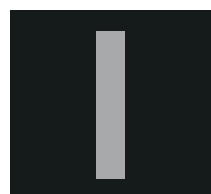# Employee C

## Australian Tax Office Leverages Tech

by **BARBARA PALFRAMAN-SMITH**

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« **Implementing an effective technology-based communication program for 21,000 employees at 96 different sites across an entire country is a daunting order. How do you engage a workforce dispersed over nearly 8 million square kilometres, achieve a balance between "push and pull" communication methods and strive for an organisational culture change?** »

Implementing an effective technology-based communication program for 21,000 employees at 96 different sites across an entire country is a daunting order. How do you engage a workforce dispersed over nearly 8 million square kilometres, achieve a balance between "push and pull" communication methods and strive for an organisational culture change?

These were the issues facing Belinda Flint when she was appointed internal communication director of the Australian Taxation Office (ATO) 18 months ago. She started with the results of a survey conducted earlier by an independent research company that had benchmarked the ATO's communication performance against other companies'. One major finding was that ATO employees weren't getting the information they required. Flint confirmed that the internal communication team was getting the same message from managers and employees.

At the time of the survey, employees were getting ATO news from an electronic magazine and a priority information distribution tool via the organisation's intranet. "Use of their main communication mediums had not been regular or regulated, and the content of the magazine, *ATOextra*, was mainly driven by employee contributions only," Flint recalls. "Within our corporate communication team as a whole, there was no one looking at what messages were and were not going out to our staff. As a result, we found that our employees weren't getting the information they needed—and wanted—and were becoming frustrated and disengaged."

### PURSUING BALANCED COMMUNICATION
Flint initiated a communication program to solve these problems, with the higher goal of improving organizational culture and staff involvement. The first step was to establish clear guidelines and roles for all internal communication tools and channels and to make sure all mediums were developed in response to audience needs. "I realised that it was important to strive for a balance in our different channels and that they couldn't work in isolation from one other," she explains.

With the ATO relying heavily on its technology
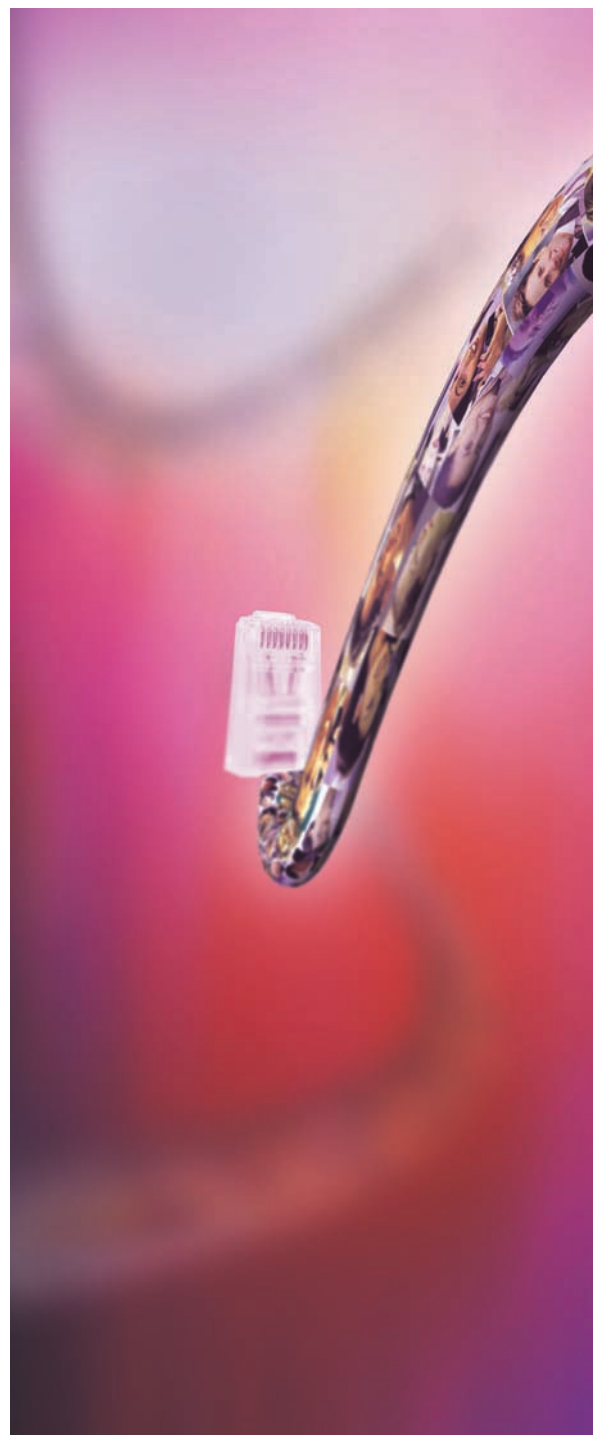
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## nology to Build Culture and Community

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platform for its internal communication initiative, Flint and her team set about enhancing and developing a balanced suite of communication tools:

> electronic employee magazine (*ATOextra*)
> priority message delivery system (ATOpriority and ATOsubscribe)
> intranet and Internet
> e-mail
> satellite television (ATOlive)
> videoconferencing
> advertising and notice board screens.

### BALANCING 'PUSH AND PULL'

Upgrading its electronic communication program, the ATO has found that the best way to get messages across to staff is to balance the "push and pull" of various channels and tools.

"Our communication approach is to engage our employees wherever possible and not force information upon them constantly," says Flint. Only critical material—information that employees need to do their jobs effectively as well as updates on security or working conditions—is sent via the "push" approach. For the rest, ATO has recognized that within its large, diverse organisation, subcultures are an important

consideration in the communication approach.

"We allow for different communication needs (both messages and methods) of these subcultures and enable our employees to choose the most appropriate communication tool or channel, using subscription options," Flint says. "This not only maximises the reach of our messages, but it also gives our employees a sense of empowerment and more control over their work environment. We have found that using this approach has resulted in employee engagement, an improved level of trust and feedback, and senior managers actively contributing organisational news to us."

### DEVELOPING A PRIORITY MESSAGE SYSTEM

Being open and transparent regarding organisational change and news is an important part of the ATO's communication platform. When news breaks or the CEO needs to communicate urgently, the organisation's priority distribution tool sends a PDF (portable document format) message to each employee's desktop within two hours. The high-priority format ensures that the message will not be "lost" or ignored among everyday e-mail clutter.

Taking this priority system further, Flint and her

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communication team expanded its use to facilitate delivery of messages to specific distribution lists to which employees can subscribe. "We find this policy empowers employees to take an interest in other areas of the ATO," Flint says. For example, one of the sub-lists distributes senior management information, but any employee can subscribe. Such openness has improved the level of trust between senior management and general staff.

### COMMUNICATING CONSISTENTLY

The weekly electronic magazine, _ATOextra_, is one of the organisation's most popular communication tools and its flagship internal communication product. Each Monday morning, all employees receive a sophisticated online magazine with graphics, photos, embedded links, video clips, surveys and animated headers. In fact, ATO is the only government organisation in Australia that produces a magazine in this format, size and quality on a weekly basis.

The magazine averages 50 pages and includes regular features and sections such as a CEO column, state and division contributions, letters to the editor, major news stories, a news-in-brief section, a health and well-being section and a "What's On" calendar that covers social and fund-raising activities within ATO.

Flint says the aim of the magazine is "to educate, inform and entertain." By building and

fostering a sense of community and unity among staff, the magazine has helped improve corporate culture. Magazine contributions are edited, except for letters to the editor, which are only vetted for offensive or defamatory language. If a letter raises a question, whenever possible an appropriate person in the organisation will provide a response that is published in the same issue. Letters have proven to be a valuable measure of organisational climate, as they provide an uncensored avenue for staff opinions and feedback.

### MAXIMISING ATO'S INTRANET

The ATO's intranet plays one of the most important roles in the organisation's communication platform. Beyond serving as an information archive, it is a resource for detailed, reliable and easily accessible centralised information and news.

The intranet is designed to be employees' primary online workspace, and it offers various sections including corporate news and functions, divisional home pages, access to vital ATO applications and links to software vendors.

Staff members are encouraged to publish relevant news and information on the intranet, provided they've first undergone ATO's online publishing training. As a control measure, the intranet and each division have gatekeepers who approve intranet postings.

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"We also facilitate community and social activities through our intranet, with regional social club sites for all states throughout the country, as well as a classified section," Flint notes. "These features have proved to be the most popular 'hit' sites on our intranet."

A "subscribe" option also has been designed for particular sites within the ATO intranet. Employees can subscribe to one or a variety of intranet sites. Each time new information is posted to their selected sites, subscribers receive an automatic e-mail alerting them to new content and providing a link to the site. This option is particularly popular for the social sites and divisional home pages. A similar tool is also available for the Job Scout (job vacancy) site.

**CUTTING THROUGH E-MAIL 'NOISE'**
As with any large and geographically diverse organisation, e-mail has become the most heavily used internal communication channel and tool. But with increased use of e-mail comes increased difficulty of getting messages through the "noise." On average, ATO managers receive more than 50 e-mails per day, and with 21,000 employees having

computers and using e-mail, establishing an e-mail policy and some controls was a priority for Flint.

One of the first things she looked at was restricting access to the ATO's large distribution lists. "We then established protocols that prohibited employees from e-mailing everyone at a site, at a specific level (e.g., managers) or across the whole organisation, without approval from the internal communication team," Flint explains. "This has improved the flow of e-mail within the ATO and reduced inappropriate e-mails by 89 percent."

The ATO has also made effective use of online bulletin boards. Each time an employee logs on to the ATO network, a panel (or bulletin board) displays on the computer desktop. Not a typical bulletin board, the panel is more like an advertising billboard. These panels are used effectively from time to time to announce internal campaigns and relay important corporate messages.

**LINKING TOOLS AND TECHNOLOGY**
"One of the most important aspects of the ATO's communication approach is that we link our communication tools and technology," says Flint.

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"When we send out any corporate e-mail, it contains only the key information or summary, and we provide an embedded link to the bulk of the information on a public folder, shared drive or intranet site. We also encourage staff to adopt the same approach."

*ATOextra* also contains links within stories that pull magazine readers to the intranet. "Even our intranet site contains links to our external site, ATO applications and other relevant internal sites," Flint notes.

### MEASURING SUCCESS

Ongoing surveys about ATO's various communication channels indicate that the technology platform is being used in a better and smarter way than in the past and that the communication thrust is succeeding. In addition, regular polls in the magazine seek to gauge communication success on issues such as employee awareness, preferences, attitudes and trust levels. ATO is currently tabulating the results of an organisation-wide employee survey that will provide further data on employee engagement and organisational culture.

"We still use traditional communication methods in the ATO," Flint acknowledges. "As we all know, there's nothing like a face-to-face conversation to make sure people understand your message. But our communication approach is about using a variety of technologies to reach as many people as clearly and quickly as possible while encouraging responses or, as we like to put it, building a 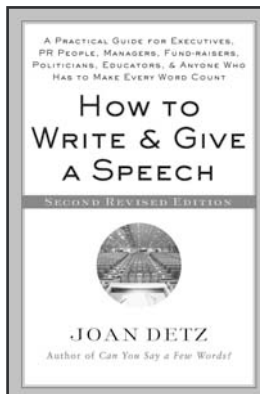community through conversation." CW