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LEADING TEAMS

Best Practices for Instant Messaging at Work

by Dustin York
“I’ll Slack you.” In workplaces around the world, the name of the popular online messaging system has become a verb, just like Google. Slack has been enthusiastically integrated into the day-to-day functions of legacy corporations and burgeoning startups: The company claims that, in 2019, it hosted 10+ million daily users. It has competitors, too, including Microsoft Teams and Zoom.

The benefits of these tools have quickly become obvious. Even in the early 2000s, researchers noted how instant messaging helped to decrease needless, back-and-forth phone calls and alleviate
miscommunications. And instant messaging trounces email by offering immediate and clearer resolution to business concerns that may have lingered unnoticed in inboxes.

There’s just one problem: We’re still figuring out how to properly, and professionally, communicate via IM. These systems can create communication silos, where teams who are highly integrated in one platform are unable to collaborate with departments rooted in another. Ease of communication also breeds distraction and informality, where instant messaging becomes a natural conduit to share non-work related information, including details, sometimes inappropriate, of workers’ personal lives. And it’s no surprise that IM has created legal snafus for organizations; instant messages discussing potential litigation can, ironically, be used in those lawsuits.

None of these issues are insurmountable. But they remain a struggle, which indicates that companies haven’t quite cracked how to design and implement policies that properly guide and govern workplace instant messaging.

How a given workplace chooses to use IM, if at all, is up to them, but with Slack and Teams becoming the norm within most organizations, here are some suggested best practices.

1. **Adopt the tools your employees are already using.**

   Popular instant messaging dates back to the early 2000s, and Slack, in particular, has been gaining traction for years. Rather than starting from scratch with a workplace IM system, companies should build upon what employees already know and like. This includes identifying which ones people are currently using; selecting one that is both popular and suited to your organization; modifying it to fit your needs; creating policies for appropriate use, archiving, and safekeeping; educating managers on use and risk factors; training HR reps; and regularly readdressing processes and procedures to improve.

   For example, at a small tech startup, many team members may already use Facebook Messenger as a means of socializing, both on and offsite. That platform itself doesn’t have to become the official IM standard for the company, but it can be integrated into a larger messaging system.

2. **Embrace all kinds of instant messaging – but set ground rules.**

   Slack and Teams can be distracting, especially when they’re used as an online employee repository for GIFs, jokes, and debates over sports games and TV plot lines. They can also be unintended outlets for bullying, abuse, and harassment, where group messages are shared about a coworker’s outfit, mannerisms, or sex life, despite that colleague sitting only two desks away.

   But there are benefits to workers messaging about non-business topics, too. These digital interactions create camaraderie, and people are less likely to leave their jobs when they have friends at the office. Liking your colleagues has also shown to increase engagement by 700%.
To reap the social benefits of these tools, while minimizing the risks of employee distraction or diminished mental health, organizations should clearly define expectations for personal messaging. These should be immediately designed and delivered to current staff and introduced to new hires during onboarding. They should also be carefully reiterated over time. And HR teams should be trained on protocols for addressing complaints and concerns.

Instant messaging systems allows us to reach out to colleagues, reports, and bosses at any time — in a way that might seem more urgent than email. Unless the communication is extremely time-sensitive, resist this urge. Most messages can easily wait until the next business day.

You might justify the behavior by saying that the issue is top of mind for you, you don't want to forget, and you don’t expect the recipient to respond right away. But the person who is pinged might project a sense of urgency onto the message and feel obligated to get back to you, even if it cuts into their own personal time.

One way for an organization to get around this is by encouraging people to sign off IM tools and to respect others’ out-of-office status messages. Explain to everyone that any requests made to colleagues should come with information about when answers are needed, and that most conversations should happen during the workday and kept short and to the point.

4. Promote face-to-face communication, too.
Digital messages aren't always easy to interpret. A boss who says, “I think you can do better” in person can be either motivational or discouraging, depending on whether the comment is delivered with a smile or disapproving glare, with outstretched hands or closed arms. If you get the same message on Slack, it’s harder to read — unless you regularly interact with that manager in person.

So, even if your workplace is mostly remote, it’s important to ensure that some sort of face-to-face communication happens: one-on-one meetings, teams and department get-togethers, onsite introductions and seminars. Even video conference calls can help.

And, even as you encourage online socializing, make sure it happens in the real world, too; consider company picnics, social lunches, and community volunteer days.

If you follow these protocols, any IM platform will remain a beneficial workplace tool rather than a nuisance.

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