migrate intranet content to the new WorkMate system and plan the launch and technical details such as accessibility. It was then run alongside the static intranet as a three-month pilot from August 2011. This launch was very soft – apart from a user group from a cross-section of staff, set up to inform how the platform was further designed and managed and to iron out any glitches, WorkMate was not actively promoted.

We just said, 'Here's a tool for you. It's got everything the static site has got. We think you will find it useful. Go use,' and nothing more than that, to see what the take-up was. (Rupert Atterbury Thomas)

In the first week about 200 staff signed up, this rising sharply over the following weeks, increasing to 1,500 staff.

The things that they were looking at were just absolutely nuts, so the times it was visited just knocked the static site out of the water. … The numbers of times that people were going back to the site to see what was happening. The amount of news they were clicking on. Finding colleagues as well, and getting in touch with people. … Before, when you've just got a contacts directory, you need to know who you're looking for. With this, you don't. You can search for people who've tagged gardening, and you find 76 avid gardeners. (Rupert Atterbury Thomas)

This allowed the communications team to build a strong business case and by April 2012 Southeastern had closed its intranet and formally launched WorkMate. A few months later, WorkMate was given an Olympic theme, including the London 2012 magenta colour and links to the live games and medal tables, as well as network groups to communicate more effectively during this unprecedented busy time. Since then, WorkMate has been put in the cloud so that employees can access it from any Internet-enabled device, not only from Southeastern devices.

The management of the tool has been very hands-off. While the communications team has hinted at possible uses, employees have established their own groups and used it as they saw fit. Its use is covered by a single broad-brush IT policy, which was only changed by adding 'and WorkMate' to the list of things the policy applied to. It is seen as self-policing, with the communications team only having to pick up on three or four comments since it started and no formal action ever being necessary.

We've never deleted a comment from the site. … Initially I probably started out with having it on a screen all the time and then realised that this was pointless. It monitors itself. If someone doesn't like something, someone else goes back and says 'You can't say that.' … Occasionally we might get a call from someone alerting us to a post they've found offensive. Usually it's not that offensive, but it's an open forum, someone's found offence. But what we do as a comms team is call the person who posted it and say, 'Look, I see you posted something earlier on today. Someone's found it offensive and to be honest,

there's maybe a bit in it. But it's up to you, if you want to remove it or rewrite it, that's up to you' and they delete it or rewrite it themselves. (Rupert Atterbury Thomas)

The results

Take-up and use
During the pilot, WorkMate received 52,341 visits, nearly 100 times the 540 visits that the intranet received. As Andy Bindon puts it, *'The results were phenomenal, really.'* Since then it has gone from strength to strength, to the point where 80% of staff are registered, about half of the workforce log on in a given month, and typically about 60 questions and several hundred comments are posted every week.[1]

Activity increases when there has been disruption or some other issue has arisen, when conversation streams can easily go over 100 comments from managers and employees. This is seen to be healthy dialogue that would not happen otherwise.

WorkMate is also used to support good practice. For example, an employee engagement toolkit was posted on it, which was viewed about 2,500 times in the first three months. It is also used to post employee survey results and advice on how to do action plans based on the results.

It knocks a static intranet for six. I would never have one, ever again. They're dead. (Rupert Atterbury Thomas)

Staff use it in a range of ways: to ask colleagues questions and help each other; discuss customer issues and queries; share stories, including difficult customers; and show support to colleagues. Some staff give a thought-for-the-day

type post or quote; and a few have become well known across the organisation for their online personas. There is also a good deal of humour, which is seen to be good for morale.

Station staff particularly use it and drivers less so, because of restrictions around the use of smartphones while driving a train. Managers tend to be less active in posting comments, but it is thought they use WorkMate more to keep tabs on what is being discussed. It has been embraced to some extent by trade unions, some of which advertise their branch meetings, promote learning initiatives, and discuss key issues (for example pay awards).

Business impacts
Staff also use WorkMate to help them do their day-to-day job. Most importantly, it has enabled staff to fix faults on trains and respond to delays more quickly, but it is also a way for staff to deal better with customer queries (for example by using links to other sources of information and communicating with colleagues to quickly locate lost property).

WorkMate was seen to be instrumental in fostering motivation and pride and supporting the organisation's performance during London 2012, which was *'one of the best periods of train performance we've ever delivered in the seven years we've been running the business. It went as well as it possibly could'* (Andy Bindon).

There has been a rise in certain measures from the staff survey between 2012 and 2013, such as how many employees understand the company's values, for which WorkMate is seen to be not wholly responsible but certainly *'a cog in the wheel'*.

---

[1] Figures current to when this research was conducted.

It is seen to add considerably to the effectiveness of internal corporate communications. As employees are drawn in to use it for their own use, management is able to put out their messages in a dynamic way to a more receptive audience. WorkMate allows the communications team to get feedback on messages it puts out, gauge how the message is being received, and put out further communications – often in an informal, discursive way – to back up and clarify the key messages. This is seen to be much more effective than more traditional communications channels such as email.

The thing with email is there's still a tendency to think, 'Well, I've sent an email and therefore I've communicated,' whereby you don't necessarily know that you have. Okay, you could [use] a 'read receipt' but if you put a message on [WorkMate], it probably won't be very long before you get a response to that message or someone adding a comment. (Andy Bindon)

More specifically, WorkMate has contributed to effective communication on organisation-wide initiatives and changes. For example, there was some confusion when staff were automatically enrolled onto Smart Pensions, a tax-efficient way of paying your pension, as a result of collective bargaining agreements. Southeastern believed it was for the trade unions to explain why the unions had agreed this, but when it became clear there was a void in communications, it promptly posted an explanation on WorkMate. Not only that, the following discussion helped clarify and reinforce the company's position. In this sense, WorkMate has proven a valuable tool for harmonious employment relations. These are the sorts of issues that traditionally, through misinformation and mistrust, could easily develop into an industrial dispute.

Comments we received from staff on the value and impact of WorkMate included the following:

I think WorkMate is excellent as we can locate any info that we need, also if we need to find an answer to something somebody out there usually has the answer! It also gives us a chance to interact with other people in the company who we would normally never meet or speak to. (Fiona Radford, Sales, Paddock Wood Station)

People [ask] questions, and there is always someone who knows why, so if a customer asks me I can say why Platform 6 has blue stripes [I can find out]. (Maggie Capps, Sales, Battle Station)

I speak to people up and down the line, never met them but we talk every day [on WorkMate], have banter, also got a birthday card posted to my home station, how nice is that? … If you are on a late turn and you are in an out station, you can feel very isolated but [with WorkMate] you know there are other people working the graveyard shift. (Maggie Capps, Sales, Battle Station)

WorkMate also provides a sense of railway community. … Whilst this can result in what seems like idle chit-chat, this has benefits enabling the release of frustrations about different aspects of the job, without people resorting to external social media. … The group section provides useful contacts encouraging company social cohesion, group working and information dissemination. (Lucien Williams, Sales, Maidstone Station)

I do hear a lot of people saying that they do not want to go on it and complaining when they find out everything is on there, though. They still feel that they are being watched by 'big brother' and technically they are correct as a lot of managers keep their eye on WorkMate without commenting. Although I think the warnings from managers about being on there too much has stopped now. (Tracy Marshall, Sales, Hastings Station)

There are a lot of great things about WorkMate, variety, informative, flexibility and a good way of making friends out of people who work for the company that I personally never knew existed. Employees can set up their own clubs so like-minded people can talk about the same thing, again bringing colleagues from the far reaches of the network together – which has to be good – and kind of gets people talking about their role in the company and also understanding other people's [roles]. … The informative part is probably the most essential part and the reason why over 3,000 employees have signed up to it, not everybody posts on the main dashboard but I reckon most of them sign in daily when at work just to read the banter, the problems, the detailed reports or maybe just to feel that sense of belonging to the company. … As you may have guessed, I think WorkMate, when introduced, was a breath of fresh air to the company and although I may only use a small proportion of the whole thing because of the relevance to me, to be without it now would be a massive step backwards and leave a lot of people blind as to what is going on. (Barry Creek, Store Keeper, Slade Green Engineering Depot)

Next steps

At the time of our research, WorkMate had been running for nearly three years. The aim is to increase the proportion of employees who use WorkMate to get as near 100% coverage as possible. Updating the company's IT hardware is also expected to help, especially as it migrates to more up-to-date devices than the older-style BlackBerrys that many staff are issued.

As we write Southeastern are on the point of launching 'IdeaMate', a managed system for capturing ideas from employees accessed via WorkMate, with an aim to generate improvement ideas directly inputting to future business policies.

A potential future development is seen to be the personalisation of communications. At a simple level, this would facilitate HR tasks, such as automatically filling in forms for employees logged into the system. At a more advanced level, it could personalise messages on employee benefits so that employees receive more relevant offers.

Lessons

It is one thing to give employees the opportunity for them to express their views and opinion, but another thing to demonstrate to employees that those views and opinions can influence big decisions. Andy Bindon is convinced Southeastern are doing both and WorkMate is a key part of this, but the technology alone does not change organisational culture.

You cannot just bring in something like WorkMate and think it will solve all your engagement and voice-type issues. After three years of steady progress, it was a logical extension of where we'd got to. (Andy Bindon)

In line with the broader culture, it was thought important to manage enterprise social networks in as light-touch a way as possible. This can be seen in the fact that Southeastern doesn't moderate or delete employees' comments, but also in the way that senior leaders don't interfere with discussions on enterprise social networks.

You cannot control enterprise social networks. Don't for one second think that you can. You can steer it. You can influence it, so you can lead people down a particular discussion but it's an open platform. So there isn't a great deal [of managing it]. Other than encouraging some conversation and contributing to it, we purposefully didn't try and say 'Use it for this … Don't use it for this.' (Rupert Atterbury Thomas)

For example, in the discussion on Smart Pensions (see above), there then followed a lively debate on WorkMate, but the leadership decided to let it run its course and not to stifle it. The result was that other colleagues corrected misconceptions and helped a reasonable view prevail, which was thought to be more powerful than a senior leader weighing in with the official line.

We didn't comment on any of the debates at all. … It certainly clarified what had happened pretty quickly, because you had [some] people feeling that, 'Oh no, this was never agreed,' but then [other] people saying, 'Well, no it was agreed. I know, because I was at the meeting.' (Andy Bindon)

Another aspect of the light-touch management of WorkMate is an acceptance that employees will use it for trivial things as well as business issues. This was not

seen to be a problem, as most discussion was work-focused and the personal side was part of what strengthened networks across the organisation.

In Southeastern's case they found making everyone use their own name, not allowing pseudonyms, has meant that WorkMate effectively polices itself. They are convinced this approach reinforces the culture of involvement and taking responsibility that they want to see across the organisation.

We want people to be able to say what they think, and they should say it in a constructive, respectful way. Requiring people to put their name to what they say is a basic given in most organisations. Yes, you have more aggregated approaches like employee surveys (which are anonymised) but I wouldn't feel comfortable running something like this anonymously. We try to create a culture here which says, 'You can say what you think, and you won't be penalised for it.' … If you've got a strong opinion on something, you should feel comfortable putting your name to it. (Andy Bindon)

In this way, Southeastern's experience with WorkMate has convinced the leadership and communications team that staff can be trusted with an open enterprise social network.

In terms of the costs and benefit of running an enterprise social network, WorkMate is considered to be good value for what it delivers, working out at about £13 per employee as opposed to the £10 per employee it spent on the static intranet.

However, the potential that WorkMate opens up has inspired the communications team to do

more with its communications, which may include greater costs. Creating engaging content takes time and money.

/Instead of just doing a poster or a booklet on your company values, if you do a video which is fun and published in a social media environment, it's far more effective. It has far greater visibility and is received far better./
(Rupert Atterbury Thomas)

A good example was the use of a video on WorkMate to bring to life the company values. 'Values in 60 Seconds' has been viewed more than 6,000 times by employees and is seen to have contributed to the finding in Southeastern's latest employee survey that 75% of respondents agreed they understood the company's values.

Finally, Southeastern's experience reinforces the value of case study research such as this. Through social media, including the community of Socialtext users, the communications team has been able to learn from others and find people who can advise on the development of WorkMate.

Acknowledgements
Andy Bindon, HR Director, Southeastern

Eugene McConlough, Employee Engagement Manager, Southeastern

Rupert Atterbury Thomas, Communications Manager, Southeastern