Dealing with misinformation, employee communication and social media in the workplace

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2022 APMA Forum

By   **Lourdes Gonzalez - Gowan Company**
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The American public is deeply concerned about the spread of false information

- More than eight in ten (83%) say they are concerned about the spread of false information, and a majority (54%) report being very concerned.

- Eighty percent are specifically concerned about the spread of false information about the coronavirus and vaccines.

- More than two-thirds are concerned both that the information they receive on social media is not accurate (69%), and also about foreign interference in social media (67%).

https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/news-and-polls/overview

Misinformation in the workplace

- The end of the 20th century is heralded as the beginning of the Information Age. A time when the digital revolution took hold, computers appeared in every home and access to knowledge was greater than ever.

- But today's broad reach of media platforms and ready audience of followers risk a less desirable *misinformation age*, where conflicting perspectives on reality can misinform audiences.

- COVID-19 and the vaccine rollout is just the latest, and most visible, example. Social media platforms have been forced to step up their fight against misinformation to address a lack of trust in vaccines. YouTube has removed over 800,000 videos related to dangerous or misleading coronavirus information since February 2020.

- Misinformation is also rife in the workplace, and not just COVID misinformation. Any sort of change or workplace transformation can be a catalyst. And it seems that spreading misinformation has never been easier. In one business study, 58% believed it now easier for people to get away with saying things that are untruthful.

https://www.forbes.com/sites/markmurphy/2017/07/30/fake-news-has-officially-infected-the-workplace-and-its-bad/?sh=339b1e05ca3b
https://www.modernhealthcare.com/information-technology/defying-rules-anti-vaccine-accounts-thrive-social-media
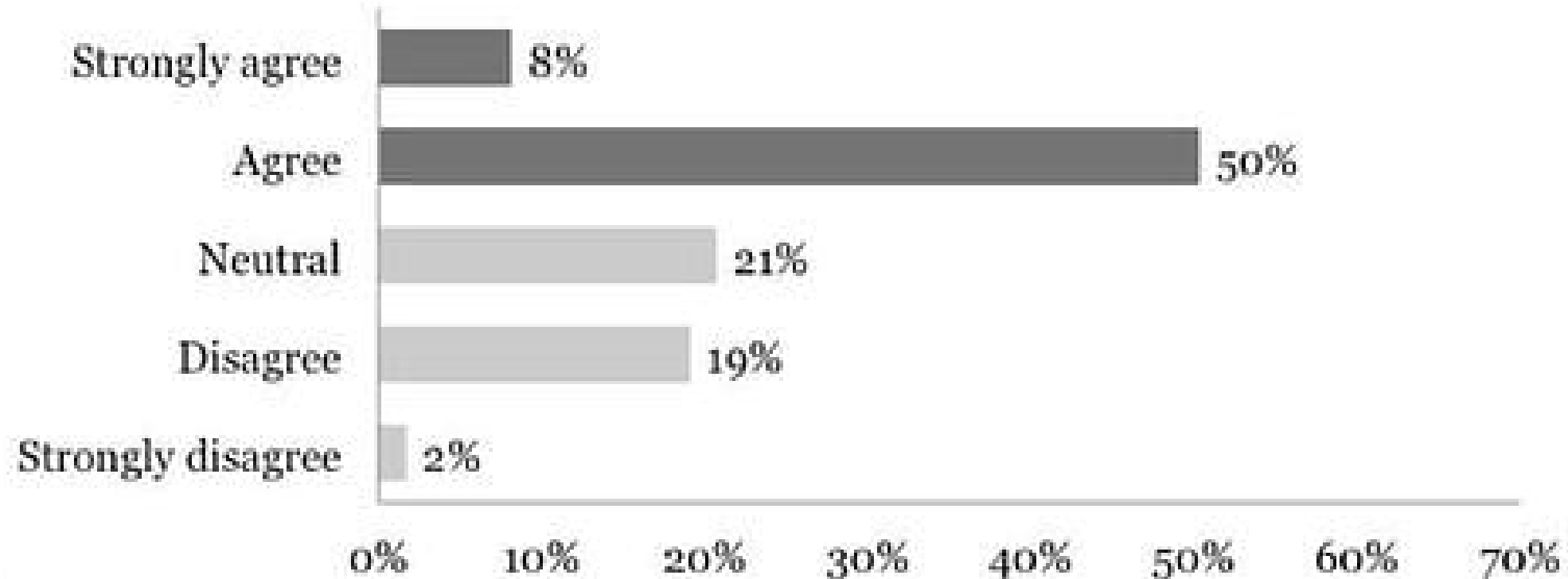
How does it affect business

- Conspiracy theories and all manner of information are corrupting the quality of information in our world, and it has already begun to affect businesses.

- To think that misinformation's tangible business impacts are limited to vaccine distributors or hospital systems is naïve.

- As the line between our personal and professional lives remains blurry, leaders need to arm their people with the tools and understanding they need to identify and combat misinformation or risk the fallout.

https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/news-and-polls/overview

CHART #3: Nowadays it is easier for people to get away with saying things that are not truthful.

Strongly agree — 8%
Agree — 50%
Neutral — 21%
Disagree — 19%
Strongly disagree — 2%

Source: Fake News Hits The Workplace

LEADERSHIP IQ

Some common reasons why misinformation in the workplace spreads include:

1. **To fill the vacuum of information** – if leadership teams haven't been forthcoming with the information employees want, speculation and rumor will fill the vacuum

2. **To show resistance** – employees in disagreement with a situation at work will demonstrate this through their comments

3. **To share anxiety or concerns** – in times of change, employees express their feelings openly to seek the comfort of like-minded opinions

4. **Some of the communication tools used in today's workplaces foster this**:
   - Chat channels make it easy for employees to send messages that reach a large number of colleagues quickly.
   - The nature of these channels also means that governance can be lower, often by design in order to promote open dialogue.
   - But lack of oversight can result in misinformation being overlooked.

Pervasive, Seductive Falsehoods at Work

- Misinformation that we pick up in our "off hours," through social media or unreliable news sources, for instance, can cross the threshold from our personal to our working lives very easily. Rumors and misinformation can also tear down morale or inspire vigilantism.

- Fake news generates 83% more page views than legitimate information, according to a study conducted by Georgia Institute of Technology, the University of Hong Kong and Carnegie Mellon University.

- And according to a report by MIT Sloan, falsehoods are 70% more likely to be retweeted than the truth.

- For employers to get ahead of misinformation, they must treat it as seriously as other complex and corrosive workplace issues, like sexual harassment or racial discrimination.

- They need to build processes to stop the spread of falsehoods internally, and ensure that their people never lose trust in the facts that their business needs to run.

What are the effects of misinformation on business?

- Misinformation is more than just workplace gossip or watercooler talk. It could be not just a spirited disagreement. It could be an active attempt to push false information or opinion as fact.

- According to the [2020 Edelman Trust Barometer](), 76% of people say they worry about false information or fake news being used as a weapon, an increase of 6% from 2018.

- Businesses are also at risk from false information being presented as true, including:

Stirring up negative sentiment – controversial statements can provoke negativity among a workforce, especially if employees are encouraged to 'pick a side'

Undermining trust in leadership – fostering speculation and untruths strengthens the belief that leadership are withholding information or being disingenuous

Reducing business productivity – unsubstantiated, contradictory information causes a drain on productive time and a misalignment of employee efforts

Ways to combat misinformation through internal communications

1. Executive backing - Endorsement from the top is essential in establishing the official company position. Management communications not only provide clarity and certainty to employees, they also emphasize the importance of the subject.

2. Regular leadership messaging - Rumor mills are commonplace and inevitable. While they can provide a valuable release valve for employees, left unchecked they can take hold and harm workplace culture.

3. Reinforcement messaging - Repetition fosters understanding. It's well known that people require multiple exposures to a message for them to take notice of it and understand it. The traditional Marketing "rule of seven" propounds that it takes seven views of an advertisement for a consumer to want to buy the product.

4. Dedicated resources - Even with regular messaging, it's possible for employees to forget what's been communicated to them – Creating and maintaining a credible message provides employees a single source of truth, which reduces their uncertainty.

5. Two-way feedback loop- It's unrealistic – and undesirable – to stifle employees' voices when it comes to announcements or changes in the workplace. Attempting to do so will only provoke resentment and inspire a negative environment that breeds misinformation.

Confronting Vaccine Misinformation in the Workplace

- Misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines has proliferated across the Internet in recent months, with false rumors about dangerous side effects, surveillance and other conspiracies.

- The rise in false information about vaccines has had a marked impact on vaccination rates.

- Vaccine conspiracies can cause disturbances in the workplace, especially if employees are sharing misinformation or condemning employees who have chosen to get/ or not get vaccinated.

- Disputes over vaccines or company policies requiring employees to get vaccinated should be handled like other workplace disagreements, rather than treating them as a health or safety issue.

Handling Vocal Vaccine Objections

- If an employee is claiming that vaccines contain microchips or cause cancer, or is spreading other false information at work, the best recourse for a manager is often the least confrontational one.

- Managers should avoid discussing their own beliefs about vaccines and instead should emphasize that sharing spurious claims with co-workers is disruptive to the professional environment.

- Managers should approach misinformation-spreading employees with patience and respect, rather than condescension.

- It is an issue of persuasion rather than changing their mind, because chances are, you're not going to change someone's mind .

Confronting Vaccine Misinformation in the Workplace -By Kelly Anderson June 23, 2021

Employees stress and worry in response to disease outbreak.

- Rumors and misinformation (social media & workplace grapevine)
- Closure of schools and children's activity spaces
- Travel restrictions
- Possibility of or actual physical isolation and quarantine
- Deterioration of trust in government agencies and social networks
- Avoidance of health facilities
- Risk of relapse in pre-existing health conditions (including mental health)
- Common symptoms of other health problems can lead to fear of infection

Social stigma

- Discrimination towards persons who have been infected and their family members

- Social stigma towards those treating and caring for patients

- Social stigma towards specific ethnic groups, population groups or nationalities

Recommended activities

- **Distribute timely factual information in accessible formats**

- **Support people in quarantine**

- **Address mental health and basic needs of people with pre-existing health conditions who are affected by COVID-19**

- **Address stigma by providing positive messages**

- **Establish opportunities for the bereaved to mourn**

- **Integrate response activities into existing services**

If you do not manage your message than who will they listen to?

Some examples:

- Mask regulations vary from region to region. State regulations that may be different from local regulations regarding COVID precautions.

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- Employees arguing, well they don't make my cousin wear a mask at his place of employment or I don't see people wearing masks at the store, why do I have to wear one here.

- Even the paranormal is not off limits, with the culture in their home country, many are superstitious and the smallest event unexplained event can snowball into a huge problem. This has been a problem for us for both domestic and guest workers.

If you do not manage your message than who will they listen to? More examples:

More examples:

- An employee saying he is too young to be sterilized and therefore will not be vaccinated

- The Pope in the catholic Church supports vaccination and reiterates that the vaccine is safe.   The employee say this is not my pope because he supports homosexuals.

- They will microchip via vaccines and will keep track of him/her

- All safety equipment has to be provided by employer regardless of cost.

- I can take my breaks regardless of time because is my right.

Misinformation and gossip in the workplace

1. Erosion of trust and morale.

2. Lost productivity and wasted time.

3. Increased anxiety among employees as rumors circulate without clear information as to what is and isn't fact.

4. Divisiveness among employees as people take sides.

5. Hurt feelings and reputations.

6. Attrition due to good employees leaving the company because of an unhealthy work environment.

Nancy Kurland and Lisa Hope Pelled in their article "Passing the Word: Toward a Model of Gossip and Power in the Workplace

Ways to combat misinformation through internal communications

- **Executive backing**
- **Regular leadership messaging**
- **Reinforcement messaging**
- **Dedicated resources**
- **Two-way feedback loop**

Misinformation can be a dangerous thing in the workplace. Once entrenched, false beliefs can be very hard to unwind. But with effective use of internal communications, managers and business leaders can deliver clear, authoritative messaging that informs employees and reduces the likelihood they'll buy-into the next piece of idle watercooler talk.

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