



## The Internal Comms Podcast – Season 12

### Episode 106 – *School of thought: Inside Matt Tidwell's comms curriculum*

---

**Katie** 00:00

Katie, welcome to The Internal Comms Podcast with me Katie Macaulay. If you're passionate about ensuring employees are informed, inspired, involved and truly connected to each other and the mission of your organisation, you are in exactly the right place. Every two weeks, I sit down with a leading comms practitioner, consultant, academic or author, and together, we explore fresh ways to improve communication in the workplace. My guest today ticks many of those boxes. Matt Tidwell is a consultant, communicator and educator with a wealth of experience. Matt has helped lead comms agencies, lead comms departments, and has worked alongside CEOs to build brands and engage employees. These days, Matt is helping shape the next generation of comms professionals as Assistant Dean and faculty member at the William Alan White school of journalism and mass communications at the University of Kansas. I first met Matt while we were serving together on the board of the International Association of Business Communicators, IABC, and I was immediately struck by his clarity of thought and deep passion for our profession. In this episode, we dive into what it means to be living in the age of the empowered stakeholder. We explore what internal comms pros can learn from our friends in marketing in terms of leveraging the power of research, mapping the customer journey and building personas. We discuss why IC professionals must be front and center when planning a crisis response. I asked Matt what critical skills aren't taught in the classroom and what qualities set apart those students who go on to have stellar careers in communications. And besides all that, we discuss a lot, lot more. It is my very great pleasure to bring you Matt Tidwell. So, Matt, welcome to The Internal Comms Podcast. I'm so excited to have this conversation with you.

**Matt** 02:30

It's so great to be here. Katie, thank you so much, and thank you for the great work you're doing. It's been fun to watch the success of your podcast, and it's become go to listening for those of us anywhere around the internal communications sphere. So proud to have had you ask me to join.

**Katie** 02:44

Thank you, Matt, that's very kind. Let's start near the beginning, and this might seem a strange place to start, but can you tell us about your mum? Because I believe she had an influence on two things: your actual career, what you went on to actually do in life, but also your overall approach to work as well your ethos. Would that be fair?

**Matt** 03:06

I think that would be fair for sure, and a good place to start, right, because we begin at the beginning. My mom was a journalist. She was a working reporter. She was a features reporter, so she covered long form features and interviews and things like that in the days before podcasts, right, when that had to be limited to the print sphere. But she did some



really interesting work. I was cleaning out my basement and looking... she's unfortunately passed, but she interviewed some really terrific, well known subjects. Margaret Mead, the famous social scientist, Gene Roddenberry, the creator of the Star Trek science fiction franchise. So yeah, and so that certainly gave me an interest in the power of communication, the power of story, and certainly these days as communicator, story is probably more important than ever. Absolutely, I look back to a lot of the things that she did as being inspiring to me as a communicator later in life. And she actually spent some time in corporate communications, PR, as well. So we had a similarity there. But I think, from the approach to work standpoint, single mother and working a job that didn't necessarily land on the higher end of the pay scale, and trying to raise two children simultaneously, and all the struggles and the difficulties that entails, that sticks with you, certainly when you're a child in that situation, and hopefully, it has informed things like work ethic for me and just to continue knitting and really trying to work as hard as you can on your craft. All of those things played a role, for sure.

**Katie** 04:26

Now you've worked in your career across both internal and external comms, so perhaps one of the obvious questions to ask up front is, what's the difference? Is there a basic, fundamental difference in approach or delivery or the strategy? There's a big debate, isn't there, whether there is even a need for a line between internal and external? I just wonder what your take is on that.

**Matt** 04:51

Yeah, that's such a good question Katie, and absolutely, it's changed. Right? Convergence has had such an impact. Truly now, I think the lines between internal and external are probably blurred more than they ever have been. Certainly, when I was working in the internal field a dozen or so years ago, the lines were much clearer. But by the way, I think convergence, in many ways, is a good thing. I don't see it as a bad thing. I think that I tell students, you need to be a five tool player, as we say in American baseball. You need to be able to do a little bit of everything. And so I think convergence has been a good trend. But there are differences. I think externally, the quality of our external programs quite often depends on the depth and the insight from the research that we do, and we have very expensive listening tools and research tools that we use on the external communication side, but I think increasingly that's true for internal communications as well. I think that our employee audience, let's say, is so much more diverse. Things like the hybrid work environment have created an employee ecosystem that's much different than it was. And I think that research there needs to be as diligent and as thorough as what we do on the external side. In the old days, when I was practicing, the line was always "we're around our employees all the time," right? We see them in the cafeteria, in the break room, so therefore we have a good pulse on the employee base. I'm not so sure that's true today, particularly with the hybrid environment. So I would encourage, and do encourage my students that are interested in internal to really approach research with the same rigor that they do externally. So I would say that's probably the major change that I've seen, but, yeah, convergence is here. It's here to stay. I don't think there's any doubt about that. And we need

to recruit and train more of those, as I say, five tool players, communications, who can do who can really do it all.

**Katie** 06:34

I've had some guests say, Oh, the big difference is, you can't put a gloss on internal news. These are people that see under the hood, they see under the bonnet. But I'm wondering, isn't that true for all audiences now? They have access to so much information, and organisations have to be pretty transparent. You need to think of their corporate walls almost being made of glass bricks. People can see in at all different levels. So is that really a big difference?

**Matt** 06:59

Yeah, well I tell my students, were living in the age of the empowered stakeholder, which is much, much different than, say, the Mad Men era or something like that. The stakeholder has tremendous power now, and we need to be cognizant of that. I teach a lot of crisis communications, and believe me, in that course, we talk a lot about treating the stakeholder from the perspective that they have true power and that they deserve transparency. And by the way, if you don't provide transparency, they will demand it. And so the game has changed, I think. And why that is, I'm not so sure, but certainly they are more empowered. The tools, social media has made a big impact on that, both externally and internally, but no, I don't think we can gloss over communications or try to slip things past, I just think it's extremely difficult. This audience has a lot of power. They're very close to where the work is happening, to where the issues are. And in something like crisis, you need to be able to use your employee base proactively. And think of them as just as much of a communications mouthpiece, if you will, as any kind of communications you can do, whether that be a press release or a standby statement or those types of things.

**Katie** 08:06

You mentioned your students that are interested in internal communication. I'm just wondering what the perception is though of internal comms compared to those communication disciplines that people thought of as having a little bit more attention and time and budget, the slightly sexier ones. Is the perception changing? I hope it might be.

**Matt** 08:26

I hope it is. I'm not sure we're there yet. I happen to believe, and I tell my students all the time that internal communications is every bit as exciting as external. I think actually some of the more innovative work I've seen strategically and from a planning perspective, is actually happening on the internal comms side. But having said all that, you're absolutely right. The students look to the bright shiny objects, right? And of course, we're living in the Instagram generation, and so I think we have some work to do there. What I try to do is just showcase the really terrific work that's happening internally, and also underscore the value that we can provide as communicators working in internal communications. I think we we have a little bit more of a freer hand there, because we don't have a lot of the outside influences that we will see in external, whether that be legal, whether that be our friends in sales and marketing. And I just think there's a lot of power that comes with internal communications.



When I was in corporate and agency all those years, I was almost split down the middle. But when I think back to the projects that I really look back on with a lot of pride, most of those were internal. They were watching an audience move in a particular direction, or they were seeing an executive team really pleased with what was happening culturally. You work a lot on those kinds of things when you're in internal and so I look back on that time really fondly.

**Katie** 09:42

Yeah, I mean, there's some very big, meaty projects that we, as IC people, get involved in. You know, major IT transformations, cultural transformations, as you say. And when we're involved from the very get go on those we can make such a big difference. And I also, think we get a very privileged position into the beating heart of an organisation as well. And I'm not sure someone working in external comms gets quite that privileged peak into every single function.

**Matt** 10:12

Yeah I think that's fair. And not that there's not pressure and there's pressure on both sides, right? No, my students are going into internal communications, you know, they're like, what is this? Sounds like it's going to be an easier role. I'm like, I wouldn't be so sure. Corporations, organisations have very definitive goals about things like where they want to see their culture go and focused on the right things like employee engagement, and you're right at the heart of that when you're working in internal communications. It's not without stress, it's not without challenge. But I do think that it's an exciting time to be working in the internal communication space, no question about it. And frankly, that's why your show is such a must listen for me, because I get a chance to hear all these great leaders talk about the wonderful things they're doing on the internal side.

**Katie** 10:55

That's great to hear. It's great to hear. This episode of The Internal Comms Podcast is brought to you by the Internal Communication Masterclass. I've condensed more than 30 years of experience and expertise into this unique on-demand learning experience. Gain the capability, confidence and credibility to turbocharge your career. There are eight workstreams in this programme, which you can buy individually or as one comprehensive learning journey. Each workstream comes complete with a downloadable coursebook filled with yet more resources and some compelling homework tasks. Visit [icmasterclass.com](http://icmasterclass.com). This is an entirely on-demand programme, so you can learn at your own pace, anytime, anywhere, plus there's no expiry date, so you can revisit the content whenever you wish. That website address again, [icmasterclass.com](http://icmasterclass.com), and as a listener of this show, you enjoy a 20% discount on each work stream or the entire programme. Simply use the code `podcast20` at the checkout. Stand out from the crowd, gain that promotion and feel re-energised and inspired.

**Katie** 12:29

Matt, you have taught for over a decade at this point, and you must have seen the curriculum change quite a bit, I'm guessing, over that time to meet the changing demands

of today's businesses. Are there any gaps? Do you think what is being taught in college that future comms professionals will need to address once they actually enter the workplace?

**Matt 12:57**

There are some gaps, certainly that we're seeing. I work a lot with, at our university, we have, of course, undergraduate students in our school, and then we also have more working professional master's degree students, and that happens to be the audience that I work more with. So these would be students that may have graduated two, three years ago. They've been through their first job. They've probably taken a few lumps in that job and had some challenges. So I get them at a unique time. But there are two things that I see from a kind of a gap perspective. One of those is business acumen. We are just simply not doing a good enough job in the kind of the secondary education world teaching the language of business fluency. And I think that's just extremely important, right? Because particularly on the internal communications, because you're, you know, you're going to be looking at data, whether that be financial, whether it be supply chain related, because you're going to have those kinds of projects all the time, and you want to be as fluent in the language of business as you can. And we're seeing that as a real deficit. And by the way, you know, when you ask CEOs, and I've been watched a couple CEO panels in conferences and things like that in the last two or three years, they will mention that as well, that too many of the younger communicators just don't understand the business. We do a great job of teaching them the tools, if you will. So how to write a good press release, how to write a good employee statement, how to manage maybe a marketing event internally or externally, that type of thing. But what we don't do is get them ready for the fact that they're going to be working in a very kind of segmented business sector, whether that be healthcare, whether that be finance, publicly traded companies, things like that, and they're going to have to understand how to read a balance sheet, how to look at a statement.

**Matt 14:33**

I distinctly remember one of my very first corporate roles after a promotion. I'm finally in the CEO suite, right? And I'm seated there, and the other executives come in, and the balance sheet, or the cost of goods sold, or whatever it might be, reports start going around, and I just look at it, and I just, my face just drops almost audibly, and as I tell my students, that was not a good day in my career. Because guess what? Other people see that, and they understand that you're, you know, you don't feel like you're ready. You're not confident, and it can be definitely a real issue. And yeah, so I think business acumen is definitely the number one gap.

**Matt 15:06**

I will say that there's some great work being done. I just had an orientation session with my students a week or so ago, and a couple names that I would suggest maybe to listeners, Dr Matt Ragas and Professor Ron Culp at DePaul University have written, I think, two books, one of them called it is called strategic acumen for business communicators, I believe. But the authors are Ragas, R-A-G-A-S and Culp, and all they do is talk about learning the language of business fluency for communicators. Highly recommend them as a resource.

**Matt** 15:32

The second gap, to me, would be what we would think of as professional skills, sometimes called soft skills, things like self awareness and team dynamic and things like that. We hit that really hard in my programme. When you and I were young communicators, everybody was working in an office environment. There was a kind of a commonality about our shared experience as employees that we frankly are not seeing now, and I think that's causing issues. It's causing communicators to, frankly, not understand some of the ways of working in a large organisational setting, and that's been a real deficit. And by the way, the students understand that as well, that they're not getting some of those softer skills, or professional skills, and we work a lot on things like emotional intelligence and the importance that, because I think in this hybrid environment, is much harder. I think it's going to continue to be difficult for them to pick up on those kinds of things that, again, you and I picked up very easily because we were there in the break rooms, and there around the water coolers and things like that. And students today, they may graduate, they may take a job at an agency. Let's say they're here in the US. They may be based in the Midwest, I have a couple students that are this way. Working for a large agency. They're working out of their one bedroom apartment, 10, 12 hours a week. Their entire team is new in New York. They may see them once or twice, and it's just it's an entirely different way of working. Say, when I was at an agency, very collegial, and everybody was there together. It causes a lot of issues. We could spend an entire other episode on things like even loneliness for people like that, but one of the things where it creates a deficit, as in this area of professional skills.

**Matt** 15:32

Yeah, I just remember spending the first three or four, maybe longer, many years, early years, watching my bosses and watching everything. Watching the way they took notes, watching the way they handled meetings, spoke to their boss. It was learning a lot through observation, and if you can't do that, I think that's, yeah, how do you replicate that? So it's a really hard question, I think. I totally agree.

**Katie** 17:29

In terms of business acumen, I think I was very lucky, because I had to spend some time in investor relations, writing the annual report for a very large British bank, and I had that moment the first time, thinking, what do all these numbers mean? And very slowly, or actually, it wasn't very slowly, because I didn't have a choice. I had to do it pretty quickly. But I found friends that would break it down for me in the finance team, and that were very kind and would talk me all through it. Is that the best way, what do people do to get that business acumen? Is it find a friend in finance?

**Matt** 18:05

It's a great question, I think that certainly, take the initiative on your own right. Because, as I mentioned, we're really not... in the communication school, the journalism schools, we're really not teaching that part of it nearly as much. When you get to the master's degree level where I am, there's some more of that. But again, we're not teaching courses like finance and accounting. We're just doing it. We're focused on other things. And you really have to take the initiative to gain that knowledge yourself, whether it be through authors and

books, as I mentioned. But there are also, there's some terrific, even publicly available, kinds of things, LinkedIn learning tools like that. Luckily, as we've all seen, our inboxes are inundated with professional development opportunities. And I would say before you just, particularly very younger professionals, before you just send those directly to the trash, if there are any of them that talk about business fluency, understanding the business of the business, the language, whether it be supply chain, finance, accounting, whatever, you know, sometimes students will say, Gee, do I really need to know this intimately? And I don't think that's the idea. I think what you want to be able to do is look at a company's annual report and be able to glean some key insights out of that, so that when you are in those executive team meetings, you're able to be conversant, you're at least able... there aren't long, 20 minute spans of the conversation where you're on supply chain, let's say, where you're completely checked out. And I can remember those days, and it's very frustrating, and it frankly, can be career limiting. That part of business is not going away. Sometimes our younger pros might think that that's the finance and account jobs, and I really don't. I can just stay concentrated on writing and editing and video production and things like that. The reality is, if you want to get promoted, you need to get better at those types of things.

**Matt 18:17**

When we spoke in preparation for this show, you said that you've met some CEOs over the years who believe internal communication can impact a culture as much, if not more than HR. Really interesting that you've got leaders now that believe that. Can you elaborate on how internal comms can, and perhaps should, play that pivotal role in shaping and sustaining a culture?

**Matt 20:09**

I'd like to say that when we all go to work for big companies, that we can choose our CEOs. Obviously, we cannot. Some of this is a bit of luck, right? Some CEOs, quote unquote, get it. And some CEOs, quote, unquote, don't. And we'd much rather work with the ones that get it, and we all know who those are, and we can point back to them in our careers, right, on both sides. But I do believe that as communications becomes more prominent, as we've earned, definitely earned more of a seat at the table, with Chief Communications officers being very common, at large companies, I think CEOs who are more cognizant of the power of internal communications as a driver of culture, I think we're seeing more of those. And so I think that's a positive trend. Yeah, I'm really passionate about this one.

**Matt 20:50**

I happened to work for a CEO when I was working for global pharma who ran our US business, who was outstanding at this, and would really look to the internal communications team to be as much of a driver to your point of our cultural programmes, whether that be our values program, whatever it might be doing, as our HR folks. And even to the point of, I remember there was a year that he asked for the internal comms team to actually run and manage the employee engagement survey. He took it out of the hands of HR. I won't go into all the complexities and politics of that, and what might have been going on in the back in his mind, but he gave that project to the internal comms team and basically his premise is, I think the people on this team understand our employees and are able to get to





engagement absolutely as well as our folks over in HR. And so all of a sudden, we found ourselves developing survey questions, which was an interesting exercise, because we came up with, or I would say, new survey questions. We all know the employee engagement survey... questions that I think provide deeper insight, like what I call the golden question, quote, unquote, my manager does a good job explaining what's going on in the business... Me, that's a very kind of meaty employee engagement, and we made that the number one question, right? Whereas in the days when HR was managing and it was somewhere down toward the middle or the end. We wanted to again, by our choice there, indicate the importance of middle management being good communicators, which we all know is so acutely important.

**Matt** 22:15

Having said that, don't get me wrong, you need a good relationship with your HR department. There's no question about that. Because they obviously do very many very important functions in the employee space. But when it comes to things like culture, which is so rooted in how we communicate, both in terms of outwardly, but also in kind of an inward way as well, yeah, no question. I think that communications, internal communications, can have a huge hand in that. And we hope that the CEOs are on board with that, and I think more and more of them are.

**Katie** 22:45

It's interesting, isn't it? Because I guess it depends on the maturity of your HR function, because just as there are some internal comms teams that are still possibly mainly just sending stuff out, equally, there may be some HR teams that are still a little bit in the personnel space. They're not really managing talent. They're more around the policies to do with personnel, and that's a very different space. So yeah, I can imagine in certain organizations, it could even make sense for IC to pick up more if they've got a better handle on what is driving engagement?

**Matt** 22:45

At the very beginning. That's at the core for us, and I'm sure, again, I do not want to make this sound like I'm running down our friends in HR. They play a very important role. But a lot of it, I do think, is training. A lot of their training is very systems based. It's very kind of bureaucracy based, and it's no wonder that's really more of where some of their strength lies, to ask them to really negotiate this very nuanced world of communications where we have to be intimately familiar with our audience. let's say, that might not be realistic. And so I think that was sort of our CEO's point, that I believe this internal comms group really has the pulse of the organisation at a much deeper level than, say, these folks in HR. So that's why that was such a cool example.

**Katie** 24:10

We touched on crisis communication earlier, and you said that in a crisis your employees can and perhaps should be real advocates in the in that crisis situation. What's your message to IC folk who maybe need to up their game when it comes to preparing for a crisis? I know this is a particular area of expertise for you. How can they handle a crisis successfully?



**Matt 24:36**

Yeah, what kind of advice would I give to internal communicators to deal with the crisis? I think the first thing I would say is fight not just to be on the internal communications team, but fight to be on the communications writ large team, because, as I mentioned earlier, employees are an integral tool to our success in handling crisis, and many times they can make or break it, frankly, particularly in large organisations. So I worked in a lot of companies where we had five to 10 to 20,000 employees, and I remember one of those was an energy company that was working in a couple of different states, so had a large geographic spread, and had employees spread throughout all of those communities, right? In the breakfast diners, in the churches and things like that. And if we were facing a crisis, we had to have our employees on board with us as carriers of the message, whether we needed to raise our customer rates because we were trying to fund new projects, and that would always get a lot of media attention, because here goes the energy companies raising everyone's bills. We were doing that for a specific reason, right, there was a need for more power, more energy production in the company, and I can remember spending a lot of time in some really regimented and calendarised employee meetings going through key talking points, because we would be, again, out in the breakfast diners, out in the churches, talking with their neighbors, and we wanted them to be armed with all of the same talking points that we gave to our communications team, that we gave to our people working in government affairs.

**Matt 26:03**

Everybody needs to be out of the same hymnal in a crisis. That's so important, right? Because we see when they're poorly managed, there's been dissonant messages, there have been messages that haven't been congruent, and it's just super important that everyone be on the same page. And if your employees are not, that's a real problem.

**Matt 26:19**

Or, the other thing that I've seen happen, you will have a situation where employees aren't properly trained in how to do things like, for instance, work with media, right? So if you have, you can almost predict what will happen in the news coverage, right? What happens is the news teams go out to the gate as the employees are driving away, right? And will roll your car window down and stick the microphone in. We've seen this coverage, right? Our friends are very predictable in terms of what they're... they're telling us what they're going to do. They're going to talk to our employees and they're going to get those windows rolled down. I tell my crisis comm students, you need to make sure your employees understand how to handle that situation. And that there should be, they should have that index card with the go to names and numbers at the organisation of who to call when you get that rap on your car window. And I just see too many of the... I can almost... I see the reports all the time, and I just shake my head and go, Oh my gosh. There was just absolutely no training on heck, because they, invariably, the employee may be well meaning, but they're going to be inaccurate in their details. They're going to have a number wrong. They're going to have a rationale wrong, even if they maybe have been in that cafeteria meeting where all of this was explained, and you don't want to leave it to that. And yeah, internal communicators

need to fight, to be on crisis communications team, and not somewhere down the hall. They need to be in a room where it happens, so that they can help to manage those pressured situations. And boy, I just, I we spend a lot of time talking about the important audiences in a crisis. We put them on the whiteboard in the classroom, and invariably, employees go right to the top of the list. Because, wow, they're just, they really play such a role and cast a huge shadow, particularly if you're now, if you're more spread out globally, it becomes more complex, and it may be not be as much of an issue, but regardless, you need to have your folks trained, and that's the job of internal.

**Katie** 28:09

I believe you studied the VW emissions scandal. And there are two types of crisis. There's the crisis that no one expected. It comes out of the blue. Maybe it's an environmental one, a hurricane takes away your plant, something that you you could have maybe ran a scenario for, but you weren't in control of it. And then there are others that are completely crises of organisations' own making. And I just wonder whether you've got any reflection on what causes those kinds of crises – is there an element? Is there a common element? When you look back on those kinds of crisis, think that's where the organisation or that's why the organisation fell down?

**Matt** 28:49

Yeah, boy, I'll tell you again. Katie, this, it's another hour long episode. But what I would say because this is, it's a huge issue. And every time we think it can't happen again, Enron, Wells Fargo, Volkswagen... it happens again! Where we have an organisation that, through its own misjudgments, its own misdeeds, frankly, causes tremendous upheaval. And just when you think it can't happen again, it will, and it does. And as crisis scholars, we look at it from a couple of different ways. We tend to look at it more in terms of, what was the response? And what corrective action? And things like that. But you're right. These are all root indefinitely. Something's going on in these organisations that allows that to happen, and by the way, that's why it's important for internal communicators to know these stories and understand that this can happen, and be ready to be the voice in the back of the room that says, just like our external comms brethren would say, what will the impact of this decision be? I watched too many communicators try to clean up an aisle three after the spill, than those that have gone around to make sure that the bottles are all properly placed on the shelf in the first place, right? And we can't abdicate that responsibility, particularly one side of our mouth we say we want that seat at the table. Yeah, and, but the other side, and I'll say those guys screwed it up. So now we get to clean it up. Now we're one of those guys, if we're at the leadership table. When we look at these case studies, the rooting and cultural is large. Cultural mores, the cultural standards of the organisation are allowing for these kinds of things to happen, these sort of either misjudgments or intentional misdeeds in case of some of these companies. And it's a very complicated kind of cultural question, and some of it may only, not only be corporate culture, some of it may be even just the culture of the particular geography where some of these things are happening. And maybe what's going on there... a complex question. But I think maybe the important point to be made is that as communicators, we need to not just be ready to do the cleanup. We need to be ready at the beginning with a strong voice that says, Hey, ladies and gentlemen, are we making the right



decision for our customers or for our employees? As internal communicators, we're even closer to that.

**Katie** 30:56

It's a really interesting question, because I often think of us as the conscience of the organisation, because we're often the ones that say, Hang on a minute. I think it could be perceived this way. I think it could go wrong this way. Have you thought about this audience? They've been left out of the mix, and then I think, Oh, is that unfair to place that role on internal comms people that you're the conscience of an organisation? But it comes back to what you said before, which is empathy. We walk around having really deep understanding and knowledge of the people that work for the organisation and how the organisation operates. We can probably see where the values and the commercial incentive doesn't quite line up, and I think that's why these things often unravel. It's just that we say we're going to do this, but actually we're rewarding people on that behavior, which is at odds. And I think that's often where we can put a hand up and say, these two things aren't quite aligned.

**Katie** 31:52

You recently alerted me to a study by Annenberg and the IABC about hybrid working. We've touched on this already, around isolation, but this report really did suggest that it's impacting corporate culture hybrid working. Can you share with us some of the key findings of that report, and also any implications for us as comms professionals in our work?

**Matt** 32:18

Yeah, that's a great question. Thank you, Katie, and this was an important project that IABC recently undertook. So thank you for giving me just a second to talk about it. We commissioned it with the terrific folks at University of Southern California, Annenberg Center, some of you may be familiar with them. They publish an annual relevance report that really is must reading for those of us in communications, along with Trust Barometer and all those great tools that come out annually. But in this case, Annenberg worked with us to survey, oh gosh, just a wide range of corporate leaders, employees around what are the biggest challenges resulting from remote and hybrid work? And you're correct, the number one challenge was maintaining corporate culture. Well over almost 70% of the respondents viewed that as either a challenge or even a major challenge in this distributed workforce. And it stands to reason, because everyone is more distributed, maintaining that that culture can be more difficult. By the way, there were some other interesting findings, including things like training and mentoring being much more of a challenge in the remote space. And then, certainly, we all know training and mentoring well in our roles and but yeah, culture, training, mentoring, to some degree, maintaining positive morale. All of these take fairly major hits in this study in this more remote and hybrid workplace. And I think it's, again, you'll be able to certainly on the IABC website, we have promoted it several times, and I think it can be a really valuable tool for those of us making decisions anywhere in the employee ecosystem. They also asked employees how do you feel about remote and hybrid work? And of course, guess what? There was very positive kinds of feelings in that regard, right? So it's a situation where our employees were telling us we actually liked this for all the

flexibility reasons and convenience reasons. But yet, the things we're trying to do as the organisation writ large, around culture and morale are destabilised in that environment. It's just this really interesting dichotomy. Again, we're very early on, right? So this is early work in this space, because we're this new way of working is really just again, at two or three years old, where this is all going to shake out ultimately, who knows? But we're talking about internal communicators. It's going to make our job more difficult, not less difficult at the end of the day, right? I mean, we really have to up our game, based on what we're seeing in this survey, and so I encourage everybody to take a look at it.

**Katie** 34:32

Do you think there's going to be experiments? Is that where we're heading? Because, as you say, it's very early days, and I don't think anyone's quite exactly worked this out. The only thing I think is going to happen is that organisations are going to have to get a lot more intentional about when and why and how they bring people together. Even at AB, we've got now quarterly anchor days, and these are days when we don't come in just to sit behind a screen and have more online meetings. We try to take those out of the calendar and give ourselves a project to work on in that day that involves demands face to face collaboration. So it's a very deliberate day, if you like, that's planned months in advance, and that's again, just trying things out and seeing what's working. But I think you're absolutely right in terms of our strategies as internal comms people, we're going to have to think about, how do we even reach people, now? I had had a guest the other day saying, I'm worried, Katie, because I'm now in competition with people putting the washing on. They said they've got a gap in their day. What are they doing? And they're not walking down the corridor and having a chat to someone around the water call us. Yeah. Have you got a prediction for how organisations are going to solve this one, or is it going to be just a lot of experimentation?

**Matt** 35:45

Yeah, and we're experimenting now, right? You mentioned an example. I've seen them as well. By the way, the deeper it does talk a little bit about that dynamic of how to handle remote workers, at least in this kind of initial phase. But yeah, the rules of the game have changed because of the this ecosystem has changed so dramatically, there's no question about it. And but at the same time, we still have we work for companies where we have manufactured a lot of time, internal comms career. I was in a manufacturing environment. Those people were still coming to work. We can't forget about them too, because we've learned the years, what happens if you forget about that audience, right? We all have those horror stories if you don't provide that direct line of sight to our people that are working a manufacturing role, punching a clock, if you will, you've got the key tenant around things like line of sight and making sure that we're taking care of all audience segments, that won't go away. What we've seen now is we just have this more challenged situation with these more desk based employees – organisations need to experiment. Funny in the early days, I was in a after the pandemic. I was in a panel discussion with some agency leaders. They were running advertising agencies and PR firms, and we all know the cultures and those very hip and with it kind of culture. And they were talking about how what we need to do is, we do they use this word. We need to lure our employees back, they use the lure word, and so then, so let's add, instead of one pool table, let's put in a second one. Let's have a beer fridge and

on every floor. And they were throwing all these sort of, what I would call ease at employees to get them to lure back, to ostensibly lure them back. Such a terrible word, but yet they were using it right. These are leaders of an organisation. Names will be changed to protect the innocent, just that's an example. We are truly experimenting, and we're feeling our way through this time, and that's why, again, I think we need to continue to do projects like this one that IABC did with Annenberg, so that we can be armed with the data that will hopefully help us make the best decision.

**Katie** 37:41

Yeah, you raise such a good point, because it frustrates me this working from home argument, because there are so many people that cannot work from home, and they're doing such important jobs in society as well, often, and I've been inside so many organisations where people on the front line doing those jobs already feel slightly distant from the corporate center, but if you layer on the fact that they're working in such different environments, now you're making me think that actually part of the solution needs to be connecting people better to the front line of an organisation where the action really happens. I don't know what the answer is, but that is an interesting idea, I think.

**Matt** 38:21

Things like maybe job shadowing, or, you know, the job swapping, you know, kinds of things. Again, we're experimenting here. We've got to test things out, you know, that's the that's the phase we really need to be in, because something is going to work to help. Because you'd really like to see those numbers around things like morale and culture improve the next time we do this study, because it's really obviously a key issue.

**Katie** 38:45

Yeah this is a difficult question, but I'm going to ask you it in a way. At this point you must have taught, I was going to say, countless students, but maybe you could estimate how many students you've taught at this point in time. I don't know. Can you spot those who are most likely to have a stellar career in communications, and if so, what sets those students apart?

**Matt** 39:09

Such a good question. Oh, yeah, I've been teaching for more than a dozen years, so I've had hundreds and hundreds of students in that time. And you're right, many times there are some kind of, what I would call innate qualities about a person that will allow them to be a good communicator. I firmly believe that with the training that we provide and things like that, a lot of people can have a successful career. But the ones that seem to be set apart are, I would say, a couple of areas. The first is curiosity. These are people that are curious by nature. I mentioned my mom's experience as a reporter and a features writer and things like that. Hopefully that's where I picked up on some of my curiosity.

**Matt** 39:44

Empathy. Absolutely, the people that are more empathetic are going to be successful, I would argue, in the external or internal side, for sure on the internal side, no question about

it, but you need to understand customer, right? You need to understand stakeholder. And that starts with empathy.

**Matt** 39:58

And I think those that have a keen understanding of the difference between being an order taker and being a strategist, right? And that's so key, and we can't assume that the 23 year old that comes into our office understands that difference. You just can't assume that. You want them to be much more on the strategist counselor side, but they've been trained around tools and around things that allowed them to be a good sort of order taker. And so that was the best advice I remember I got in my young phase as a young communicator, marketing communicator was, you know, you're not an order taker, you're a strategist and a counselor. That's how our clients own their nature. That's how they need to view you when you walk into the room. And the people that get it right away, they already have that understanding built in that they shouldn't just be saying to their boss, hey, I can press release. They should be saying, Hey, have we asked this question of our employees? Have we experimented with this particular strategy? And they keep themselves well versed in what strategies and toolkits are out there, and so I think that's important as well. But yeah, those would be three things, I would say. And the good news is there are some very bright people coming into our field that do have a lot of those types of qualities. And you see them every day in classrooms, and they're making this a real commitment. And you can see it right off.

**Katie** 41:18

Do you see empathy playing out in the way that organisations and maybe even students as well in their own projects, are getting under the skin of audience groups? Because what I'm noticing in internal communication is, you're absolutely right, most of our work starts with some sort of discovery or exploration, some kind of research, and a lot more clients are interested in personas for their employee audience. They wouldn't in a million years sell something externally without understanding customer personas, but they would happily send something out internally without properly segmenting or understanding their internal audience. Do you see that changing? Is there more interest in getting deeper under the skin of who is actually employed by these organisations?

**Matt** 42:05

Yeah, it's like my other answer, I think, I hope so, but I'm not sure we're there yet. In looking at what I'm seeing coming out, you see the same things. There's still a lot of one-size-fits-all communications, much more so on the internal side than the external side. And again, I don't know whether it's just in the beginning, whether it's that focus on good quality research, which we tend to do more externally, I would argue, than we do internally. I'm not sure what's driving it, but there's way too much one-size-fits-all, and with this empowered stakeholder audience, that's dangerous. I think they will tune out very quickly as communications become... so I think you're asking a very relevant question, and I guess maybe one of the things we're circling around in this conversation is our jobs are getting harder, not easier, as internal communicators, right? But that's the world we're living in, and I just think you have to be really diligent to keep that in mind. But, yeah, interesting



question, but I'm not sure we're there yet. I think there's more work to be done, and I think that, I will say that a lot of the same tools we can use on the external- I also teach branding, right? I teach external branding, and guess what we're using there, audience personas, customer journey maps, right? Where we're customers going from online space to show room to consideration to where we're doing these elaborate labyrinth maps of the customer journey. And I even just as thinking about our conversation is, why couldn't we do that for employees? Employees take a journey too. Employees take a journey just like customers take a journey. That's a great tool, and again, some terrific outcome in academics. So I love authors, people like Brian Solis and those folks have talked about the benefits of a customer journey map, but I think we can flip that around and use that same tool for the employee experience, and probably get a lot of benefit out.

**Matt 42:06**

I couldn't agree more, and it's actually mapping that journey out is really interesting and vital, if you're at all interested in developing some kind of employee experience value proposition, if you like, and where you get to, I think, is an audience that really could be very powerful for many, many organisations, and that's their alumni. You leave and that's it. Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? They could still be advocates. They could still be interested. Some of them could even come back. You never know. So, yeah, I couldn't agree more.

**Matt 44:13**

One of the problems with the way we treat employees is we put a lot of emphasis on their experience when they get there, the orientation, and it's the buffet spreads and the tchotchkes and the goodies and the swag and yada yada, and we spend money and time and effort and all these things, and then we shoo them out the door after orientation, and we don't think about what their experience looks like beyond that. We do a wonderful job managing their experience on day one. And I used to get frustrated with this all the time, because we would spend all this time and money on this two day orientation, and then we send them out the door and forget about them – that's a generalisation.

**Katie 44:47**

It's a good point. It's a very good point. You've already mentioned IABC, and I know you're also involved with the PRSA. This is a question I kind of love to ask, and it's a bit of a devil's advocate question, because I'm heavily involved with the IABC and a huge fan, but we get a lot of stuff, seemingly for free online. Now I'm just wondering how these organisations need to evolve to better support the development of the next generation of comms leaders, who might be thinking, what's the point of these professional associations when I can get LinkedIn learning, or whatever it is? I'm just interested in your perspective on the value of them and how they need to change.

**Matt 45:28**

Well, it's an important question, because, as you and I know, these organisations have really been laid low by the pandemic. Right? Memberships are way, way down and unfortunately, and they're really struggling. They're actually just now crawling back out of it, which is amazing to me. God forbid we have another pandemic. But I think that you're right. They



could be doing more. IABC is doing some, I think, very interesting things along the realm of younger professionals. They unveiled a couple three years ago, a tool we call the Career Roadmap, where you can go on and take a look at where you stand. And I know you were familiar with that tool, which again, extremely important for a young communicator to get a clear picture in their mind where they may fit in a career continuum? And then there are other tools that go along with the Career Roadmap, and some of those are free, actually, for young professionals to avail themselves of. And then they've done some other things too. Like, I know there was a very popular short course on business acumen, private, a concept we talked about earlier that IABC had in place. So gosh, even prior to the pandemic, I believe that's been popular with younger communicators. And so I think they're making an attempt to evolve an outreach but it's yeah, the generational gaps and these organisations have been pretty pronounced, and I'm not sure we're there yet, but I do think those are positive steps.

**Matt 46:40**

I'm telling younger communicators right now: You know what? Probably at this point in time it's more important for you to join an organisation like that than any other, partly because of what we just talked about with this hybrid, distributed workforce. Right? If you are staying in your bedroom, working 10 hours, 12 hours a day, and your entire team is in New York, you find a team in your own city, and that is through one of these organisations. And because, to your point about getting that more person to person thing going, you can do that by proxy, by using your membership in one of these organisations. Now, I realize it's expensive, and we're trying to work on that as well in these organizations to make it more affordable, and that's been slow going, but hopefully that will get there. But you know, because you're going to get so many things out of it. You're going to it, you're going to learn more soft skills. You're obviously going to pick up training real time and not being thrown at you through a computer screen. You can take a role on, let's say, a chapter board. You can get valuable leadership experience. I know somebody who hires and they tell me, I look for people that have had leadership experience in one of the local marketing clubs or organisations, because I know that even though there may only be 26, 27 years old, they've had a leadership role, and that can make them more viable. All kinds of great reasons. I could go on and on, but it's more important that we recruit and that these younger professionals join these organisations than ever before. But unfortunately, the trend is not... it's moving the other direction, and to me, that's frankly dangerous.

**Katie 48:03**

I'm just interested to ask you this slightly philosophical question before we jump to the quick fire ones. You spend your day surrounded by the next generation of employees, leaders, communication professionals. From a broader societal perspective, how optimistic or maybe pessimistic are you about the future in general, when you look at the people sat in your classroom today?

**Matt 48:30**

I am optimistic. There's no question about it. I'm fascinated by Generation Z. I just I think they're, and there's some, if you haven't read some of the books out now on Generation Z

and the very different kind of mindset they approach things with, and the fact that they're a little more fiscally conservative, and an author that I read recently that called them kind of old souls and younger bodies, there's just, I'm just, I can't... everything I get my hands on about this generation, I read it, and I'm fascinated by it, because they have, in some ways, they've moved backwards in terms of their orientation than, say, the millennials may be a little more conservative, but I just I really like the way they are approaching things, and the importance of living your life and having it be meaningful and experiences. And I suppose how it was when you and I... you have to go get that job, you have to get on that corporate hamster wheel as quickly as you possibly can and start just turning away. This generation doesn't think that way. And I think that, again, we're in the experimental phase because they haven't been around a long time. But how are organisations going to meet them where they are? And that speaks to hybrid/remote work, because they want that. So how can we now accomplish what we want to do culturally when they want to work at home? We really hit it at something that's right at the crux there. But I am optimistic about them. I think they're extremely bright. I think they're extremely driven, once they're interested. I always tell them, you have to find the color of your parachute. You can't be feeling around for it. But, man, they're incredible. Can't read enough about them. I can't learn enough about them. I'm enjoying them. In my classrooms. It's going to be a really interesting next few years, as they move deep force.

**Katie** 50:04

I think it means that leaders, organisations are going to have to up their game, because, as you say, they haven't got an army of unthinking people that jump on the hamster wheel and 30, 40, years later, think, Gosh, why did I do that again?

**Matt** 50:20

Oh, boy, I burned a lot of years on that hamster wheel, Katie.

**Katie** 50:24

Exactly!

**Katie** 50:28

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. 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** 52:02

Let's hop over to those quick fire questions. Quick fire in terms of me asking, but not necessarily you answering them, Matt, So do feel free to answer them in your own way. What would most surprise people about Matt Tidwell?

**Matt** 52:15

Boy, I don't know. Maybe surprising or maybe just more of a fun fact about me, if you will. But I started my career as a bit of an entrepreneur. I started a business along with a colleague in association management, oddly enough, and we would run small healthcare associations, things like that. My first job was working for a company that did publishing for that group, and I'm really glad I did it. I had all the issues that entrepreneurs have, and made lots of mistakes, and certainly, at the end of the day, failed as most but I'm glad that I did it, because when you think about things like just understanding a bit this more holistically, I think even though, believe me, I can be a bit math challenged, that's why I went into journalism and communications, like a lot of us. I think the training that I had there over those four or five years, very early in my career, I'm talking mid 20s, was really helpful for me. Yeah, people just tend to think of me as just a lifelong marketing comms guy. But actually was, for a while, I was was a business starter.

**Katie** 53:12

What's the one piece of bad advice or unhelpful thinking that has consistently dogged the communication profession?

**Matt** 53:21

Yeah, and this may sound familiar, I think probably my biggest pet peeve is that we still have too many of us at the thought leadership level, Katie, that you and I have spent so many years in, that are still talking about us getting a seat at the table. I just that phrase, you know, I think... and you've interviewed a lot of these people, right, Sally Sussman..? We had to have our seat at the table, at least in most places. And so we need to quit being so focused on the journey to get there, and we lose our focus otherwise, right? We need to be doing the important work now that we're at the table, but yet I still see, yeah, you gotta... I looked at a programme for some kind of regional communications conference not long ago, and there was a session around getting a seat at the table. Oh my gosh. Are we ever going to break out of that mindset? So I was on a bit of a soapbox there. That was a pet peeve. But quit complaining about earning a seat at the table and just go out there and lead, because we can do that more than we probably ever before.

**Katie** 54:14

I love Shel Holtz's answer to this question. He was like, I don't want to see it at the table. I want to be called before the person goes to the table.

**Matt** 54:21

Exactly, yeah. Leave it to Shel.

**Katie** 54:25

Provide the advice before they get to the table.



**Katie** 54:28

What's your go to productivity hack or tool that helps you stay efficient and get stuff done?

**Matt** 54:35

My gosh, such a great question. Because, boy, earlier in my career, I was an early adopter any productivity tool that was out there. Boy, I would jump on and buy it and order it and whatever it might be. You know what I'm doing now is just the aspect of just good, solid calendaring. I use my calendar not just for events, but also for tasks. I think that is the verb used, 'calendaring'! And that's been probably my best productivity tool that I've stumbled onto, is just find a good calendar programme that will allow you to not just show events, but also tasks, and those can be color coded and ranked and things like that. So I'm a big fan of calendaring. That's my go to.

**Katie** 55:09

You read a lot. I can tell through this conversation. How do you find the time for that? That's all about prioritisation. Is there something that you deliberately don't do or do less of than you see other people do?

**Matt** 55:23

I've tried to, and you see them these services that will give thumbnail versions of books. Yeah, some of those, and it can be helpful. Particularly, I look a lot for authors and books that might help in the classroom, so it gives me a feeling for what the key points are. And I still use some of those services a little bit, but I tend to be centered in certain genres. So if I'm teaching branding, or if I'm teaching... I teach leadership, which is a really cool class to teach. And there are obviously numerable authors that speak about leadership, so it just depends on the on kind of the genre. But yeah, I think that again, it speaks to the point that where we are currently in our profession, we have to be well read because things are changing so rapidly – or well listened, in the case of a tool like you provide. And, yeah, I don't miss an opportunity on a commute to pick up an episode of a terrific podcast like yours or others and and so it's it comes at me in different ways, but yeah, but the point is, it needs to be coming at you on a fairly rapid basis. If you're doing the wash, if you're doing... you need to use your time wisely. I'm a sports fan, and I love that kind of thing as well, but I also know how rapidly our business should change.

**Katie** 56:32

Yeah, great advice. How would you complete this statement? World Class internal communication is...

**Matt** 56:42

Picking up on a prior theme, I think, of world class internal communication is relentlessly striving for empathy. And it's becoming harder for us to reach because of some of the complexities we've talked about. But I think the struggle continues and the striving needs to continue, because, particularly on the internal side, again, our stock and trade, to me, is to be relentlessly striving for it. So how's that?

**Katie 57:10**

Yeah, no, I love it. And you're also making me think you said earlier, our jobs have got harder. And there's no doubt our jobs have got harder. But do you also think, when you reflect back on the early days, the prize has got bigger as well. So although the job's harder, what we can deliver for organisations now, potentially, is so much greater in terms of behavior, value, perception, change all of those things?

**Katie 57:36**

Excellent. And finally, Matt, we give you a billboard for millions to see, and you can put on that billboard any message you like. What are you going to put on your billboard Matt?

**Matt 57:36**

Yeah, without question. And when you see those successes, right? And when they're chronicled, wow, there's some really cool stuff there, and we've all seen those examples. So yeah, the payoff is tremendous. I would argue that payoff when it goes well on internal as I mentioned in thinking back in my earlier in my career, is every bit as satisfying as driving a sales number on the external side, or driving customer acquisition, or whatever it might be, a win. And some of that is we get to be very in close proximity to our successes in internal connections, conversely, as we do if we fail. But I think that again, that also makes the reward sweeter is because we can see an employee who was once disengaged now engaged, or a work group that was once lagging behind now performing at a top level. Those are pretty special moments. And so I think again, it may take some selling for our younger communicators to make sure they understand that there is a lot of reward there, but oh my gosh, it's definitely there. So yeah...

**Matt 58:12**

Boy, a billboard, such a great question because you're driving by at a high rate of speed, right? So it doesn't want to have a lot of copy. Then, is it a one word type of thing? I think if it were a one word, it would just simply be 'Grace', you know, and give it to others. Give it to yourself. I work with a lot of younger professionals. They're successors because they're pleasers and overachievers. But many times that comes at a cost, and the cost is they don't give themselves grace, right? They don't really give themselves a break, if you will. And I think that we need to, we don't we don't want to burn ourselves, because it's easy to do in this business. And I would would start and stop with grace. And if I had a slightly bigger billboard, I put those little subheads under it. Give it to yourself. Give it to others. How's that?

**Katie 59:34**

That's such a lovely answer and a perfect way to end this conversation. Matt, thank you so much for your time and your wisdom.

**Matt 59:41**

You're welcome. Katie, thank you for what you're doing. This is such a terrific service to those of us who care so much about this profession and honored to have the conversation.



**Katie** 59:50

Thank you. Thank you so much. So that is a wrap for this episode of The Internal Comms Podcast. As always, you can find all the links mentioned in today's show, including a full transcript on our website. Just head over to [abcomm.co.uk/podcast](https://abcomm.co.uk/podcast). Matt and I talked quite a bit in the show about the importance of building your business acumen. If you're interested in developing your understanding of business, check out workstream two of my Masterclass which is devoted to helping IC professionals become more savvy about the fundamentals of business. You'll find my Masterclass programme at [icmasterclass.com](https://icmasterclass.com). Now, we've got some fantastic episodes lined up in this season with some of the sharpest minds in our field. So be sure to hit that subscribe button today. You won't want to miss a single conversation. A huge thank you to Matt for sharing his insights today, and a big shout out to the dream team behind the scenes, my producer, John, sound engineer, Stuart, content manager Madi, designer Rob and the rest of the incredible crew at AB who keep this show rolling. And finally, of course, my heartfelt thanks to you for tuning in to The Internal Comms Podcast. I do love hearing from you, so please do continue to reach out to me on LinkedIn. Until next time, lovely listeners, stay safe and well and remember, it's what's inside that counts.