The workplace communications crisis

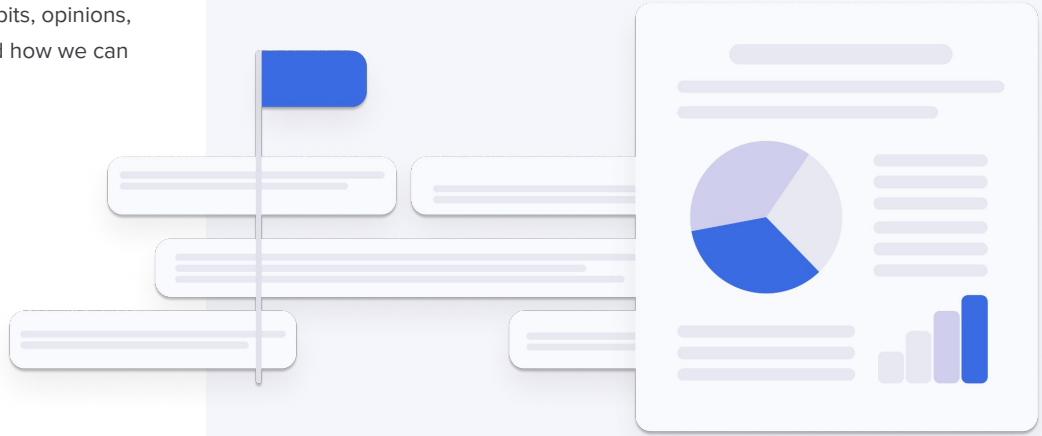
Why internal communications aren’t working

AXIOS HQ

What's inside

Axios HQ is dedicated to helping organizations communicate more effectively. This year, we surveyed hundreds of employees, communication professionals and executives to better understand how leaders communicate at work and, more importantly, what is and isn't working about it.

This report dives deep into workplace communications — the habits, opinions, and attitudes of employees and employers alike — to understand how we can all be clearer, more productive communicators at work.



The crisis ahead

There is a fundamental issue inside every organization — every institution, agency, nonprofit, team. Whether they know it or not, research shows most are struggling with the same internal issue: communication.

The problem: There's a massive breakdown in how communication leaders engage their teams and how those teams view the details they receive.

- **66%** of communicators think they know what updates employees need.
- **31%** of employees agree.

Across teams of all sizes, that creates under-productive and disengaged employees. Leaders are sharing an avalanche of information — mostly ad hoc — but rarely have a feedback loop in place to know if their comms are effective. So while communicators think employees are sprinting toward the next goal, they're more often struggling or unclear on how to move forward.

You can imagine the ripple.

- Team feelings of support, transparency and connection fade.
- Rising managers, untrained in communication, exacerbate the issue.
- Cross-organizational updates become unclear, inconsistent and weak.
- And once you've lost team engagement, it's hard to rebuild trust.

Critical messages that many leaders think they're getting across are never seen at all. Let's dig into what's happening and how it can improve.

CHALLENGE 1

Employees aren’t reading ad hoc updates

The number one challenge communicators face: getting teams to stay engaged and read critical company or organizational updates. Across communicators:

- **48%** say it’s their top issue, at companies with under 100 employees.
- **66%** say the same thing, once their teams hit 100 and larger.

Employees face a flood of information in their day-to-day work — emails, IMs, document dumps, texts, tweets, alarms, alerts. And while shrinking attention spans and shallow memories aren’t new, its fallout will continue to scale as the company does.

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Case in point

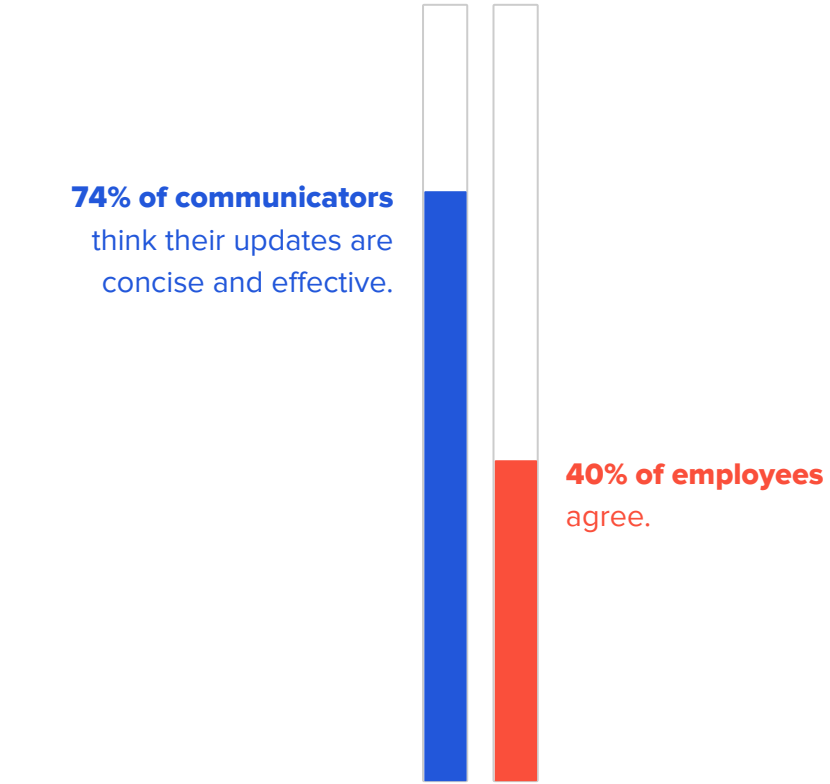
Less than half of employees feel informed about their company's business goals. And the communications they receive are often flawed:

- Leadership perspective is often lacking.
- Messages are confusing and not transparent.
- Updates aren't relevant or catered to teams.
- Cadence is inconsistent or unreliable.

Nearly 70% of communicators acknowledge the problem — their main way of sharing information is ad hoc email.

- **Yes, but:** Only 48% of employees realize these ad hoc updates are the main way they get access to important information.

It's inefficient and feeds a vicious cycle. Employees feel confused and out of the loop, and communicators, tight on time and feedback, struggle to evolve their strategy — 32% say finding enough time is a key issue in communicating to employees. Streamlined, focused updates are critical in stopping this spiral.



A smart solution, from Grail

The answer is not more words. It is far fewer, more thoughtfully shared, that will serve teams and their leaders long-term, mend employee trust, and reignite engagement.

The issue with ad hoc is leaders only think, "I need to communicate a piece of information," said Matt Burns, VP of Communications at Grail, a biotech company, "not, 'What is the employee experience that we're creating with all of these little touchpoints?'"

- **The Grail way:** "We set a deadline on Thursday. If you have priorities you want to communicate to employees, share those, and we put them into a very compelling newsletter."
- **In 4 minutes,** employees get the details they need, rather than ignoring a dozen ineffective emails.

Clear, concise, consolidated. This approach saves time. Leaders send fewer updates, each one full of essential information. Employees get a consistent feed of relevant, transparent updates, in an engaging way.

> *It's not just good for the employee experience. Managers are getting a lot more eyeballs on core communication they want people to see.*
>
> **— Matt Burns,** VP of Communications at Grail

Go deeper: More advice from Grail's VP of Communications

CHALLENGE 2

Communication issues compound

In small teams and early stages, communication is less complex. Keeping 10 people on the same page is rarely more than a quick call or catch-up away. Scale much beyond a dozen, though, and a new reality starts to set in: everyone becomes a "communicator."

- **45% of leaders** — whose titles have no tie to communications — are sending internal updates to employees weekly or even more often.

The problem: Most were never taught how to communicate with a team, engage executives, or develop long-term reader trust. It's a skill leaders are expected to have, but it often doesn't come naturally.

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Case in point

Communicators are nearly twice as likely to think their updates are informative and engaging than the employees who receive them. As teams grow, management layers quickly get complex — and folks who have rarely seen effective communications become responsible for sharing vital news.

- **Mid-sized companies** struggle the most sharing high-level objectives.
- **Large organizations** say topics like DE&I are hardest to communicate.

And while it is not lost on anyone that there is room to improve structure, strategy. or visual appeal in workplace communications — employees rate them a 3.3 out of 5 — feedback loops to inform those changes are missing.

- **45% of communicators** say they don't get enough feedback.
- **31% of employees** say there's no clear place to share their feedback.

That leaves companies stuck in a damaging rut. Employees get in a habit of "skim-and-delete" — if they read updates at all. Communicators lack the data to do it well. And around the time organizations hit 1,000 employees, that confusion and disconnect becomes an obstacle that's hard to correct.

As companies grow...

66%

of communicators in small orgs say only one or a few people send internal updates.

80%

of communicators in large orgs say one or more teams focus on sending internal updates.

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A smart solution, from Salesforce

Communication doesn't have to be complicated. It comes down to an honest evaluation of what teams need, a realistic assessment of how much information to share, and a conversational approach that reaches readers with the same language they use day to day.

"The trust and transparency we create as communicators is gold," said Salesforce CCO Brad Burns. "Whether you're a two-person shop or a Fortune 500 company, it begins and ends there."

- **The Salesforce way:** "We started sending a daily email to employees. It talks about what happened today and what's going to happen tomorrow, and we have an open rate of almost 70% by 65,000 employees."

Consistent communication, directly from leadership, with follow-on updates from a manager. This helps teams feel included in high-level strategy, find a sense of community and connection, and map their daily contributions to each set of goals between them and the very top.

> *It's an email that's written with humor. It's punny. It's engaging. It has become destination reading for our company.*
>
> **— Brad Burns,** CCO of Salesforce

Go deeper: More advice from Salesforce's CCO

CHALLENGE 3

Tracking is an obstacle

Less than half of communicators — **47%** — say their organization measures how effective their internal communications are. Among those who do:

- **73%** say email open rates and surveys are their most common tools.
- **79%** say casual and unsolicited feedback is their other regular input.

The problem: Employee engagement is being treated as a given, rather than the result of a strategy that leaders nourish, nurture, track and evolve. Standard emails can't always offer the analytics and insights that make that monitoring easy, so as teams grow, they turn to more sophisticated engines.

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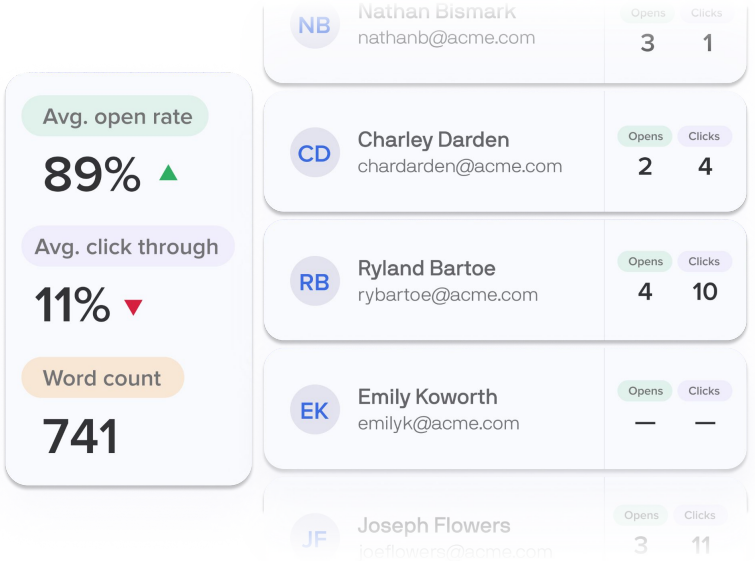
Case in point

About 30% of communicators at medium and large organizations say newsletters and other similar, multi-item updates have become the main way they share internal company news.

- **75%** send them at least monthly.
- **54%** send them at least weekly.

Streamlined strategies, plus analytic tools, can help communicators track engagement in the same ways organizations are now accustomed to seeing sales, marketing and business-level performance.

Teams that are most engaged start to reveal themselves, the topics that resonate become easier to spot, and baked-in opportunities for employee reactions and feedback can influence content strategy.



Smart solutions, from the survey

It's important to keep a pulse on reader attitudes. But for teams that don't yet have a feedback process in place or tech stack to track performance, employees and communicators shared what they think sparks engagement.

What employees want from workplace updates:

- Shorter, multi-item updates that are relevant to their roles.
- Clearer, more transparent updates to cut out surprises.
- In-person opportunities to discuss important updates.
- Ways to share their voice and offer feedback.

What communicators suggest for sharper internal updates:

- Keep them short and succinct.
- Set a good, reliable cadence.
- Don't ever send more than you have to.
- Engage readers in several ways — emails, meetings and more.

Our thought bubble:

Both sets of insights add up to clearer communication strategies, more engaged and informed employees, and an overall team culture that's found a way to get smarter, faster — together.

Go deeper: Checklist for more engaging communications

WHAT'S NEXT

Take action

In this era of nonstop noise, every person must be a skillful communicator, and there's nowhere that need is felt more than in teams and organizations. The urgent issue they're facing:

- Communicators do not realize their strategies are ineffective.
- Employees don't believe their needs and feedback are heard.
- Both issues intensify as teams continue to scale.

As communication breaks down, trust, engagement, and productivity erode alongside it. At organizations small and large — from Axios to the Fortune 100 — a few strategies have helped leaders and teams connect in a more genuine way, stay focused on the information that matters, and above all else, bust through the noise.

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How to get started

1. **Consolidate what's key.** Keep vital updates in one recurring update. Readers build a habit around it, and leaders avoid ad hoc sends.
2. **Ruthlessly prioritize.** Make your point early and clearly so readers can move on: 60%–80% of them are scanning, not reading, what you write, University of Maryland research found.
3. **Write like you speak.** Jargon and well-known background weigh your messages down. Conversational language is captivating.
4. **Listen and learn.** You're reaching smart readers. Give them what they need, stop when you've said enough, and set up a system for feedback.
5. **Repetition matters.** If you want someone to remember your message, communicate crisply — and repeatedly. By the time you have annoyed yourself, others are probably starting to hear you.

Our thought bubble:

The communications crisis isn't confined to business or top leaders. The more noise and distraction, the more precision and efficiency will matter for anyone to be heard — and remembered.

Go deeper: How to win the war for attention

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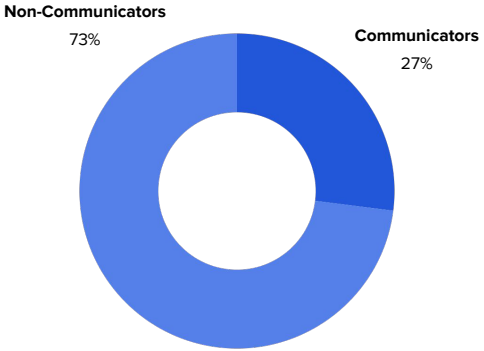
METHODOLOGY

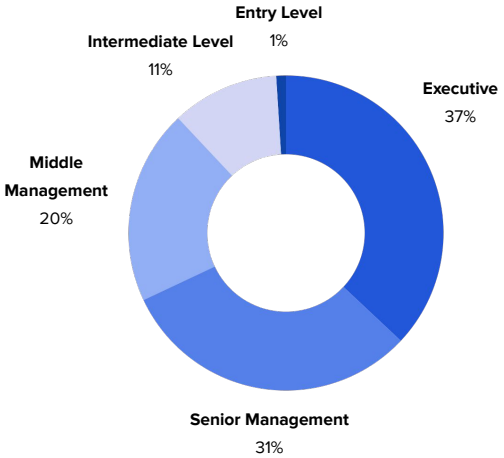
Who we surveyed

We conducted two surveys — one reaching communicators and leadership at organizations, and one reaching employees. Respondents included both Axios readers and non-readers:

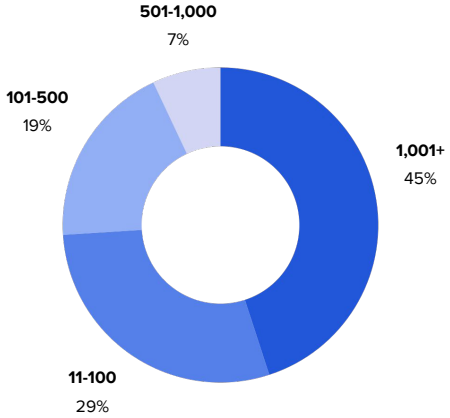
Communicators vs. Non-communicators

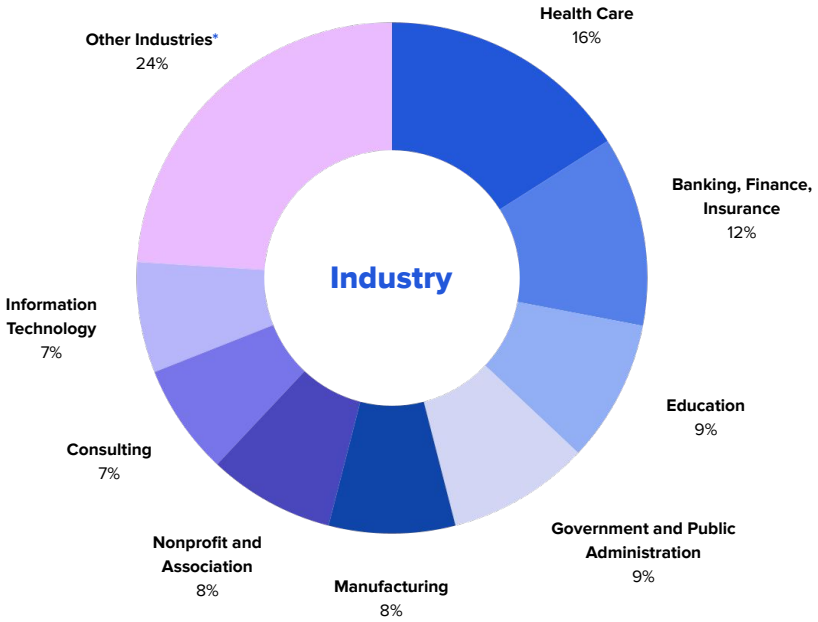


Job level



Company size





Other Industries includes the following categories:

- Media, Publishing, or Broadcasting 5%
- Transportation and Public Utilities 4%
- Retail 3%
- Legal Services 2%
- Investing 2%
- Real Estate 2%
- Hotel and Food Services 1%
- Telecommunications 1%
- Academia 1%
- Arts & Entertainment 1%
- Government Lobbying 1%
- Gaming 1%

About us

Axios HQ helps teams communicate more effectively. Rooted in years of research, HQ creates smart updates that distill essential information in half the time — increasing transparency, boosting engagement, and building trust.

Innovative companies like Delta, Edelman, and Everfi know communication is the key to culture, connectedness, and growth, and they use HQ's intuitive platform to elevate company updates that get their teams smarter, faster.

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See how Axios HQ has perfected the art of clear stakeholder communications.

See a sample update

Book a demo

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Write less. Say more.