Communication

A resource for researcher representatives

Resource 3 of 4

Created by Electv Training

Overview

Communication and managing input and output of feedback is a key part of being a researcher representative, as you are the link between your cohort and the decision makers. It's up to you to manage the two-way communication required and design a strategy that works best for you and your cohort.

This document is the third of four resources that aims to cover communication planning and strategy for researcher representatives. The other three resources focus on how to make the most of your position, negotiation and influencing. Each resource will provide information, exercises, links and an opportunity to reflect on your own aims and experience.

Your communication strategy

A clear communication strategy is crucial for researcher representatives and considering the WHO, WHAT, HOW and WHEN you are communicating is a helpful starting point:

WHO are you communicating with (group or individuals)

WHAT is the aim of the message & what do you want to tell them

HOW will you communicate (what is the best channel of delivery for those recipients)

WHEN will you send the communication (the timing of delivery)

In the previous resource, you considered your stakeholders and frequency of communication, you may wish to review this now before embarking on designing your communication strategy. Who are the key people/ groups you are required to engage with?

Exercise:

Consider the next message/ communication you will be writing as part of your researcher representative role. Write down the WHO, WHAT, HOW and WHEN for this message.

Channels of communication

Your method of communication and choice of communication channel will depend on the content you would like to share. For more detailed, complex content, such as information about research funding or health and safety, then email may be preferable; for minor announcements or news then social media may be sufficient. Remember that you are communicating in two directions (sending & receiving information) and with two groups:

1) Your cohort of researchers

   and

2) Senior staff and/or a committee

Therefore, you will need to have suitable methods of communication for each. For your cohort of researchers, you may engage in several ways including via mailing list/ newsletter, email, social media and in person; Table 1 below includes a range of communication methods that you may wish to use to do this. In contrast, when working with senior staff or a committee you may only use one form of communication, such as email.

Communications in to you from your researchers	
Forms/ surveys	Use short, multiple choice questions with the option to comment further. Useful for gathering & collating a lot of information quickly.
Email	Email messages from individual researchers to you directly. These should be treated as confidential.
Social media	More discussion, questions and comments from your group. These could be in a public forum (e.g. Twitter) or a private group that you manage.
Paper notes	Collected anonymously at an event or from a secure location in the department. Good for short comments and notes.
Word of mouth	Researchers engaging with you directly with queries, requests, information, ideas and concerns.
Communications out to the research cohort from you	
Newsletter	Using software such as Mailchimp or SendInBlue, you can create and send regular newsletters to your cohort. Easy to setup, repeat & good for communicating with a larger cohort. You can also automate signups to this newsletter as your cohort grows.
Email	Often a favourite method of communication, good for short announcements, attaching documents & you can create an email list in your email program.
Presentations	Giving a talk, making a short announcement at an event or Zoom session, participating in panel sessions, both online and in person.
Social media	Information/ news posts, links, announcements, links to surveys, starting discussions, resharing information from other people/ organisations (e.g. relevant job adverts)
Noticeboards/ flyers	If placed in obvious places with high footfall (e.g. lifts or the noticeboard next to the lunch queue), these can still be effective. Use to advertise events, call for sign ups and add a QR code which links to your social media page or newsletter sign up page.

Table 1: Possible communication methods that researcher representatives could use to engage with their cohort.

Other factors to consider are:

- How do you want people to contact you? What is your preference?
- How regularly do you want to communicate with your group and your committee? (e.g. weekly, monthly, quarterly).
- How many people are in your group? Social media and newsletters may be more efficient when working with large groups.

The flow of information

As part of your communication strategy you will need to consult with the cohort of people you are representing. This consultation will then need to be discussed and collated so that it can be fed back to a committee or senior member of staff who you are liaising with so that it can influence decision making.

When designing your communication strategy it can be helpful to summarise the flow of information in your communications loop so that you can visualise how the feedback you receive can reach the decision makers to enable actions and change. The diagram in Figure 1 below gives an example of what a communications loop may look like.

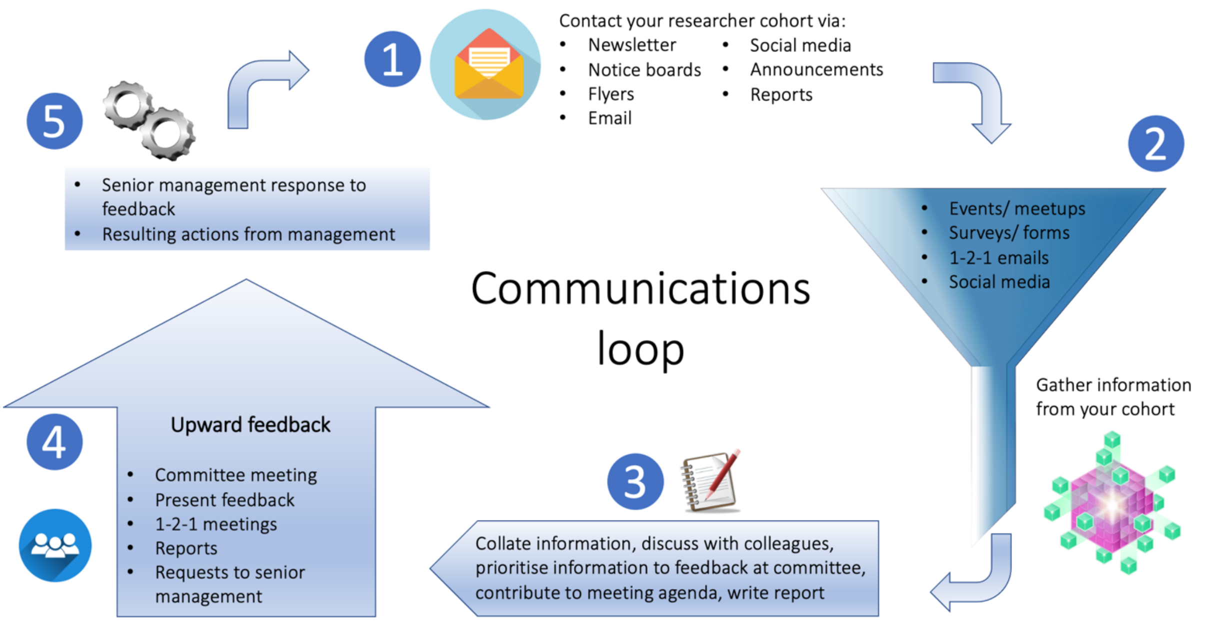

Figure 1: The communications loop showing the flow of information.

Communicating in writing is a good way to reach a large number of people and to provide details and information that may be missed in in spoken communications, people can also then refer back to the message later and reflect. You can also rest assured that recipients will not misinterpret or revise your intended content. Aim to keep your messages short and concise (nobody wants to read a 3,000 word email or post) if possible. When feeding back to senior researchers, a short summary or 1-2 page report (which can be included as an item to be discussed at the next meeting and put on the agenda) may be appreciated, as they are more likely to read and respond to this than a long, verbose, detailed document.

Exercise:

Complete your own communications loop by writing down what you would put into sections 1 – 4. Aim to be as specific as possible (e.g. what social media channels).

> "In the G2PD committee we work together as a group to connect researchers in a professional capacity, through seminars and career workshops, but also at a personal level, through postdoc-oriented retreats and social evenings. Each committee member has space and remit to run with their own ideas for activities or campaigns. We share a common belief that community plays a key role in improving research culture, which is why we strive to be a source of support generated by postdocs, for postdocs."
>
> - *Dr Brianna Vandrey, George Square Postdoc Society (G2PD)*

Technology

There are a variety of technical solutions that can help you to manage your communications efficiently and you may wish to experiment with these. A full breakdown of the apps and software available goes beyond the scope of this resource but the list below suggests some that may be of interest (beyond email programs and social media platforms). For some of these, a link to a relevant YouTube video or video list has been provided for information.

- Events management: Eventbrite, Ticket Tailor
    - Free to use if your event is free to attend. It's an easy way to list events/ seminar series and enables people to sign up automatically.

- Newsletters: SendInBlue, Mailchimp
    - Free up to a certain limit of subscribers. Useful for automating your sign up process and ensuring that people opt-in to your mailing list.

- Surveys: Qualtrics, Online surveys (BOS), Google forms, SurveyMonkey
    - Useful for collecting a larger number of responses.

Please note: all of the above software is free to use, either through a University of Edinburgh licence (e.g. Qualtrics) or because it operates on a freemium model for public use.

A necessary piece of information when building and managing a community is basic knowledge of General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). This applies to the majority of UK organisations, including universities, and it covers how you should manage the personal data (e.g. email addresses) of the people in your cohort. The key thing to ensure is that people are giving you permission to hold their information (even if it is just an email address) on the mailing list by letting them "opt-in." This is simple to do: just ensure there is a tick box when they sign up stating that the person is happy for you to hold their information. Further details on GDPR can be found via the following links:

Information Commissioner's Office

University of Edinburgh guide on data protection

Exercise:

Mark an "x" on the line below to indicate how comfortable you are with learning and using new software:

____

Not at all *Adequate* *Very comfortable*

For further information on types of software and more training opportunities, refer to the Digital skills training and toolkits webpages: https://www.ed.ac.uk/information-services/help-consultancy/is-skills

SMART goals

Finally, once you have considered your communication strategy and what will work best for you and your position, try to create some SMART goals to solidify your ideas, aims and plans. SMART goals are designed to help you make clear and achievable goals. By taking this focussed approach, you are more likely to avoid general statements and vague timelines: it enables you to set out a more productive plan.

- Specific – a simple, clear, specific area for improvement
- Measurable – a way to measure success
- Achievable – is this reachable or feasible?
- Relevant – what is the benefit of this goal?
- Time-bound – what is the deadline?

Exercise:

Complete the table below with your SMART goals to form the basis of your communication strategy, the first row has been done for you as an example. You are welcome to extend the table and add further SMART goals below.

	Specific	Measurable	Achievable	Relevant	Time-bound
Outbound communications to your cohort *(example)*	I would like to engage with as much of my cohort as possible & build a list of 100 people	I would like to send 1 newsletter & 10 social media posts per month	I would like to receive feedback from at least 10 researchers per month	I will focus on the following three issues/ themes: x,y,z because this is relevant to the cohort	I will complete my post by January 2023 & will hand over to the next representative by December 2022.
Outbound communications to your cohort					
Communicating with senior staff/ committee					
Establishing a team					
Organising & managing events					

Hypothetical scenario

Alex has just started as the PhD representative for his department and the previous person in his role gave him a list of emails that represents all of the students in his cohort. Alex would like to establish a regular mailing list that people can subscribe to automatically so that new students can add themselves to the list easily and they can agree to the appropriate GDPR conditions. He would also like to communicate regularly with the cohort and thinks that most people prefer email as a method of communication over social media. He takes the following steps:

1. Alex explores a range of software online that specialise in simplifying communications and chooses to use Mailchimp, a free software for creating, managing and tracking mailing lists.
2. He sets up a new list for his cohort and adds the existing email list to it (he has permission from the users to do this).
3. He also sets up an automatic registration form with a GDPR opt in checkbox and adds it to the department's website, along with some text inviting students to join the mailing list.
4. He builds an email template containing the department logo, images and an information section that can be used to add news, upcoming events and other information relevant to the cohort. There is also an "unsubscribe" section so that people can choose to leave the mailing list.
5. Finally, Alex adds the current information for this month's communication and sends it to the cohort, informing them that this is the first of regular monthly emails. The Mailchimp programme is now set up for Alex to send out regular monthly emails using the same template, making his communications more streamlined and efficient.

Questions:

a) What other methods of communication could Alex have used?
b) How would you set up a similar communications arrangement for your cohort?