

**Investigation into the impact of digital
communication on working relationships
– An intergenerational, international study**

*Research conducted in 2016 by Bonnie Carlo and John Smythe on behalf of
Carlo Communications, Engage for Change and Engage for Success*

Contents:

1. Introduction	Pg 3
1.1 What does the term 'digital communication and collaboration tools' cover?	Pg 3
1.2 Why research this topic?	Pg 4
2. Participants	Pg 5
3. Our quantitative research	Pg 6
4. Our qualitative research	Pg 12
4.1 Focus group themes	Pg 13
5. Our qualitative research: what works well and why?	Pg 14
6. Our qualitative research: the issues	Pg 16
6.1 Shrinkage of 'my' social space	Pg 17
6.2 Generational nuances	Pg 17
7. Demands for change	Pg 18
8. 'So what' for leadership teams?	Pg 20
9. Messages to big technology providers	Pg 22
10. Phase two of this research	Pg 23
11. Contact us	Pg 23

1. Introduction

The topic was jointly researched by Bonnie Carlo, Principal of Carlo Communications in Sydney, Australia; and John Smythe, founder of Engage for Change in London, England.

We found ourselves wondering:

‘Is online communication at work making work/life easier for people, or adding more tasks to the working day? Is it a boon or burden?’

We found that too many digital communications and collaboration tools are dropped into workplaces, without clearly defined commercial or cultural purposes, plans, governance and training. Compounding this issue, many of the Baby Boomers and Generation X leaders in participating organisations were described by their colleagues as poor digital role models.

This report includes a summary of what people at work want to change about their digital communication and collaboration platforms.

Given the findings of this investigation, we hope leadership teams will more carefully consider the type of workplace culture they wish to foster as a result of investing in communications and collaboration platforms at work. We believe our findings will also serve as a driver for employers to explore relevant technology for their businesses, and to find the right tools to improve their company’s performance and sustainability.

1.1 What does the term ‘digital communication and collaboration tools’ cover?

For the purposes of this report, digital communication and collaborations tools are defined as:

Any software designed to facilitate communication or collaboration at work.

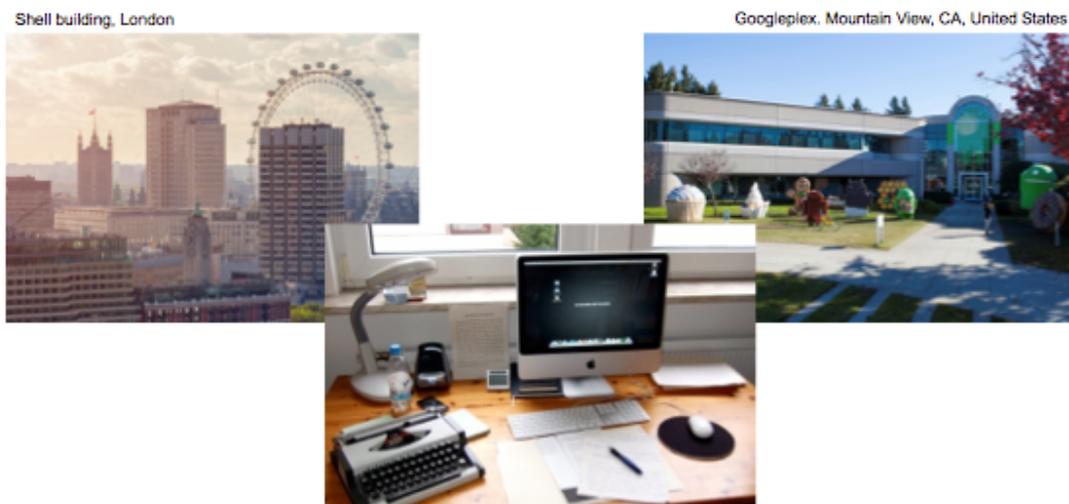
Some digital communications and collaboration tools are also referred to as Enterprise Social Networks (ESNs) or corporate social media.

1.2 Why research this topic?

The inspiration for this research – generational shifts



Our research was inspired by the unprecedented generational shifts in the current workplace. Today's workforce is possibly more diverse than at any other time in history, spanning the generation that remembers a time before television existed, to the generation that grew up in the Google and social media age. We were keen to see if different generations have different views on the impact of digital communications and collaboration tools on their workplace, from the Baby Boomers and Generation X to the Millennials (Gen Y) and Generation Z.



The ever-changing nature of 'places of work' also prompted this project; it's estimated that in 2025, 75 per cent of the workforce will be technology-native millennials (2015 Deloitte Millennial Survey). And in the US by 2020, it's predicted that 46% of workers will be self employed – a pattern that is being repeated in the UK and globally, enabled by mobile devices and powered by lifestyle preferences. The physical architecture of work is changing from city offices and business parks, to home desks and remote working.

The third theme behind this research is the blurred lines between the working and non-working day. The era of Unions advocating the '888 rule' (eight hours for work, eight for recreation and eight for sleep) is long gone. Many in the workforce are online 24/7, accessible by computer, tablet and smart phone and readily logging on at home and working out of hours. The 'rise of the machines' now means that 48 hours away from workplace technology is no longer called a weekend – it's thought of as a 'digital detox', and the different generations have conflicting views and habits in this area.

2. Participants

We initially struggled to recruit participants for this research, but once companies realised we were aiming to analyse the influence of digital communication and collaboration tools on workplace *culture* and their competitive *market position* – AND provide participants with bespoke, actionable insights, interest was piqued. Following the early support of Alex Aiken at the UK Cabinet Office, participants were secured in Europe, Australasia, India, and North America.

Some of the participants so far

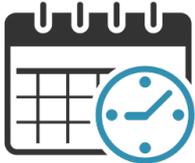


The study is on going – if you would like your organisation to participate, please contact us. Our contact details are included at the end of this document.

3. Our quantitative research

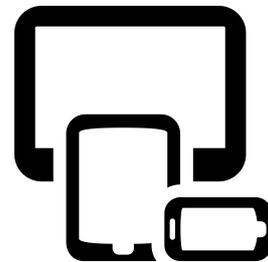
We invited a sample of employees from all of the participating organisations to complete a detailed questionnaire on Survey Monkey. We were delighted to obtain nearly 1,000 individual responses. The headline findings from this part of our study are summarised here.

What we are exploring: quantitative study



How many hours per day are our participants online for work?'

We asked which devices people were using for work



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11

Hours spent online:

- Most participants are online 3-4 hours per day
- 1 in 4 Millennials are online 7+ hours per day
- 52% of Gen X are online for 4 hours or less per day.

These findings start to indicate that it's increasingly easy for employees to spend time in digital bubbles, only interacting with similar people (often referred to as the echo chamber).

Technology device usage:

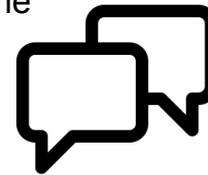
- Gen X possess more than 40% of all company-owned laptops, tablets and smartphones and dominates in terms of private smartphone and tablet ownership
- Boomers dominate in terms of private ownership of older, less smart device types – Blackberries, standard mobile phones and desktop computers.

What we are exploring: quantitative study

We asked people how often they work from home

We then asked people how productive they are when they work from home

And we also asked people how much they communicate with colleagues when they work from home



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One in four Baby Boomers and Gen X are working from home at least one day per week – more than twice the amount of Millennials.

All generations claimed they are **significantly more** productive when they work from home. However, while working from home may increase productivity, it also causes around one in three to communicate **less** with their colleagues.

This raises a red flag for us: are companies potentially sacrificing engagement in return for increased productivity?

What we are exploring: quantitative study

Given the increasing tendency for younger generations to work from home, we asked people about the impact of digital communications on work/life balance



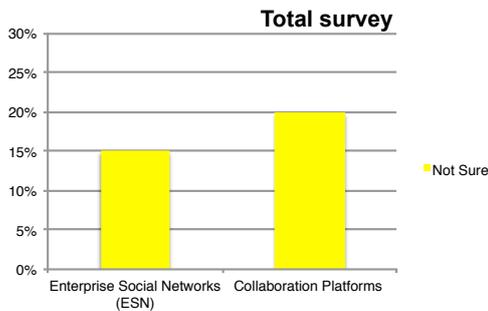
Gen X are most positive about the impact of digital communication and collaboration tools on their work/life balance, likely because they say they like to work from home and feel more productive when they do.

However, significant proportions of all generations experience both positive and negative impacts on their work/life balance, caused by digital communication and collaboration tools. Participants like the work style flexibility that mobile devices and digital communication and collaboration tools enables and feel their productivity is enhanced, BUT...

...Participants also struggle with the 'always plugged in' side effects that come with this.

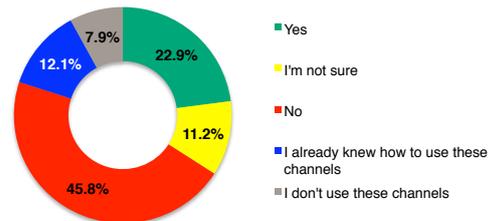
What we are exploring: quantitative study

We asked 'What methods of digital communication are used at your organisation?'



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We asked whether training had been provided for ESNs and Collaboration Platforms



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14

There was some uncertainty around the availability of networking and collaboration platforms in participating organisations, especially among Baby Boomers.

We also found that only *one third* of people polled were set up properly with relevant training to use these technologies. **More than 50% of participants had NOT been offered training on how to use Enterprise Social Networks or Collaboration Platforms!**

What we are exploring: quantitative study

We also asked people to rank digital channels in order of IMPACT and USEFULNESS (for work purposes)



Email remains the dominant channel in terms of *impact* – though many participants report negative side effects such as email overload.

A significant proportion of Baby Boomers thought Enterprise Social Networks and Collaborations Platforms had no impact at work whilst, perhaps surprisingly, many Gen X and Millennials feel their impact is *negative*.

Email also remains the dominant channel in terms of *usefulness* for work purposes.

A significant proportion of all generations aren't using ESNs or Collaboration Platforms *at all*, because they don't find them to be useful.

This suggests that whilst there is considerable investment in digital communication and collaboration tools at work, they are not as impactful or useful as the sponsors of these tools need them to be.

What we are exploring: quantitative study

What is the preferred channel for providing feedback and giving recognition?



What is the preferred channel for communicating with different stakeholder groups?



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16

Face to face remains the preferred channel for providing feedback and recognition, but email is not far behind and is especially popular as the next best alternative in younger generations – despite widespread irritation with email.

People also use email as a backstop record/paper trail, as newer platforms may not have the facility or participation may not be as popular or widely used.

In terms of stakeholder communication, Baby Boomers prefer to communicate face to face with younger generations but again, email is not far behind as an alternative.

4. Our qualitative research

Wherever possible, we led focus groups with representatives from each company reflecting participants from the generations; Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and a small number of Gen Z. The groups included a spectrum of roles across the business hierarchy, from those with no managerial responsibilities, to managers and directors leading teams of 50+. The focus groups were set in the context of the organisation’s culture using a simple guiding device:

What we are exploring: cultural context

Autocratic	Distributed leadership / power
Hierarchical	Flatter
Secretive	Transparent / trusting
Monolithic / central planning	Distributed
Adult to child	Adult to adult
Fear culture	Safe to challenge
Status conscious	Achievement oriented
Deference	Candour
Permission culture	Initiative culture
Bullying	Negotiative
Grandeur	Self deprecating
Clubby	Open
Elitist / private	Accessible
Formal	Informal
Serious	Sensitively humorous
Employee	Partner

Participants discussed their own experiences of the company culture, and although influential personalities and heritage have a big sway in micro cultures, there are usually common cultural themes that emerge across all. Many groups discussed the table above and whether their culture is stuck fast, moving from left to right, or regressing right to left. They explored:

- Feelings about communication in their company
- Social media use outside of work, and the benefits it brings
- The types of digital communication and collaboration tools that people interact with in the workplace
- What benefits these bring to individuals, teams and the organisation – do they make working life easier?
- Any complaints or bugbears about workplace tech and digital communication and collaboration tools
- Their ‘magic wand’ changes that they believe would bring personal and organisational benefits

4.1 Focus group themes

Key themes emerged from the focus groups:

- ***Challenges in managing multi-generational teams***

All generations, from Baby Boomers to Gen Z, are now in the workplace together – but increasingly they don't convene at a common *place* of work. Managing people takes on a different dimension as people need and expect managers to be digitally fluent. Managers may also be leading employees who work remotely, and therefore need to utilise digital communication and collaboration tools for briefing but also build relationships without the usual face-to-face interaction. Usually everyone in the team needs digital influencing skills to engage with others in collaborative ventures.

- ***A new spin on employee engagement***

It could be time to re-evaluate the founding presumptions of employee engagement. In the emerging workspace, there may only be 'us' trading in a 'market of ideas', rather than 'them' (managers) trying to engage their teams. The message becomes more inclusive, with the final glory shared with everyone. Online communication allows people to reach down and up, across, inside and outside the hierarchy; power and influence is defusing and constantly re-arranging new spheres of influence. Therefore, it has never been so critical for everyone to have a handle on the demographics of their organisation and an understanding of the generational mix represented.

- ***The end of the traditional workplace***

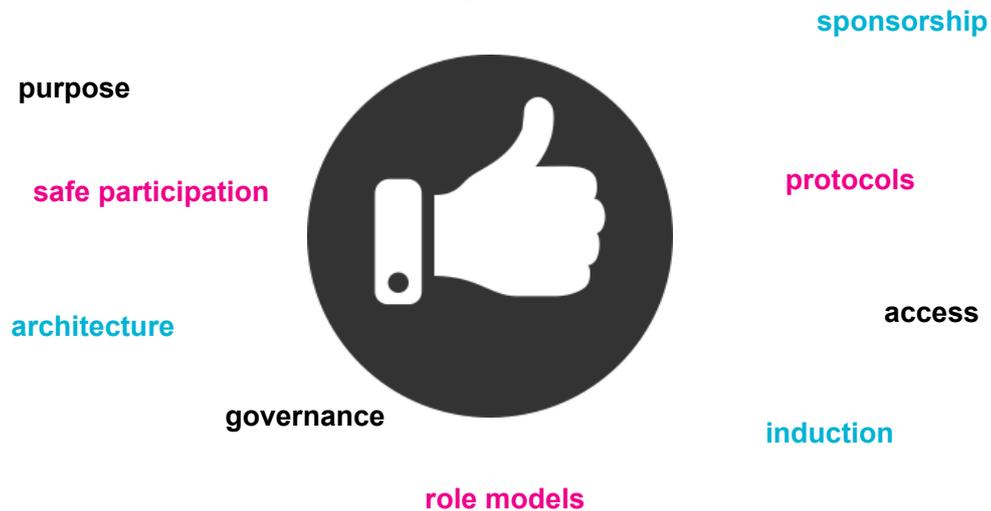
Remote and flexible working in many organisations may eventually render a physical office unnecessary, with many employers realising the negatives as well as the positives of this development.

- ***Strategy and change moves online***

With the high volumes of online communication in action, change and strategy origination and execution in companies is now beginning to be run online. This is significant as change and strategy used to be the preserve of elites. Those elites must learn to govern change and strategy digitally to capture the wisdom of the many. Move over Boomers and Gen X!

5. Our qualitative research: what works well and why?

Universal truths from the qualitative research: *What works well and why*



Digital channels are credited with delivering improved commercial and cultural performance, and great benefits for people, when the following provisions are in place:

- A clearly articulated purpose for the digital communication and collaboration tools being introduced
- Visible and respected sponsorship for its integration and long-term use
- Sensible protocols
- Safety of participation
- Easy access from all devices (particularly smart phones)
- A clear architecture of channels – i.e.: when to use which channels
- Inclusive, confidence-inspiring induction and refreshment training
- Robust governance
- Visible leadership role models

Where these conditions are met, people are generally enthusiastic about digital communication and collaboration tools at work. Benefits cited include:

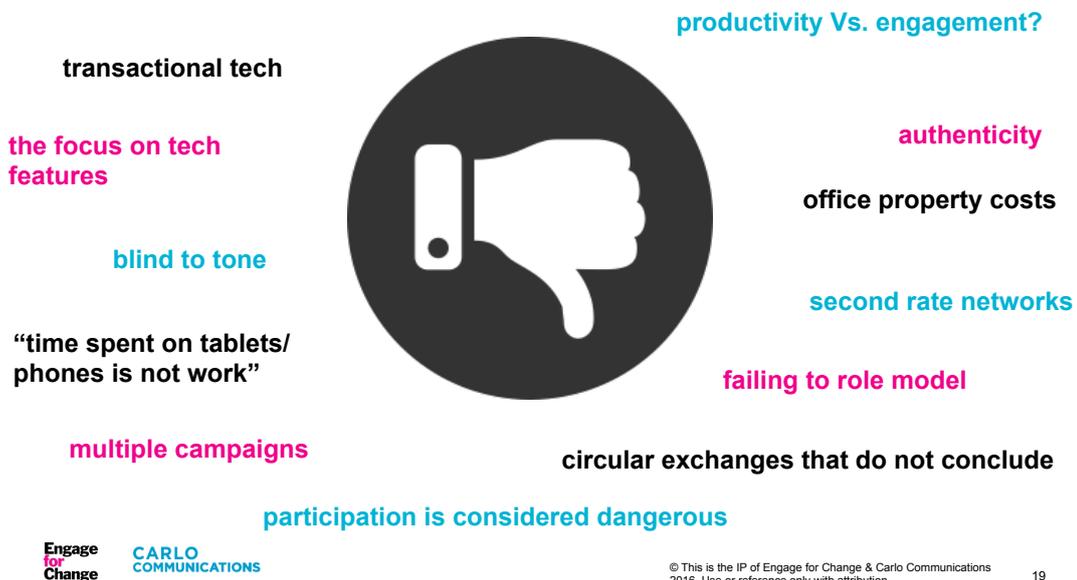
- Connectivity; from one to one, to one to many, and many to many
- Geographic reach
- Speed versus post and wait
- Generations of friends/contacts remain current, unlike in the offline world of old
- Hierarchy is triaged
- Staying plugged in and feeling connected wherever people are, and whenever they choose
- The ability to multipurpose in long meetings

Some participants also credited digital communication and collaboration tools with allowing them to:

- Improvise using mobile devices or digital tools that may not be corporately sponsored (or authorized) – use of unauthorized tech is widespread and hard if not impossible to control
- Be more human - more visuals/video helps them know people and feel connected
- Learn from colleagues
- Work flexibly and remotely and when they please – good management trusts them to ‘get on with it’
- Mix work with pleasure – work ideas come to some when they are at leisure, and they don’t resent that as they also take what is owed to them.

6. Our qualitative research: the issues

Universal truths from the qualitative research: *The issues*



At the other end of the spectrum, people have negative experiences when technology and tools are not introduced thoughtfully.

A typical example: the investment decision for procuring online communications tools may be framed as a transactional tech purchase, and one which may be delegated and side-stepped by the Boomers and Gen X in the leadership team.

Another scenario: the tech purchase decision may be made by a Business Unit head or a regional figure where the focus is on features and technical details rather than delivering the organisation's strategy and commercial and cultural performance.

In those circumstances, and other examples, people report:

- That online communication is blind to tone and thus tricky when the topic is sensitive
- There is often no discernible purpose, order, sponsorship, protocols or air traffic management in online communications and collaboration platforms - resulting in multiple campaigns and overlapping content and overload
- People are aware of leaders pretending to be digitally fluent by delegating to others the management of posts and conversations. Digital reputations are hard to build and can be and lost easily. Authenticity can only be delivered with transparency and integrity
- Remote working can be exploited by organisations - using it to cut down on property costs. In creative enterprises, productivity can be cut through isolation from the community
- In some cultures, older generations assume that time spent on tablets/phones is *not work* - thus a generational divide is created
- People state that a critical mass of participation is key to ensuring the best and appropriate team members are accessible. People are anxious to avoid being plugged in to second-rate networks – one participant stated “the wisdom and idea market doesn't always work as the

wrong people are present". This suggests that a massive effort is required to get people participating

- On a similar note, time is said to be wasted on circular exchanges that do not conclude – the conclusion is that some issues need to be addressed decisively face to face.

6.1 Shrinkage of 'my' social space



Many participants spoke of the 'shrinkage' of their own social space. Away from work they report withdrawing and watching, rather than risking posting content that may come back to haunt them. They also speak of the confluence of personal social space and work social. Some were also angered by employers expected them to respond to digital communication, outside work hours.

6.2 Generational nuances

Generational nuances

- There are always exceptions but:
 - most Boomers and Gen X have to learn tech
 - Millennials and Gen Z are natives and are digitally fluent
- Millennials prefer instant digital chatter to slow email, phones and face to face meetings
 - Millennials are more transactional and less likely to affiliate with corporate purpose, values etc. Loyalty to organisations is transient. Old style engagement may fall on deaf ears.



7. Demands for change



What would participants like to change about digital communication and collaboration tools to improve their working relationships and increase their productivity?

Clarity of purpose, intent, strategy for new digital tools

- Decision makers need to understand their organisation's demographics – the best tech strategies must be tailored to suit the workforce profile.
- Digital tools must support the achievement of the corporate vision and business strategy – as well as any other specific business objectives
- There must be a credible sponsorship and robust protocols for implementation and ongoing success.

Usability, usefulness, functionality

- Usability – participants said tools must be easy to use, starting with an easy login process
- Many would like a 'one-stop-shop'; one accessible network rather than a jumble of networks draining individuals' time and energy
- Video access was on many people's wish list.

Induction

- Most participants saw huge value in a full technical induction and training for users
- Mix the generations for inductions and keep offering refresher training, especially when there's upgrades or new releases of the technology.

Governance and best practice

- Employ an 'air traffic control system' to stagger organizational projects and avoid everything landing at once – overload is a major cause of complaint
- Communicate channel protocols – i.e. when to use which channel and what for
- Define clear rules of engagement – clarity of legitimate online behaviour needed
- Promote freedom of speech but also online safety
- Coach employees on the digital equivalent of learning to write a good letter/run a meeting
- Consider peer policing/a trusted network
- Remove old technology – a widely reported gripe of participants was companies adding to the layers of tech rather than removing and replacing.

Role of leaders

- Online communication and collaboration needs leader role models
- Leaders need to develop their own authentic voice; no corporate spin
- Dialogue is more impactful than monologue – leaders should be encouraged to invite and respond to feedback on their posts

We strongly recommend that organisations develop a commercial and cultural plan for introducing new digital tools before spending any money on procurement – and the five themes outlined above can form the foundations of a successful plan.

8. 'So what' for leadership teams?

'So what' for leadership teams?

The issues are here to stay for a while



The last Baby Boomers won't exit the workforce for 12 years and Gen X will leave in 28 years; these groups will continue to adapt, but will always remember a time before digital communications.

Leadership teams need to understand their organisations' demographic makeup and reflect that in day to day working relationships and communication. They should recognise that 'command and control' styles of management and communication are being disrupted by technology at work.

Involve all generations in designing communications platforms at work

When considering introducing new digital tools across an entire business, it's important that key stakeholders from every generation have a say in determining the best tools for the identified needs. Digital communication and collaboration platforms should be considered as a core business resource rather than a semi-detached, transactional IT resource.

As we've said above, we believe businesses should develop a commercial and cultural plan across functions and business units

Throughout this research, the people who are less enamoured with online communications at work are those who don't believe there is a commercial or cultural outcomes plan for the technology investment. They state that the tech simply 'turns up' often with no context or purpose, and with little governance. Or at the other end of the spectrum, some participants reported far too much governance/micro-managing. And in many cases, people report multiple platforms (especially in federated or conglomerated organisations), which adds to their tech burden. No single function or business unit, including IT or communications, can develop a successful commercial and cultural plan – it needs to be a collaborative effort, led by a broad representation of key stakeholders.

In high performing businesses, few other investments would be made without such a plan.

When new tools are parachuted into organisations without adequate planning, the chaos and underperformance that ensues can often be hard to remedy.

Some further food for thought on this point:

\$3.4 trillion was spent on tech in 2016*, yet since the Internet revolution, work place productivity has actually declined. No doubt we have far more digital workplace tools now than ever before – but are they really delivering on the promises they're marketed with?

*Global IT spending forecast made by Gartner in 2016.

9. Messages to the big technology providers



Most respondents feel that the tech revolution at work is still in its infancy. Observers note that a new period of enlightenment will emerge, with workplace technology creating a powerful market of ideas through cultural evolution in organisations.

We feel that big tech companies can do more to help organisations with the critical up front commercial and cultural planning needed to ensure new digital tools create a boon, not a burden.

Organisations also need to discipline themselves to lead commercial and cultural planning for online communications platforms – and neutral third parties such as Carlo Communications and Engage for Change can help to facilitate this process.

10. Phase two of this research

Whilst we have gathered many interesting and useful insights from this research, in many ways, our work to date has thrown up some more questions that need to be addressed.

We're now considering a second phase of our research, digging deeper with participants to explore themes such as:

- Optimal levels of governance for digital communications tools
- Getting the right sponsors involved, to ensure enduring success
- Is engagement the price organisations will pay for remote working?
- Best practice case studies in commercial and cultural plans

If you would like to suggest any other areas of enquiry, which would provide useful insights for your organisation, please let us know and we consider them.

11. Contact us

For more information:
Contact us via our digital channels!



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