Communications Case Study

Using notice boards effectively

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Introduction

Thousands of notice boards exist on NHS sites providing a valuable opportunity for low-expense, high-visibility communications.

The consensus among communications officers is that notice boards have been overlooked as a communications tool. This is partly due to the number and spread of notice boards; the distances involved can make maintenance time-consuming and difficult.

There has also been a drive towards email and web communications and certainly the increased number of communication mechanisms available means that some will be prioritised over others, and it is easy for less ‘sexy’ communications tools to drop out of favour.

Observing notice boards in situ reveals many examples of boards that contain too much information, which can be confusing, and lack coherence in the type of information they contain.

Often there is no clear ‘owner’ of the board and anyone is free to post material at their own discretion. This user-generated entropy can result in information overload that limits the effectiveness of notice boards for communicating.

This paper identifies six steps towards using notice boards as a powerful, functional tool to communicate key messages, engage staff and the public, and ensure that important information flows freely and made known to staff.

These steps stem from a discussion among NHS Wales Communications Officers at the 1000 Lives Plus Communications Study Day in May 2011, about how to use notice boards to communicate effectively. They have been tested ‘on the ground’ in sites across Wales.

Six Steps to Effective Use

Step 1 - AUDIT

Identifying the locations of notice boards can be the first, difficult step. There are many different boards, often hidden away.

Here are some criteria to identify the boards to concentrate on:

- Position - e.g. in a populated office area where staff work, or a waiting room.
- Footfall - i.e. how many people pass the notice board and will see it. Bear in mind that many facilities have developed organically. Most staff may use different entrances to the original entrance hallways, but notice boards might not have migrated along with the footfall.
- Size - larger boards can become ‘wallpaper’ and not really arrest the eye. Anything posted above average eye height in a corridor will probably not be seen.
- Visibility - is a board obscured by equipment?
- Current usage - do people look at it / act on information they see already? Use local staff contacts to identify the best boards for staff traffic. (This may be problematic in some places e.g. in one Welsh health board there are no major footfall sites.)

The challenge is large. There are thousands of notice boards and it is not feasible to deal with every single one. Auditing current boards will help identify the key boards and focus on them.

At this point, it’s worth identifying boards that are ‘standing empty’ - if they are not being used then it should be easy to claim them and corporatize them with key messages.

**Step 2 - RESITE**

Position is very important - a great board can be in totally the wrong place. It might be necessary to reposition boards and the criteria identified in the previous step all apply. Conversations with staff are valuable at this point to identify areas where people are, and where they linger. Notice boards in staff break rooms are more likely to have an impact than in busy corridors where people rush past.

Unusual sites can catch the eye. Posters in toilet facilities (in easily-cleaned plastic poster holders) are used in many commercial settings for advertising and raising awareness.

**Step 3 - RECRUIT**

Promote local ownership / management of general boards, e.g. by asking people working in the area to be ‘board guardians’. It’s important for people to know which boards they are responsible for, and what exactly they are required to do. Think of what a ‘job description’ would look like - maybe a commitment to put items up when required, spend a few minutes at the end of each month reviewing notices and removing out-of-date ones, and so on.

Informal training in ‘good practice’ will help. For example, taking photos of good boards to show what ‘best practice’ looks like.

In some places, e.g. on wards, there may be certain boards designated for specific purposes like communicating progress on patient safety initiatives. These will probably already have ‘owners’ who may be willing to take responsibility for other boards as well.
Step 4 - ADD CONTENT

Before adding content, it may be useful to purge boards of out-of-date or tatty material.

The first step to adding content is to decide what key messages should be standard across all ‘official’ notice boards. This may include a values statement, the latest edition of a newsletter, patient safety and other improvement messages, contact details for patient feedback, and so on.

It’s possible to sub-divide boards, for example with coloured tape, into ‘corporate’ messages and ‘local’ messages (see right). Alternatively, use separate boards that are clearly labelled, e.g. ‘Health Board Staff News’ or ‘1000 Lives Plus’. Corralling information in this way will help those using the board to find the information they need.

Consider the design of corporate messages – well designed posters with prominent headlines will always attract the eye and be read more than a black and white printed policy with small dense text.

If staff need to be redirected to further information provide pre-printed tear-off sheets with web addresses or contact details on. This can be a useful audit tool later - interactivity with the board can be measured by how many tear-off pieces have been taken.

Content-wise, it is good to separate out notices ‘for staff’ and ‘for the public’ - they are different audiences. Are all internal messages suitable? Some are - it’s good for patients to think ‘they know what they’re doing’. This builds confidence in staff.

Prioritise the messages and information that most need to be on the boards. Email messages out to ‘board guardians’ for them to put up. It is good for there to be a regular schedule for updating the boards - perhaps monthly or quarterly. Again, review which messages to cascade via boards. Long memos may not be suitable for printing and displaying.

Not all messages are best promoted via boards. Some information which is aimed at staff would be better covered in team meetings so conversations can develop or feedback can be received.

Controlling content could be challenging. Putting the name of the person responsible for the board onto it may help in controlling the content that gets placed on there. ‘Contact James Jones if you want to put something on this board’ will help prevent board overload and material being put in the wrong place.

Encourage the use of ‘expiry dates’ on notices so that they can be binned when no longer relevant. This will help ‘board guardians’ remove irrelevant information. Taking a photo every three months and comparing them will help identify stale messages - be ruthless and take them down. One out of date poster undermines the relevancy of all the information.
Recycle key messages. Repetition can be a good thing when trying to embed an important message, but ‘taking a break’ from promoting a particular message will help make it more visible when returns to the spotlight.

**Step 5 - AUDIT AGAIN**

Before and after photos are a good way of showing the positive effect of change. Regular photos can also help to keep tabs on progress (or regress).

There are several ways to audit boards:

- Tear-off information (as seen on many adverts for student house and flat shares or similar services) - simply see how many of these have been taken. They will indicate whether people are using the notice board for information
- Run a competition and promote it solely through the notice boards - see how many people enter.
- Other ‘interactive’ points include sponsor forms, sign-up sheets, and petitions. It is possible to gain feedback on any issue by asking people to write on a blank poster (and attaching a pen), although this would need to be monitored carefully.
- Spot checks - nothing beats turning up and having a look. Take a photo for the record.
- Ask staff working in the area what they think about the board - a short survey could help you identify if they have noticed a change, whether they think it’s better, etc. This could also provide useful information about what staff would like to see on boards and help inform your content strategy.

**Step 6 - ADAPT & ROLL OUT**

As with any improvement initiative, it’s best to start small and test your ideas. Maybe select a handful of boards at each site. Once you have established what works (and what doesn’t) you can adapt your strategy and roll out in a larger programme to all notice boards.

This is also a time to think more widely about what constitutes a ‘notice board’. Plasma screens are in use in many hospitals and primary care settings, and function as electronic notice boards. Consider what messages could be put on them.

PC screensavers are another potential good vehicle for a standard message for staff - particularly for a reminder of good practice or a safety message.
Learning from real-life examples

Please note many of the following photos were taken using a low-resolution phone camera. All of the boards were in public access areas of NHS property, and viewable to the general public.

Position / footfall - A&E corridor

This board is positioned in a corridor that links the triage centre with the ambulance entrance/exit. People coming in enter in a rush (e.g. pushing a trolley with a road traffic accident casualty on it). Staff also leave through the exit at the end of the shift - usually quickly (including on a bike!)

It could use better materials considering it’s in a high traffic / transit area. The marker pen is already smudged, and ‘repairs’ to the text are visible.

The verdict: Great content; but let down by position.
Mixed messages and data protection issues - ward entrance

This is a board with good content, including health improvement messages. But there are also lots of cards and messages from patients. This makes the board look a bit confusing, and messy.

Some of the messages include sensitive information (thank you for your care for my late mum) and identifiable information (full names and even personal addresses of patients).

There could be a data protection concern here. Should cards like this should be on display or are they private messages? Would it be better to put them on a board in a staff only area?

However, seeing other people’s positive messages and thanks for the care received does boost confidence in the ward among patients, so maybe putting them up (with permission) serves a purpose.

The verdict: A good mix of material on a well-positioned board, but more care might be needed regarding data.
Competing messages - outpatients clinic

This large board features a plethora of safety messages, and other health information. From a patient’s point of view, there may be too many.

There is also information aimed at patients, including contact details for support groups. But there is no clear labelling distinguishing it from the other messages.

The verdict: Separating out staff and patient information would be useful so that people know where to look. So many competing safety messages may be confusing. Proximity to other similar material may well undermine the messages.
Board overload - out-patient clinic, Physiotherapy Unit

This board contains a real mix of information - including official policy information from the health board, public awareness campaigns (Stop Smoking Wales), self-help groups, events, and an advert for half price vegetables stuck on at a jaunty angle. Some of this material is for events that had passed at the point in time this photo was taken.

This overload makes it messy and hard to find relevant information. Also, it’s worth noticing the ‘poster creep’ - the posters have drifted beyond the edges of the board and one is blue-tacked to the wall below.

**The verdict:** This board needs someone to monitor it and cull out of date material. It also needs to be bigger, given the volume of information being shared on it.
Clearly labelled board - staff corridor near entrance

This board has been divided into ‘corporate’ and ‘local’ sections, each side clearly labelled (see close up). There is also a contact name and phone number on the top heading, although it’s hard to read in this picture!

While the multiple-page documents on the left-hand side look a bit daunting, they are neatly pinned up with no overlaps. This photo was taken shortly after the board was reclaimed, hence the open space awaiting the addition of ‘local’ messages.

The verdict: This board is ‘ready and waiting’ for use by staff - and when items are pinned up they should not obscure the key corporate information that staff need to access.
Board with a purpose - Safety Cross in Transforming Care ward

This provides clear communication of information in a public setting. There is an explanation on the board and people are invited to ‘Know how we are doing’. This board has a specific purpose and message - it is to highlight progress and raise awareness, and it conveys information effectively.

One or two things have been pinned up later that transverse the edge of the board, but they are ‘updates’ to the key information, so remain relevant. However, this board is ‘full’ and there really isn’t room for any more info to be posted up.

The verdict: This is a well-maintained and structured board, updated regularly and presumably has one or more people asserting ownership over it.
Conclusion

In the armoury of communication methods available, notice boards are a useful tool that can deliver key messages to staff and members of the public at low cost. There is some cost in staff time, but once the initial steps to gain control of the notice boards have been made, maintenance of boards should be easier, especially if local ‘guardians’ have been mobilised to keep them up-to-date and orderly.

In addition, there are other benefits to a focus on how the boards are used. Improving their appearance will improve the general appearances of work areas, and foster a sense of organisation-level co-ordination and orderliness that will encourage staff and reassure patients.

Ultimately maximising the potential of notice boards may be time-consuming to start with, but in the long-term the positive effects will make the time spent on them well worth the investment.

Contact details

This guide was produced by Andrew Cooper and Jon Matthias, 1000 Lives Plus, in collaboration with Communications Officers in NHS Wales Health Boards and Trusts.

Comments and additional material are welcome, especially photos of more notice boards illustrating good practice or issues. Please send comments to 1000LivesPlus@wales.nhs.uk

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