# Bringing greater diversity to internal communication
By Paul Roberts

A recent piece of research with one of the UK's best known companies provided us with a fascinating statistic: that only one third of staff prefer to receive communication in a read-only form. Of the rest, over 40% prefer to receive it in an audio-visual form, whilst the remaining 25% want to interact with the content they receive by either discussing it locally with colleagues or more widely with other communities across the organisation. But despite this spread of preference, read-only remains the dominant form of internal communication.

Should these findings come as a surprise? We know different personality types take in information in different ways. We also know that people learn in different ways and much help is being given to those who find reading difficult. So what is the case for extending this principle and bringing greater diversity to an internal media mix?

Communication Preferences

42%

25%

33%

- Read-only preference
- Audio Visual preference
- Prefer Interaction
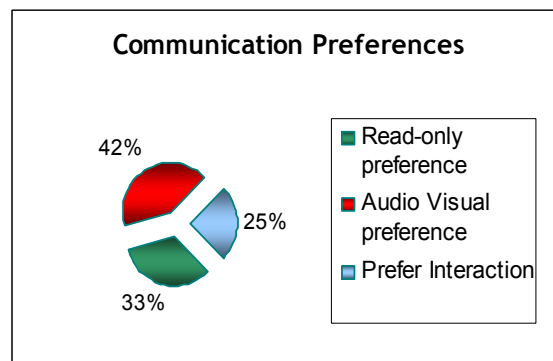
One of the most striking aspects of the research was the strength of the stated preference. Respondents who prefer read-only communication argue that content in this form is portable, flexible, easily scanned and useful as a reference to check detail. They would take a great deal of persuading that any other form is superior and even those that generally prefer other forms recognise that read-only has an important role to play.

Equally persuasive are those who argue that read-only lacks the richness of audio-visual or discussion-based communication. Hearing or seeing someone speak stimulates more senses and makes it easier to engage. It also allows the receiver to focus on more than one thing, switching attention between different content sources according to interest.

Those favouring discussion or interaction of any kind believe it's essential to be connected with groups of like-minded people and have access to exactly the right information at the moment they need it. They want to ask questions, clarify understanding and enhance the personal relevance of communication either through face to face dialogue or tools such as Wikis or Instant Messaging. None of these points of view is right or wrong: they merely tell us that people are different and balance is essential.

Another argument in favour is the perceived discrepancy between internal communication and how we receive communication more generally. If we take our daily intake of news as an example, some will be happy with a short two minute radio update whilst others prefer to read the newspaper or watch the TV news. Our expectation is that we receive the news in the way that suits us best and yet most organisations provide their news in a single, usually read-only, form. An increasingly media-savvy world will not accept this discrepancy forever.
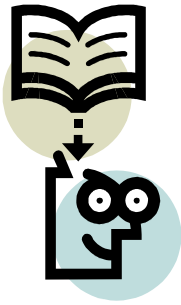
Read-only communication also brings potential for discrimination. As a society, we are becoming more tolerant of those with reading difficulties, estimated to include up to 20% of the UK adult population, and recognise that an inclusive society means providing those affected with an audio-visual alternative. Indeed, the Disability Discrimination Acts 1995/2005 create a legal requirement for all companies to make reasonable adjustments to their working practices, policies and procedures, to ensure that people with disabilities are not at a substantial disadvantage.

So with such a compelling case for diversity, why is it that read-only tends to dominate? Our research suggests there are three significant barriers to building a more balanced mix: time, technology and organisational culture.

Ask anyone about the principal constraint to better communication and they will cite a lack of time. The perception may well be that 'the information is out there' but with a demanding day job and limited bandwidth for non-essential information, people want to use their available time effectively. This often means defaulting to read-only as it's easy to access and can be picked up and put down. Of course, preparing a read-only communication is usually the most time-efficient method for the sender too.

Until recently, technology (or lack of it) has presented a very considerable barrier with audio-visual communication confined to offline DVDs or videos, usually requiring specialist production. But broadband Internet and third-generation mobile technology have combined to make audio-visual more accessible and helped to remove time as a major constraint. So in a world where audio-visual content can be accessed through the mobile handset, people have the opportunity to use downtime that might otherwise be lost to receive audio-visual content.

The biggest barrier of all remains organisational culture. For all sorts of reasons, people have become very used to relying on read-only as their primary source of communication. Audio-visual is seen as obtrusive, potentially distracting to others and always easy to dismiss as a poor use of company time and money. Opportunities for face-to-face discussion vary greatly across and between organisations, whilst a proportion of managers will always lack the skills or the content to make this work effectively. And a significant proportion of people in any organisation remain suspicious of the potential benefits of emerging social media. Clearly, attitudes need to change if organisations are to successfully introduce greater diversity.

So in the face of such adversity, why should we treat the results of a single survey as a call to action? By returning to our purpose for communicating in the first place we have a very clear answer. The purpose of any communication is to engage the receiver and prompt a desired action. Logically, our greatest chance of success comes if we provide the communication in the form most likely to achieve that objective, be it read-only, audio-visual or discussion-based. Wider societal trends and new technology are accelerating the need for change making it essential that internal communication grasps this opportunity and introduces greater communication diversity.