



## The Internal Comms Podcast – Season 10

### Episode 89 – Paul Downey, *Netflix-style IC: Snackable, on-demand and authentic*

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**Katie** 00:04

Hello and welcome to the Internal Comms Podcast with me, Katie Macaulay. This is a show to inspire, inform and generally energise those of us responsible for communicating to our internal audiences. Every fortnight I sit down with a comms practitioner, consultant, author or academic, to tease out new thinking smart ideas and thoughtful insights, all in a bid to improve the way we communicate at work. My guest today is Paul Downey, Global Head of Communications and Engagement at the Access Group, which provides business management software to small and mid-sized organisations across the UK, Ireland and Asia Pacific.

**Katie** 01:00

Now, Paul has had a long and impressive career in many well known organisations across the private and public sectors. These include, among others, Microsoft, MoneySupermarket, Shell, Number 10, and the Cabinet Office. Now, Paul first came to my attention, because of a post on LinkedIn. He was describing what sounded like a truly global and highly ambitious virtual event for his employees. We had an initial chat, and it was immediately clear that Paul had a wealth of experience and wisdom to share. In this conversation, we talk about the Netflix effect, how we need to make our content snackable and on demand for employees, and how to find the right balance between global messaging and local relevance. We talk about the importance of your organization's ENPS, its employee net promoter score, and how to use this benchmark stat in your planning and in your conversations with senior leaders. We talked about Paul's no slide rule for leaders, and how you decide it is finally time to move on in your career and find your next role. Throughout this conversation, Paul was very open, very honest and generous with his advice and insight. I hope you enjoy this conversation as much as I did. So without further ado, I bring you Paul Downey. Paul, welcome to the internal comms podcast. And thank you all. So for being here in person.

**Paul** 02:51

No problem. Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to have the conversation.

**Katie** 02:55

Probably a good starting point would be just explaining a bit about the organisation you currently work for, the Access Group, a little bit about its sector, what it does, and also the nature of your workforce as well.

**Paul** 03:09



Yeah, really good place to start. So the Access Group, we're one of the leading providers of business management software to small and mid-sized organisations. So we're in the UK, Ireland and Asia Pacific. So we help customers across commercial and also not for profit sectors become more productive and efficient by using our technology. What that looks like from an employee perspective is so we have currently around 600,000 employees globally, which makes internal comms more challenging and more interesting, trying to engage with different timezones, different cultures, and also, we're growing. And we're scaling. So two other really important things to flag.

**Paul** 03:52

And we'll talk about this in the conversation, because it's part of how my landscaping how I build the strategy is that some of our growth is due to acquisition, so again, from an internal comms perspective, we've got to take that into account. So I think of us as a blended family. So that that's one of the challenges. And then the second thing is that 60% of our workforce work 100% remotely. Yeah, we have a huge, flexible working culture at Access. So when I'm thinking about my comms strategy that really influences how I and my team engage with our workforce globally.

04:31

I can already think of many questions. Just in that little intro to what you do, not least the hybrid challenge, but let's go back to the beginning in terms of where we first met and how we first met. It was literally a post on LinkedIn that I spotted, you've done a big global employee event. And it really caught my eye. I reached out to you and said, I'd love to talk to you about it. Can you share with us a little bit about that event, the objectives that you set out initially, and how you structured it?

**Paul** 05:03

First of all, LinkedIn is brilliant to connect with people, isn't it? So if anyone's watching, please feel free to reach out, connect with me, I'm happy to continue the conversation. So the global event, it was our FY 24 kickoff. So that's our fiscal kickoff for the year looking back what we've achieved what we celebrated, and then looking forward, and there was really three purposes. So firstly, to understand, so launching our new strategy, and how everyone in the business played a part in delivering that for the new fiscal year. And then secondly, to celebrate what we've achieved in the last fiscal year, and then also to feel proud about the Access journey. So where we've come from, and I just talked about the global scale of what we're looking at over the next three to four years. So really feeling proud about that. Lots of challenges. If we think about the demographic of my organisation, so there's really, I think, two key challenges. So global, so how we looked at it from a global mindset, so that everyone felt involved. And then that led on to the second challenge was around inclusion. So how we made it a really inclusive event that everyone felt



part of, and everyone felt that they could see themselves in, because as a global organisation, and there may be people listening who work for global organisations, it's not possible to get everyone together, face to face. So those were two of my main challenges. And one of the other challenges was that, we came up with this new concept of Access TV. So think of it as Netflix, but for employees. And that was a really new way of engaging for the business, and for some of our senior leaders and some of the speakers that we wanted to bring in and be part of this event. And so that was another challenge as well, in terms of getting everyone on board to the concept, because that was how we were really going to engage people from a global perspective.

07:01

So lots of supplementary questions here. So this was totally an online virtual event. Yes, yes. And you say Netflix style, meaning that could people both watch live but also on demand later?

**Paul** 07:18

Yeah. And that's where the concept came from. When we thought of it from A) global and B) inclusion, how can we make that happen? And also, actually one of the other challenges was this sheer scale of content that we wanted to tell and how we brought that all together into one compelling story. So just in terms of, I'll give you some stats here, because internal comms people love some stat. The scale. So the programme ended up being broadcast live over four days, not just one day. So four days to take in time zones. We had 24 global sessions. Each session was a 90 minute TV show. And we had 150 global speakers. Yeah, so it was huge. So yeah, going back to your original point, we broadcast to all live. We have a TV studio in the UK, we broadcast it all live from there, so anyone within the timezone they could watch and consume it live. And it was also available on demand on Access TV for other teams to watch at their own convenience. And then we also package that up, and they were able to use it as part of their local kickoffs as well.

**Paul** 08:25

Going back to the challenges of inclusion and the diversity, we wanted to think about how we brought more diversity in voice into the event as well. I didn't want to feel just like we were broadcasting from the mothership or from HQ. Yeah, but obviously, there's certain messages that we need to land from HQ that need to cascade throughout the rest of the business. And that's where the concept really came to life. We had one kickoff event, which we call the Big Fab Kicker. And that was our CEO's moment. His show, his 90 minute show was various other senior leaders from the business, really setting out what the strategy was for the next fiscal year. And then also celebrating what everyone had achieved. Then each local leader had their own 90 minute show. So they would take that strategic messaging, and work out what that meant for them at a local level. And then they hosted with various



members of the teams, their local TV show, once they brought that strategic messaging to life from a local perspective. So we had a plethora of diversity of voices coming in. The other thing we wanted to think about from a diversity point of view was the external speakers that we brought in that we really got traction across the globe with not just the speaker, but also the topics that we wanted to speak about. So we really focused on diversity and belonging, being, leadership... so the three speakers that we ended up landing with were June Sarpong, who's amazing speaker on diversity and belonging in his written various books, we had Dame Kelly Holmes, come in and talk to us about leadership. And then we had John Torode come in and actually do a Masterchef cook off. Going back to how do we get people together? How do we get people engaged in doing things that were also fun? So everyone was challenged to take part in the cook off, post their photos online of their final meal, there was prizes. And another thing that we thought of from a cultural perspective, particularly came through from a digital lens was, so giving is a huge part of the Access culture, we've got a massive giving culture. So last year, we raised 1.3 million for our charity of the year partners, to throughout the whole week, we had giving activities, where employees could get involved with their teams at a local level, and also at a global level from a fundraising perspective. So that was going on, as well as all the digital broadcast content.

**Katie** 11:04

It sounds like a massive amount of work.

**Paul** 11:07

Yes, it was.

**Katie** 11:08

You've got the content, you've got the logistics, you've got supporting leaders at different levels throughout that. Can you give us a sense of the size of the internal team, the in house team that was doing this work?

**Paul** 11:23

Yeah. And you'd be probably sitting at home or in your office or on the train or wherever you're listening to this thinking, oh, he's got a big massive team. Good luck to him. I don't.

**Paul** 11:33

As probably most of us know, internal comms, don't usually have huge teams. I have a team of five

**Katie** 11:42

Wow.



**Paul** 11:42

For a global organisation. Two of those team members are based in AIPAC. One is based in Romania. And so they focus on local activation, and then global activation as well. And then I have two in the UK. It's a very lean, small team. But what I will say is that an event like this doesn't rely just on internal communications. So we had to pull in lots from the business. So it relies on stakeholders, and it goes down to the culture that you work in as well. I suppose in some organisations, it might all just be, right internal comms, get on and deliver that, whereas the culture that we have Access, we talk about making it happen, and everyone wants to make it happen. So part of my role was to get the local leaders and their business partners and various teams galvanised and excited about the concept and about what we wanted to do, because it was a different way of engaging with the business. So there was a piece of taking them on that journey. And then for them understanding that they were the content owners for their TV show. So it was providing the framework and providing the support, and then ensuring that from a central perspective, the key messages were wrapped into all the content. So we were really very clear on what was the golden thread that we wanted running through every single show. So we were looking at it almost like we were producing the a 24-parts series on Netflix. Yes. And you have that running kind of plot going through storytelling was a really big thing. And we looked at what was almost like each being an episode, what was the introduction, setting the scene, there's always something that happens in terms of a challenge that your key character comes up against. And then there's the euphoria, kind of end moment of that aspiration, that inspiration they've overcome. So we've worked the content that way, and gave everyone a framework to develop it. So they were all developing consistent frameworks. So when I could look at all 24 episodes or sessions, they did have a consistency.

**Katie** 13:58

That is super, super smart. Can I ask, are you planning for this to be an annual event?

**Paul** 14:07

Can I just ask... No, my CEO is watching too. Can I have more resource? Yes, it is. It's an annual event. And firstly, we're already in planning for next year.

**Katie** 14:17

I was gonna say a bit your planning starts early.

**Paul** 14:19

It does. But also what is important to know is that we do mini versions of this each quarter. So we have a company update every quarter, which is broadcast to the entire organisation, and that's broadcast as a 60 minute TV show. And then we also do every quarter, a



leadership conference, which is called Ignite, because our leadership community is also global, and we broadcast that over two afternoons as well. So we so we've got quite a good rigour now around how we produce them, how we broadcast them, but this isn't the only rodeo that we're doing.

**Katie** 15:00

I can imagine. Yeah. Let me take you back to when you first joined the organisation. Can you share your reflections on that very first leadership event that you attended at Access?

**Paul** 15:16

It wasn't that long ago, I only started at Access last September. So I've been with the organisation for a year, but it feels like a long time – in a good way, because the team have created such impact. And it's incredible to see. And my first thoughts of that first leadership conference, I think it was like my second week in post. So I was, it all had it all been organised. So I knew that I was inheriting, and it was all in motion. So I was there is, in a listening, watching, stealth-like mode in the background. I felt that it did what it needed to do, and it was a conference. I knew where I wanted to take it from an engagement perspective, and also from a creative perspective.

**Paul** 16:13

So part of my remit being brought into the organisation was to develop how we engage the business. And I think that coming out of, I'm gonna say the C word sorry, coming out of COVID, everyone had to really quickly understand how do we engage digitally with employees and leaders. And I don't think that's gone away. I think obviously, there's a huge amount of learning, that's really important. And so that got me thinking really creatively about how we do that from a global organisation. Because it's not sustainable to get people together face to face, from an environmental point of view, from a financial point of view, from a time point of view. And so it got me thinking, how do we make the storytelling and the content really engaging, snackable, but still get to the point of what we needed to get to. And so that was my springboard. And I actually, in a way, it was glad that they weren't doing that. But I was like, This is what I want to do. Great. You're not doing it. Let's do it. And I think that also you get a sense really quickly of the culture of an organisation, don't you? And how stories are told or not told, and also how comfortable leaders are with doing different things. And I have been really fortunate this year to be surrounded by an incredible exec team who want to innovate, and they want to take the risks. We talk a lot about marginal gains, and doing things seeing if they work, if they don't work, what did we learn from them? And moving on that way. And so that's really embedded into my communications approach as well. Because they had that mindset. It was let's try this. If it doesn't work, we can pivot. And thankfully, it did work.



**Paul** 18:07

But some of the things that were maybe a challenge for some people listening from a creative point of view and from a storytelling point of view. I'd stripped back slides. So we had a no slide rule. I don't know if people can comment on where they listened to this was I brave or stupid? But I wanted to get away from death by PowerPoint.

**Katie** 18:27

Yes. Don't we all.

**Paul** 18:29

Thinking about what we just talked about that engagement digitally, you know, a few thinking of the end user, and they're sat at home, or they're in an office or even they're commuting and watch it on the mobile because we watch media on different platforms. And it's just slides, slide after slide. Are they really taking in the information that you that you need them to take in? Probably not. And so going back to the concept of Access TV, it wasn't no slides whatsoever. But actually, if we needed slides, what was the visual story that we wanted to tell?

**Katie** 19:06

Yes.

**Paul** 19:07

So visually, bringing things to life. I'm using video, using diversity voice, bringing other people in to tell that story. We now do a lot of fireside chats, rather than just talking heads of presenting slides.

**Katie** 19:23

Yes.

**Paul** 19:23

And that was my second week at the leadership conference when I first started and I said to my Chief Sales Officer, and the CEO was like, I think I'm gonna ban slides. You've got too many slides. And there was a little bit of silence. And then they looked at me and they're like, Okay, well, that's great. Then they tried it. Yeah. And it's worked. So we've built that into our content planning. We don't call them slides. We call it content. So what's the content? Rather than can we have a slide deck? Because the slide deck just becomes a PowerPoint presentation of graphs and numbers and...

**Katie** 19:59



That is super smart. I always have these light bulb moments in these conversations, calling it content. Rather than calling them slides. Immediately your brain goes off in a different direction. That is super smart. Thank you.

**Katie** 20:14

A quick word from our sponsor. AB is the world's most experienced internal comms agency. For 60 years, our brilliant consultants and fearless creatives have been helping organisations around the world inform, inspire, and infuse their employees, building great organisations from the inside out. There is a lot of pressure on internal comms folks just now. To help you plan, prioritise and deliver a astonishingly effective communications, arrange a friendly, informal chat with us today. Simply email [hello@abcomm.co.uk](mailto:hello@abcomm.co.uk). And if you do, I look forward to meeting you.

**Katie** 21:13

There are many different channels, tools, platforms available, you're lucky, some listeners might think you're lucky, in the sense that you work for an organisation that's very tech based and you've got your own in house TV studio. That's amazing. I'm sure many listeners would die for one of those. But I'm just wondering what your advice would be for an IC team thinking about whether we really navigate today's digital landscape in terms of the tools, the channels, the platforms I should be looking at?

**Paul** 21:47

That's a really good question. I think that this, there's probably three things I'll say. Firstly, one of my big passions in my role, and my career is connecting how we consume our media and your personal life to your professional life.

**Katie** 22:04

Yeah.

**Paul** 22:04

And it frustrates me and I don't understand why those are differentiations, you know, you won the way to work or you didn't score on and you've got your iPhone or whatever other device you have, and you've clicked on an app and you've checked your media and you've read something, and then you get to work and you log on and you don't have that experience.

**Katie** 22:23

Yeah.

**Paul** 22:24





So you're like where do I find something? It's the whole user experience. And that's not just down to internal communications, that's down to IT, and your tech teams and working in partnership to really understand what your user experience is from an internal perspective. So the first thing would be how do you blend that?

**Katie** 22:44

Yeah.

**Paul** 22:44

How do you get that personalization of your content and your media? The second thing would be everyone is time poor.

**Katie** 22:53

Yes.

**Paul** 22:54

And I don't believe that people have the time, or even probably the attention span now, when you think about working at screens so much how that's changed our attention span, and there is data that's showing that, is they don't have time to read a 1500 word article on your intranet or an email, you know, so how do you make things snackable? At Access, we talk about snackable content? If that's a two minute video, keeping things really snackable for people I think is really important.

**Paul** 23:27

And then the third thing would be your leadership advocacy. So where are they showing up in your content? Where are they showing up on your channels? So if you have a social channel, like Yammer, for example, are they showing up on it? Are they visible on it? And if they're not, then how are they and you expecting the rest of the organisation to get involved in that channel if you're not having that role modelling from your leaders? And that's why I go back to what I referenced earlier, I'm really blessed to access that I do have really smart, clever, switched on leaders who get the importance of engagement. And it's not just in telecommunications, it's engagement because it impacts your productivity and your end line. Starting with your your leaders is a really important part of looking at how you get that engagement.

**Katie** 24:25

This might be a very hard question to answer.

**Paul** 24:28

But you said you weren't gonna ask any hard questions.



**Katie** 24:33

If there's a listener who's thinking, that sounds great, but that doesn't sound like my leadership team. How do I get them on that journey where they become more visible, where they become more themselves where they get involved more in my tunnels? Where do you start with that?

**Paul** 24:52

It's a really good question. I think start with use the data.

**Katie** 24:56

Okay.

**Paul** 24:57

So I'm sure everyone listening will have some form of employee survey that gives them the sentiment of what employees think. That's your first starting point. Yeah. And using the data, and then also using industry best practice data. You know, we all know how we use employee satisfaction scores, what that does to engagement, but also what it does to productivity, so blending those two together.

**Katie** 25:25

Yeah.

**Paul** 25:25

And then coming up with the business case for what the outcomes and what the impact on your business will be.

**Katie** 25:32

Yeah.

**Paul** 25:33

So it's elevating it to a strategic business level.

**Katie** 25:37

Yeah

**Paul** 25:37

Rather than I just need a new intranet. That doesn't mean anything to leaders. So there's this strategic business aspect to it from a data perspective. The second thing is meeting your leaders where they are.



**Katie** 25:51

Right.

**Paul** 25:52

And using my example of Access TV, there were various levels of comfort with it. So meeting your leaders where they are and understanding what is your style, what have you previously done, that you've liked? What have you previously done that hasn't worked? And working with that. So don't force one of your leaders to post a fireside chat with an external guest on a live broadcast if that's not what they're comfortable with. Use their strengths, and then understand what they need to build on and work on that. You know, it's a journey, we don't yet fully formed, go on that journey with them, and each time have a different intervention that gets them more comfortable.

**Paul** 26:33

Yeah.

**Paul** 26:33

And then circling back with them with the feedback and saying, This is how the session went down. This is the data, this is the sentiment, these are the positive comments, these are the comments we could work on. So having that 360 conversation with them and using that sentiment, because most times people don't want to do something because they've never done it. They're not comfortable. It goes back to inclusion. You don't want to put someone in uncomfortable situations, you need to meet them where they are.

**Katie** 27:01

A lot of this is going to come down at the end of the day to budget, it so often does. I'm noticing at the moment, a lot of clients seem to have more and more pressures and tasks poured on their shoulders, but less and less time and budget to do it it seems. How would listeners go about trying to convince their senior stakeholders that they need more investment?

**Paul** 27:25

So let's use an example. Your organisation has a really low NPS score, if you use it, a platform that benchmarks in the industry that you're in, then say your benchmark is 50 in the industry. And your benchmark score internally is let's say 25. You're looking at that across your whole industry and thinking actually, crikey, we're really low in terms of what the average benchmarking is. So what does that say about your organisation says that there's an engagement issue?



**Katie** 28:01

Yes.

**Paul** 28:01

And then that sentiment should show you the drivers behind that engagement issue. So these are the issues. And it's not for comms to solve, but it's for comms to highlight .

**Katie** 28:11

Yes.

**Paul** 28:12

This is the issue. This is the drivers behind it. These are... actually I was gonna say these are some of the interventions but that's not right. Because it's for the business to look and think actually, what are the interventions that we need to take-

**Katie** 28:26

Yes.

**Paul** 28:27

To drive up that engagement and comms will enable that, through all the creative, brilliant work there everyone listening does in their organisations. And then strategically thinking, if we're really low from an engagement scoring perspective, what does that tell us about how we're viewed externally? So this is when you bring the external in from an internal perspective. If you're thinking about how do I attract the best talent? How do I retain the best talent?

**Katie** 28:57

Yes.

**Paul** 28:58

If you've got a 25% engagement score, what is your attrition rate? Are we going to have employees leaving your organisation and taking their talents somewhere else that's going to give them the things that they're telling you that they want?

**Katie** 29:10

Yes.

**Paul** 29:10

So it goes strategically back to a business perspective in terms of how does that impact attrition and attracting and retaining the talent that you want to grow your business?



Because everyone wants to say we're the best place to work, come and work for us. That's one of my first questions. What's your engagement?

**Katie** 29:29

Yes.

**Paul** 29:30

And what's the culture and what's driving that engagement? Oh, so it's 25%. What's your benchmarking? Average is 50. Why is that?

**Katie** 29:39

Yeah.

**Paul** 29:40

That would be a serious red flag for me in terms of jumping to another organisation. And then you come up with your interventions from a communications perspective. This is what's going to drive the engagement. This is how we do it and that's why you hopefully get the buy in for the investment for that.

**Katie** 29:57

It's super smart because you're not really saying I think this is the investment we need for communications, you're saying this is the investment, we need to drive our business forward. Yeah, but by the way, there's a comms aspect to this. And we need some investment for that. But it's all part of the business plan.

**Paul** 30:12

As a discipline, in telecommunications, it isn't just intranet or pushing out a newsletter. It shouldn't be. But it should be really smartly using a lot of that sentiment to drive business, to drive your business strategy. And it should form a really core part of the structure of any organisation.

**Katie** 30:31

I just want to dive into the specifics just quickly, because listeners will have heard you say, ENPS: employee Net Promoter Score?

**Paul** 30:41

Yes, I should have qualified that we all have an acronym in comms, don't we? And there's an assumption. Yes. If you have an external provider doing your survey, it's based on one core question, and the question is usually worded around, would you recommend my organisation is that a place to work to friends or family? And that gives you the overall



engagement score. And then that score is benchmarked across your whole industry. So all of the same industries will be asked that same question.

**Katie** 31:11

But what's smart about that is lots of listeners, their organisations will have net promoter scores for clients and particularly customers. Yeah, particularly if they're b2c, they'll have NPS scores. So interesting to see, one can assume these things align, I'm guessing, happy employees, more happy customers and clients.

**Paul** 31:32

Yeah, that's what you'd like to think. And if you think about the McLeod report that's actually quite old now, but a lot of us have based some of our strategies on that. And that does demonstrate the impact of high engaged workforces and productivity which then has an impact on your customer satisfaction scores as well.

**Katie** 31:52

So it's one question you asked if your employee...

**Paul** 31:55

We asked more questions than that. We asked a question about customer sentiment, how our employees feel our customer experiences.

**Katie** 32:02

Oh, nice.

**Paul** 32:02

And we use a lot of that sentiment to drive forward improvements in customer experience.

**Katie** 32:08

Really clever.

**Paul** 32:09

We asked questions around wellbeing questions around reward, recognition, diversity and belonging, how people feel, how they feel they're treated, respected. We also ask questions around giving, because it's a huge part of our culture. Leadership... we can break down and segment and look at what the drivers are for each of those questions.

**Katie** 32:29

One final question on that, and sorry, I'm getting very nerdy. Yes. But how important is it that every single question is a question you can benchmark against your industry and



business in general? Versus the balance of saying, No, we really need to ask this question. It's off piste, if you like. It's not part of a standard benchmark question. But we need to ask it. I'm guessing it's a mixture of both, is it?

**Paul** 32:57

Yeah, I think it is. And I think that it's important to have the industry benchmarking, because then you have that as an indicator of where you are in the industry. Thinking about a retention and attraction point of view, bringing the talent in, we can say we're in the top 10% of engaged tech companies. But for example, you won't have benchmarking for everything. So some of the things are just because they're part of your internal strategy.

**Paul** 33:23

So one of our parts of our internal strategy, which I've touched on is giving. And we want to understand how employees feel about that. So we don't have industry benchmarking for it but we have our own internal sentiment. And sometimes that sentiment is really useful because it informs our strategy. So for example, we've used a lot of the sentiment to drive forward how people do give, because not everyone is in... it goes back to inclusion. So we really blend kind of our inclusion and our giving and wellbeing approaches. So they're intersectional. There is a real kind of epiphany moment with the team where it's not just about giving financially, because not everyone is in a position to do that. If you think about the cost of living crisis that some people have been going through, but they may be able to give some time, or they may be able to give in another way, you know, so this year, we're partnering with 10 global charities. And so we're working with them in terms of being able to offer our expertise, so giving an hour of your time to work with a charity, coaching them on a comms strategy or a recruitment strategy or a business strategy or sales strategy. So it made us open our eyes and think, What does giving really mean and how do we make everyone feel that they can give with what they have? So those sorts of questions are really useful to inform your strategy, but they don't always have to be benchmarkes.

**Katie** 34:53

You mentioned right at the front of this conversation that you are largely a totally virtual organisation, you do obviously have some sites for some people coming into them. But for many organisations now we do live in this hybrid world – some use of the office, some working at home, a mix of both. Do you have any predictions of where this is going to go? Because I feel we are still experimenting, trialling, testing. I would say even at AB I don't think we've got it all sorted out yet. Do you have any predictions? Both of how we build culture? And then the communications layer over the top of that I guess?

**Paul** 35:34



It's tricky, isn't it? Because COVID changed everyone for various different reasons. And it definitely changed the workplace. And it demonstrated the power of technology. And it demonstrated how you can really work anywhere.

**Katie** 35:53

Yeah.

**Paul** 35:53

And I don't think that many organisations saw a decline in their productivity. And, in fact, I think there's lots of data that demonstrates that even during that period, there was an increase in productivity. And sometimes that may have gone down too, because people had a bit more time.

**Paul** 36:10

Yeah.

**Paul** 36:10

There was no commuting, so they could use that commute time. I think that the danger of that is that then where does your work life end? And where does your home life begin, coming out of it? organisations are starting to think we need to go back to offices. So there's now a bit of a tension. And I didn't know whether it's a nostalgic thing. They want the old world, we want to go back to how things were. But we can't go back to how things were, things have changed too much. And we've also shown how things have changed.

**Paul** 36:43

So you think about your workforce, and you've shown how you can work, then that doesn't necessarily take away from the fact that it is still important to have that face to face time, to get together, because that builds relationships and it builds culture. But I think, for me, it probably goes back to putting the oneness more at a local level. So for myself, my team is global so that's pretty impossible for us to get together, you know, once a month. Yeah. So if you're in that situation, it's actually thinking, we talk a lot. We talk a lot in my team and access about digital water cooler moments.

**Katie** 37:25

Oh, nice. Yeah.

**Paul** 37:26

And it's now I think, from a communications perspective, but also from a team level perspective, being really intentional about those moments when you are digitally engaged with someone. And it sounds really simplistic, but when you start a meeting, not going



straight into the meeting. Having a conversation. How was your weekend, what's happening? You need to still build relationships. And also intentionally reframing things. For example, with our employee survey, there's the ability for employees to leave comments. Now, getting people to engage with those comments online has been tricky, but we've managed to circumvent it by talking about those digital watercolour moments. Because if I was to come up to you in the office at the watercooler, or making a cup of tea or a cup of coffee, and I said, Hey, I've got this bit of feedback, and I give it to you, you wouldn't just walk away from me, would you? You would respond to me in the moment. And so it's flicking your mindset of, I've just had that, but it's online, I still have to respond to it.

**Paul** 38:31

So in a way, we all have to rethink about how our engagement through the world in the workplace and with our colleagues has changed. It comes down to personal responsibility. What responsibility do we take to engage in that and build that into our work? And the second thing is around local leaders and line managers, and I suppose it comes down to giving them the space to work out what's best for their teams at a local level. How do you get people together face to face? But I think that we now have to look at that through the lens of inclusion. So not everyone is able to, to come and meet face to face in a local environment. So how do we make it inclusive, that everyone still feels involved? You can't just organise something face to face, and then people that can't come then they just don't come - it says a lot about your culture. It's not a one size fits all. We talk a lot of Access about meeting with purpose. So what is the purpose? Why are we getting together? I know those are organisations that are trying to mandate three days a week in the office. So what's the purpose of that? And are we getting together? And is that going to be really productive? Or is it just because people have been told that's a target that they have to hit? And also then what does that do to your engagement? What does that do to your productivity? What does that do to your attrition? It's something that I've been wrestling with myself, because I've got three young children. And they're already asking me really challenging questions. And it's got me thinking, as an employer, are we really thinking about this right now or thinking they'll just creep up on us and then we'll have to [pay attention]? Things like sustainability inclusion, well being where you work, that flexibility. That younger generation are coming up. And they're not just expecting it. They're demanding it. I don't think that organisations can just rest on the laurels and think I'm a big household name so people will just come and want to work for me anyway. Well, actually, I'm not sure that generation is wired that way. They will want to go to the places that feed them.

**Katie** 40:46

Yeah.

**Paul** 40:47



And give them what they need. Because it's not just transactional. It's not just I employ you, I give you a salary. It's more than that. And that generation want all of that. And I think that we really need to be thinking about that. And I think that's where employee communications comes into its own really, in terms of building that narrative of what your culture not just looks like, but what it feels like, what does it really feel like to be here? And work here and experience it and move through your organisation? And what does it offer? That's gonna come really quickly, that generation.

**Katie** 41:23

Absolutely. I can sit with my own boys, they're gonna want their work to mean something to them, to the world. Yeah, everything you're saying, I think really does chime. I would love to ask you about your career, if I may.

**Paul** 41:38

Yes.

**Katie** 41:38

Because you have worked for many impressive diverse organisations, Microsoft, MoneySupermarket, the Cabinet Office, and Number 10. Now the Access Group, and I'm sure many others. It makes me wonder to myself, how do you decide that it's time to move on?

**Paul** 41:58

That's a very good question. And if anyone's listening at Access, I'm not thinking of moving on. Because I am obviously loving it there. There's three things. I've been thinking about this a lot. The first thing is, have I added enough value? And if I feel that there's not any more value to get out of it, then what's my next challenge? So where's the place that I can add that value? And so for me, what really excites me is being able to demonstrate the impact of employee communications within a business strategically. So I think once I've got to that point of value add, then that's one of the light bulbs that comes on for me, and it's okay, where's the next place that you want to go to add that value?

**Paul** 42:48

The second thing is growth. How can I grow my career? But also, how can I grow myself, personally? I think we spend so much time with our colleagues and so much time at work, that it has to grow you personally, it has to feed you. And so that's a big part for me as well: where am I going to be inspired? Where am I going to have that space to be empowered? Where am I looking up to my leaders? What's that aspiration for me? But also, what's the inspiration? But then also, how can I inspire other people as well within the organisation? So where's my role in that? And what can I do to inspire?

**Paul** 43:33

And the third thing is my family. That big, massive decision for me, and I'm working dad, and one of those decisions is does this role does this employer does this culture, support me as a working dad? Because that's really important. And I think that it goes back to, I mentioned at the beginning, that blended family that I think Access is, but also thinking about coming out of COVID and how we need different things now. And I think that it's really important that we're not separating who we are as people in our private lives and who we are in our work lives. We talk at Access about bringing your whole self to work, being your authentic self. And so that's a really important part of that culture for me of not covering, not talking about your family or not talking about what you do outside of work. And so those are the three things for me that make me then take Okay, it's time to ground.

**Katie** 44:36

Just a supplementary question on that. Yeah. Has it always been. employee comms that's really driven you? And inspired you and if it has been, why is that? What's special about the internal audience?

**Paul** 44:50

Actually, I started my career in external comms. I worked in various publishing houses and PR agencies. And then I picked up just as a side hustle doing internal comms, which people probably usually did when it was really an immature kind of discipline and people didn't really know what this was. And I love it for a couple of reasons. I love it because you get to tell people's stories.

**Katie** 45:19

Yes.

**Paul** 45:20

And I think with external comms, you're really getting people to do something, to buy something, it felt a lot more... I want to say aggressive, but that's not the right word. But it just felt quite transactional. Whereas with internal comms, you get to make people feel things. Yeah, I don't know. Maybe it's the dad and me. Internal comms to me feels like and looks like if I was to visualise it, building a family. And everyone is doing their part to build this family to grow this family. You're celebrating moments, you're celebrating what employees have done, you're celebrating what the business has done. When you go to the external world, you're celebrating what employees have done for our customers. Yes, it goes back to the customers ultimately in how we're supporting our customers. But that whole piece goes back to pride.



**Katie** 46:17

Yeah.

**Paul** 46:17

And it goes back to celebration.

**Katie** 46:19

Yeah.

**Paul** 46:20

And if you think about those two words, they're emotive, they make you feel things. And that's actually why I love it.

**Katie** 46:27

I love that answer. Thank you very much.

**Katie** 46:33

This episode of the internal comms podcast is brought to you by my very own Friday Update. Would you like a short email from me never more than five bullet points long, giving you my take on the week's news from across the world of communications? This might be the latest reports, books, podcasts, conferences, campaigns that have caught my eye during the week. I always limit myself to just five nuggets of news. So you can read it in record time, but still feel a little bit more informed, hopefully a little uplifted as you end your week. Now, this is subscriber only content, which was initially intended just for AB colleagues and clients – I don't post this content anywhere else. So you do need to sign up. But that is super easy. Simply go to [abcomm.co.uk/Friday](http://abcomm.co.uk/Friday), we just need your email address. And it's equally easy to unsubscribe at any time. So give it a go, that sign up page again: [abcomm.co.uk/Friday](http://abcomm.co.uk/Friday). And if you do choose to be a subscriber, I very much look forward to being in touch.

**Katie** 48:07

Let's head over to those quick fire questions. They don't need to be quick for you to answer. They're supposed to be quick for me to ask as opposed to my long rambling questions. What trait or characteristic do you possess, that you think above all others has most led to your career success?

**Paul** 48:26

Okay, so I might have cheated at this question just so the listener knows, you sent me the quickfire questions. And I didn't want to come in with 'this is what I think' and it made me sound really great. And going back to internal communication that all communication,



people love feedback. I asked someone who I've been working with at Access for a year, and she also wanted to be named checked – so thank you, Kate Hassler.

**Katie** 48:57

Lovely name!

**Paul** 48:59

Lovely person. We have, so at Access, when you join, you're given a buddy, everyone, regardless of what level you're at, you're given a buddy. So she's been my buddy for the year, so she is our brands director. So she's been my buddy, and also my advocate, my champion, and also my partner, because, you know, internal communications has a huge amount to play on how we activate our internal brand, externally.

**Paul** 49:25

So Kate and I are working on what that looks like from an external point of view. Maybe that might form another one of your podcasts when we know what we're actually doing. So I asked her this question and what she said, I have to read it, she said that it was keeping my empathy grounded in what the business and an employee needs. So realism, and being able to blend those needs. Which I thought was lovely. And I didn't pay her to say that. And I think actually, when she sent me it, I was like, Yeah, that's true. Because it is about understanding what – if you think about the analogy of the family – it's about understanding what everyone in the family needs, and then trying to work out the best solution for that. So she was able to articulate that probably a lot better than what I was, and I would say, for myself, is I was answering the question, and I touched on it earlier, is that tenacity to push forwards the importance and the impact of internal communications. Always pushing that forward, always demonstrating. It's not just there to send an email. That's now what we're there to do. Demonstrating from a data perspective, how we can add value.

**Paul** 49:25

Yeah.

**Katie** 50:41

Yeah.

**Paul** 50:41

And so I think that tenacity, hopefully, what seems to have worked, got people's attention. Yeah. And it's been... Oh, I see that now. It wasn't, I didn't expect that. Oh, that's okay. So that tenacity, of being sure about the importance and the relevance of internal communications.



**Katie** 51:02

And grounding it in evidence, data, insight? Love it. Absolutely love it. Yeah. How would you complete this sentence? World class internal communication is...

**Paul** 51:15

Can I have a list?

**Katie** 51:17

You are allowed lists.

**Paul** 51:18

So there's a couple of things. So world class internal communication is meeting the employee where they are, to capture their attention, to go back to what I just previously said. It's also about using the data to drive change. It also is listening. And also acting, not just listening and ignoring but listening and acting. It also contributes strategically to the business goals. And I think sometimes that's, that doesn't necessarily always happen in organisations, but that's what world class internal communications is. And also my own personal one is, and I think, maybe people listening will identify with this. It's highly underrated, and as much needed. And it's a strategic discipline, which clever organisations should embrace, support and welcome,

**Katie** 52:13

I love it. Thank you very much. What a perfect answer. If you had to make one book recommendation related to the work that we do in comms, I know, this is the hard question, do you have one?

**Paul** 52:24

Yes. So I actually have just finished reading a book called Revolution in a Heartbeat, by Matt Stephens. It's brilliant. We talked about that, the analogy of family. But if you really want to understand how you put people at the heart of your organisation, and also your engagement strategy, it's really worth a read, where he talks a lot about not just understanding what people think, but what they feel. Because if you want to drive changes, we can use the data to drive change. But another mechanism to do it is by emotion, yeah. Because you're never going to drive the change if someone thinks something, but they feel something else, and you're trying to drive it because you think that they think it and that's gonna be the driver. If someone feels something that takes long to change, so it's... and also people, going back to my list, they want to be listened to and want to be heard. And yeah, I would highly recommend it.

**Katie** 52:25



Links in the show notes as ever, listeners,

**Paul** 52:29

Revolution in a heartbeat, by Matt Stephens.

**Katie** 52:37

Perfect. And then finally, we give you a billboard for millions to see. And you can put on this billboard any message you like, what would you like on your billboard Paul?

**Paul** 53:40

So I was going to cop out of this going back to my no slide rule, and say I wouldn't put any messaging on it. But I thought no, that's not fair. So I did think about what quotes really gets me through a lot. And what I would put on it is it's a quote by Maya Angelou.

**Katie** 54:00

Yes.

**Paul** 54:01

And it's 'People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.' And I always go back to that quote. I think that it's super important when you're navigating the world, in business or in your personal life. And I think it's so emotive from lots of different angles. So that's what I would put.

**Katie** 54:25

you've come full circle with that quote, because by getting leaders to stop being propped up by slides, and saying, you are going to take employees on a journey, and the only way of doing that is to leave the slides behind and tell a story. That is when you are tapping into emotion, isn't it? Yeah, perfect.

**Paul** 54:46

Yeah. And the only way you get that, it was something actually that I was trying to work out how to work into the conversation is, it's about authenticity. And so we talk a lot at Access, I'm sure other listeners talk about this in their organisations, about authentic leadership. Who are going to believe? Who are you going to follow? Is it going to be someone who's authentic, ho's their own self? Or is it going to be someone who's reading from a script? Yeah. And how do you emotionally connect with someone who's doing that? So again, going back to how do you make people feel things, it's about you also showing that you feel things and being authentic. We joked about the no slide rule, but it goes to that authentic leadership, because we want people to be themselves and we say as the organisation, come as you are, be who you are, do what you love, Be your authentic self. But that has to also be role



modelled at the very top of the organisation. And employees see that and see leaders being the authentic self, then they come into the business and I can be myself as well.

**Katie** 55:49

Yes. I've had so many guests on this show, effectively, say, get leaders to throw away the script.

**Paul** 55:57

Just talk. At the end of the day, what's gonna happen, you know your stuff. Yeah. But you need to tell it in a compelling way you need to tell a story. No one wants to hear you reading a two page bullet point in scripts. They want it to be brought to life.

**Katie** 56:13

I love it. Thank you, Paul, for your time. This has been a lovely conversation. Thank you.

**Paul** 56:17

You're very welcome. Thank you for having me.

**Katie** 56:20

So that is a wrap for this episode of the Internal Comms Podcast. For the show notes and a transcript of today's episode, head over to AB's website. That's [abcomm.co.uk/podcasts](http://abcomm.co.uk/podcasts). You'll also find that our entire back catalogue of nearly 90 episodes. My thanks to Paul, my producer John Phillips, sound engineer Stuart Rolls, Content Manager, Madi Bruce, and all my wonderful colleagues at AB who valiantly keep the show on the road.

**Katie** 56:59

And finally, my thanks to you for choosing the Internal Comms Podcast. There have been 340,000 downloads of this show since we started, which is a real testament, I think, to the growing interest in and importance of internal communication. If you did enjoy this episode, please help your fellow IC folk out there find this show. The simple way to do this is to give the algorithms a little nudge by giving us a rating on Apple Podcasts. If you do choose to do this, thank you very much. Also, please do get in touch. I love hearing from listeners. And I do try to respond to every comment. So until we meet again, lovely listeners stay safe and well. And remember, it's what's inside that counts.