



Transcript for S9 E6 Opportunities for internal communicators in the future of work with Janet Hitchen

Cat Barnard (00:42)

Hello and welcome to a fresh episode of the Future of Internal Communication podcast. I'm Cat Barnard, as ever joined by Jen Sproul and Dominic Walters. Today, we've got a great guest for you, somebody that I literally have dragged from a workshop I attended in the summer of, late summer of 2023. I'd love to introduce you all to Janet Hitchen, who, when we were on the workshop, we were funneled off into little breakout groups to discuss something or another and Janet revealed that she had worked in internal communication quite extensively at which point I literally started following her around the workshop and begged her to come on to the podcast and chat with us all. So Janet, welcome, thank you and I will leave it to you actually if you wouldn't mind explaining to our listeners your background in internal comms that would be amazing I'm sure you'll do it far more justice than I would.

Janet Hitchen (01:45)

Thanks Cat and hello Jen and hello Dom and thank you so much for having me and yeah you might have followed me around but there was also lots of tea involved so you know if you always have me at tea Cat, always have me at tea. So I've been in internal communications for about 20 years now which sort of is sort of feels like a very long time but also not a long time at all because not much seems to have changed and I started that at a corporate investment bank where I was asked once, two banks had kind of merged together. And after lots of work that had been happening, what we would now call about employee experience, out of that popped, we need to have somebody doing internal communications. And I was asked by the CEO of the UK branch, could you please figure out what that looks like? It's like, sure, that sounds fun. And so that's what I did for a good number of years.

I did it until the credit crunched, so I did it all the way through credit crunching and being told no budgets. And then I thought I actually would quite like to work somewhere a little bit more creative, a little bit more where I can kind of stretch my creative muscle. And I put it out to the universe that I would quite like to go and work somewhere like that. I was inspired by, and I've told him this story, so I'm allowed to say it out loud. I was inspired by who was then the creative director of Innocent Smoothies, a guy called Dan Jermain who did a talk in the city and blew me away. And I thought, my God, I wanna go and work with somebody like you, you're incredible. I love it. He was full of energy, full of life. His slides were like one image, not thousands and thousands of bullet points that I was constantly battling against. And I thought I want to work with somebody like you. Long story short, I got asked to go for an interview with Apple and I kind of six months later I got the job and it was to work so setting up at Crédit Agricole, setting up with the financial institution and with Apple retail it was because operations and communications had just separated and they wanted somebody to help figure that out and they wanted somebody to establish business partnering and become a more strategic organisation from a communications perspective, because they've been doing a lot of ops, it



was very operational. And actually, what does the strategic internal communications look like at Apple Retail? And so I did that. I did that for nine years. If I was to, I've kind of saved on my CV, if I was to write everything that I did at Apple Retail, I'd write a book. So I kind of choose sort of, you know, the top five things that I really enjoyed. And as you can imagine, when you're working somewhere like that, we were inventing a lot of stuff. We were creating playbooks. Everything was constantly new and we were constantly trying to figure out what to do and how to do it. And that was anything from launching iPhones to talking about how we do accessories to talking about how to help our teams go on really great journeys and understand how to talk about products with our customers, all that kind of good stuff. So that's where I learned all about how employee experience really impacts on the customer experience. That's where I learned how to figure out playbooks. That's where I learned how to figure out how do you put processes in place because we had no processes and we had to figure all of that out. And it was also where I cut my teeth, really cut my teeth understanding business partnering, relationship management, the importance of business acumen and all that kind of good stuff. And I had a blast. I had a really good time, but we kind of came to the end of that period and I was offered an opportunity to go be in the States and I kind of didn't really want to. And also I was a woman of a certain age and I was thinking what is happening to me? I don't really understand and so I took some time off to figure all of that out get myself feeling much better and six months down the line, I thought I should probably do something. I should probably earn some money again. That would be a good idea but understanding that I was what was my North Star because I'd been in one organisation for nine years, another organisation for nine years, so two big chunks of time. And I knew that the thing that I cared about was setting up functions or taking a function that has been set up, but they actually want to take it to the next level. So how do you go from tactical to strategic? Or it was about implementing business partnering. I've heard a lovely phrase recently in we've undercooked our internal communications. So how do you, and I'm like, that's kind of, that kind of works. It allows you to visualise exactly what that means. So taking these undercooked internal communications functions and how do you bring that to being something that is fit for the future and fit for purpose. And so I set up my own company and then COVID hit. So that was a great, that was great timing.

And I've been working with lots of different companies on exactly that. So either setting up new functions or figuring out how to embed brand new CEOs into organisations or figuring out, okay, we're a startup, we've just two X-Star workforce and we know that we don't have what we need, so can you help us figure out what that looks like from an architecture perspective, so digital employee experience, but also from it, we don't really have a strategy, we're very tactical, kind of flying a little bit by the seat of our pants, it sort of works, but it's not going to work for much longer, so can you help us with that? And doing a lot of sort of strategy work and that kind of thing. And then most recently I studied at Cambridge doing some sustainability work. So I did a business sustainability management course, which sounds very sort of pompous and very, very exciting. It was eight weeks, it was incredibly hard work because Cambridge don't allow you to say the word Cambridge unless they really work you hard. But I learned a huge amount and I learned that because I've been on a journey, I hate the journey word, but I've been kind of working towards a, for the last sort of probably four or five years, understanding what is going on, what is happening in the world. And as I started to look around, I started to see marketing teams, corporate communications teams all being given this thing called ESG to manage and people are having this thing added onto their job title. What does that mean? What does that look like? And it doesn't mean to say that I'm an absolute



expert and I have a PhD, but what it does mean is I understand enough, I know enough to be able to ask good questions and I can spot when somebody's talking nonsense at me.

Janet Hitchen (07:53)

So that's sort of something that's really interesting and that's kind of where I've been pushing and I'm working a lot most recently. So my current role is I'm working as mother nature for an organisation. And my role there is to ask questions and to ask questions about what people are doing and how they're working.

Cat Barnard (08:12)

So what you have just explained has literally brought me right back into the room where we left off the previous conversation because you had started to talk when we met up in September about tactics versus strategy and it spawned an entire conversation about opportunity for internal communication in the future of work. So I'm really thrilled to hear you reiterate what you shared with me in September. And there's such a lot of opportunity, isn't there? There's such a lot to go at, not least, not least just in that one singular field of sustainability. But hopefully we can dive into that as we go along in this conversation.

Jen (08:53)

Just to pick up on that Cat, is that you explained so eloquently your journey and there's so many things that you've talked about in there that feel like this move that we want to be as a profession where we're seen as more strategic, less tactical, you know, that we still bring all that creative and how we establish new functions. And obviously I sit here of leading the IoIC for I think about, I think it's seven years, it could be longer, you know, it all blends together after a while, doesn't it? And that conversation still feels like it's on going, we haven't got to the end of it yet. We haven't got to that point of placement yet. We're not moving in that direction. I absolutely thoroughly accept that's anecdotal to some degree, but it doesn't feel like just the sentiment I pick up. So with all of that rich tapestry, and I think the sustainability gender is another really big opportunity. What thing that most frustrates you today about the perception of internal communication? I think we could all have a go with this. This is like room 101 for internal comms maybe.

Janet Hitchen (09:55)

I mean, I've got a list, okay? I wrote quite a lot. And another thing, and another thing. I think the biggest one is that there is this perception amongst people who don't really understand what internal communications can be, is that we're just kind of sat around, waiting for people to come to us to tell us what to do. And there are a number of people who do that. I've worked with them, I've seen them, I've witnessed that. And I'm like, okay, that's kind of, that's you don't want to move forward. But what I think where the challenge really is, is that they're waiting to be reactive. They're



waiting to react. And so when I've seen internal communication work best, it's always when it's trying to be as proactive as possible. So you're trying to go back to the organisation with, here's what you're telling us, here's what we think, here's what we heard. Here's all the 75,000 things that you want to do in the next quarter, which obviously we can't do. So can we have a conversation about it? And not simply saying no, but using the information that you have and that you've learned to go back to the organisation to go, do you really want to do 75,000 things? Because that's just, nobody's got the bandwidth to do that. Nobody's gonna be able to take that on board. So how about we kind of break some of that stuff down? When I was working at Apple, that's when we really started to see something unlock because we were able to sort of say we can keep pushing all this stuff out but people have a certain amount of bandwidth and they will take the two things out of the ten that you sent them that day and they will take those two things and there are eight that have just gone begging and the people who are responsible for those eight will come back to us and say oh well we need to we need to message that again and I distinctly remember a time somebody saying to me we need to message that again I said okay so tell me how do you want to do this differently and they said I'll just put the same message out. I was like, what? But it didn't work that time. Why would it work again? And so I think it's being able and having that information as an internal communicator and go, okay, proactively we can show you what this looks like. We can pull a plan together and we can show you that actually we've got too much stuff. We've got a pipe that's this big and you've got this much stuff that needs to try and go down it. And that's not possible. So I think it's that don't sit, be proactive.

Janet Hitchen (12:08)

Go to the business, share what you understand, share your plans. We need to shift away from that 80% reactive, 20% proactive to 80% proactive. That's where it needs to be. And it's hard. It's hard work. And it sometimes means you have to have tricky conversations and you have to know what you're doing and you have to, you know, and sometimes people say no and you, or you negotiate and you don't win. I hate the win or lose, but you don't kind of get what you want or you have to compromise. But you need to work for the employee, for that employee experience to make sure that, well, it makes sense. So if you're just sat there waiting for things to come in, and then you're literally just a postbox, I find that really difficult because there is a huge perception amongst people who've never worked with an internal communications function that actually really is really cooking on gas.

Janet Hitchen (12:59)

That's what they do. Oh don't worry we just we tell you what to do don't we tell you we want a video we tell you we need a newsletter we tell you we want no and I think more people need to be able to have those conversations so that's a huge frustration of mine.



Jen (13:13)

Can I just pick up on that as well because I totally get that and I sometimes wonder do you think and I wonder if you've done this when you've got more on your list but when you walk in and you set up that new function that we don't spend enough time diagnosing what's good and bad as an overall picture as opposed to being kind of micro-focused like as in becoming that detective, that internal detective, that sort of gathers that body of information going, well, this is the sentiment, this is what's going on. This is about where we can get to. This is about the bandwidth. So that actually we're doing that work upfront to push back or find, because I wonder sometimes if we look too much for the good news rather than the bad news in an organisation so we can fix it.

Janet Hitchen (13:55)

I think it's about listening to the organisation. It's about figuring out where are the organisation's priorities. It's about understanding those objectives and about thinking, okay, as an internal communicator, how can I support that? How can I figure out what we can do? And that might be connecting the dots on certain projects that are happening when you think, oh, actually, that's coming under one bucket of sustainability. So actually, all of that can have a same overarching narrative. It can all link into the same thing.

It's about understanding what people are actually trying to achieve. So that when I had a CEO that came to me once and he sort of said, right, so what I need is a newsletter and what, and he expected me to just sort of sit there and take notes and be like, okay, well I'll pop off and I'll just go and make you a newsletter. But what I did was I asked him what he was trying to achieve. What were his outcomes? What were the things that he wanted people to, to kind of feel about what he was doing to understand? And the list he came up with was nothing that a newsletter wouldn't have even touched it. It wouldn't even have got close.

And so I said to him, look, bear with me. And this was one of the first conversations I'd had with him. So we didn't have a trust level built yet. Okay, he'd hired me, he'd been part of the process. So he kind of, he'd met me and he'd sort of read my CV. So he was like, okay, so she's not just, you know, she's not got no experience. She must know what she's talking about. But we'd never, we'd spoken probably once or twice. And I said, based on what you're telling me, allow me 24, 48 hours to just knock up something quick and dirty. It's not going to look beautiful. It's not going to be a perfect deck. But allow me to be able to put something together that says what your needs are and actually my understanding of the problem you're trying to solve and then a solution that I think will respond to those challenges that you've just you've just raised. Allow me that opportunity and then we can have a conversation about that. And I was lucky because he said yes. Now that could be either because he just thought okay, you know, I've got nothing to lose.

Or because, I don't know, maybe I was persuasive. I honestly don't know why he said yes, but he did. And I went back to him and he looked at it and he said, okay, yeah, I've told you this, these are my words. And you're playing back why the newsletter that I've told you I want isn't going to provide the solution to the questions and the challenges that I'm telling you about. And actually I do understand



that yes, the thing that you're recommending and the different things that you're recommending are actually more likely to do that.

Janet Hitchen (16:11)

Even though they're going to push me more out of my comfort zone. And that's okay. And so we worked together on that. And we got great results. Was it scary for him? Yes. Was it scary for me? Yes. Did we make it work? Absolutely. And I think sometimes it's about having those conversations that are a little bit uncomfortable, but are the right thing because it was the right thing for him, but also it was the right thing for employees. If somebody tells you they want to, improve their visibility, they want to improve, they want people to get to know them because they're a brand new CEO, but they want you to push out an email that is very obviously going to have been written by me, that doesn't give their true authentic tone of voice, that doesn't give any sort of credibility about who they are. It's obviously been sort of written by somebody else. That's not going to achieve that get to know me, credibility, any of that sort of stuff. So actually we needed to look for ways in which people could hear him, hear what he was like, see how he spoke, understand his words. And I never scripted him. We would talk bullet points, but I would never give him a script. And sometimes he was, you know, I would say, two minutes, what's a two minute video? And it would be like four minutes. Okay. And I didn't give huge amounts of feedback in the beginning because I just wanted him to do it.

And I just wanted him to feel confident and comfortable doing it. And then we started to get into a little bit more feedback as we, as we would go on. And from the first video to sort of, you know, 12 months down the line, you could see a real difference, but he was now comfortable doing it. He felt okay. And people were far more able to actually understand who he was, what he was about, what he was trying to say. So when it came to delivering difficult messages or having a challenging message that needed to be delivered, they actually knew who he was and they'd heard. So we weren't trying to do that, oh, okay, we've got some complicated piece that we need to try and figure out, oh, and this is the first time that you've actually heard his voice. So I think there's little things like that where just by having a difficult conversation, just by challenging back and going, I actually want to do the best thing for you, not just what I'm being told to do. And I've never been very good at doing what I'm told.

Cat Barnard (18:19)

One of the things that strikes me when I'm listening to you tell that story, Janet, is that there's a massive educational piece, isn't there, here, around the notion, and I think it is a very real notion, to your earlier point, that many people at work today think that communication is some kind of frothy little pillow-primping exercise where you'll just be waiting for them to come in and say, right, I need these five things or what have you. But to your point about 10 items, 10 pieces of information, but only two of them are understood, it strikes me that in our operating landscapes right now, and as we move forward, we are at the mercy of competing amounts of information that need to be conveyed from point A in the business to point B and therefore competing agendas alongside a very narrow



bandwidth of the information recipient to receive the information in a meaningful way that gets the job done.

Why did that individual need to hear that information? Have they understood it? Has that enhanced their capability to deliver? So there's all these competing agendas and still only the same amount of time in the day and bandwidth to receive information. It strikes me that a key opportunity here is for internal communication to educate around you know, some of these basic tenets of communication, how information is received, because we tend to think about information broadcast, but not information reception. Is that the right word? And how we receive information. So I'm just thinking about all of these things and just thinking, well, our landscapes aren't going to get any more simplistic anytime soon. So lots and lots of opportunities. Where would you start?

Janet Hitchen (20:35)

So usually an organisation will have a strategy deck or they will have something that explains what their year is going to look like. You need access to that. Now every time I've been given access to one of those decks, I've been told, oh, and it's top secret and you're not allowed to tell anyone. And I'm like, okay, so if I'm doing the job properly, you need to give me that because I need that information. That is an input for me to give outputs to whatever it is that you need to do.

And I think you can break it down into what do I need as an input for me to be able to figure out, do analysis, work on, understand, connect the dots, all that kind of good stuff, so that I can create outputs that will eventually create the outcomes that you require and that you desire and that are the right thing for your organisation. And I think a lot of the time what happens is people come and they kind of say, oh, okay, we need these outputs, but they're not giving you the inputs that you need to do the work that you need to do.

So if you can break it down that simply, sometimes it's about going back to the organisation and saying, in order for me to do a really great job and to come back to you with what I think the next year should look like, these are the inputs that I need. And some of them, yes, some people guard them with their lives because knowledge is power and all that kind of nonsense, but you've got to try and get around that and explain, actually, I'm not gonna do anything with it. I'm not gonna take your job. That's not, I've got no skin in the game. That's not why I'm here.

I need that in order to be able to fulfill my purpose and to be able to provide the organisation with a plan, a strategy, a narrative, all of those things that they can understand what the next year is going to look like. Otherwise, we're just going to be giving a tsunami of information and we're not going to be able to tie any of it together. We're not going to be able to try and figure out, you know, if we're going to go with the tsunami thing, don't go to the tsunami, go in waves.

So what's the first wave? What's the second wave? What's the third wave? How do you break it down? And I can't do any of that work and that understanding. And that's the analysis piece. A lot of the time that's missing, because we're jumping straight to react because a lot of the time, because they think we're sat around being told what to do and we cut and cut suddenly go, oh, now suddenly I must react. What happens is there's no time for the analysis, but there needs to be time for the analysis.



Janet Hitchen (22:52)

Because otherwise, if you haven't done that, how do you know that the output that you're creating is the right thing? Or are you just creating stuff because you've been asked to create stuff? And actually, if you start to do this kind of, where are the inputs? How do we get to the outputs? How do we get to the outcomes? And getting those inputs, suddenly the work becomes more interesting because you understand why you're doing what you're doing. And you can start to break down, OK. If I understand these things, and if I can figure that out, and I can start to put together a plan, and if I can start to understand how much bandwidth do people have per day, per week, whatever, I can start to look at what does my plan look like every week, every month, every quarter, every year? Where are there gaps? Are there ways that we can just give people the opportunity to breathe and take a breath?

Or are there times when actually there's going to be quite a lot of things that we need to do? So we need to make space for that. Or we need to tell people that this is going to be a very busy period and there's going to be a lot going on. We're going to need you to do something like that. Or work with your organisation to do that. When I was working in retail, we knew, because it was something that had been agreed, when Apple retail was set up, that each person would be given 15 minutes a day for internal communications. So we knew that they had 15 minutes a day. Now that could be worked with huddles, that could be worked with things that we were producing centrally, but we knew they had 15 minutes. So if we were able to look and see, okay, well, we've got 15 things here and each one of these things is two minutes each, that's 30 minutes, they've got 15 minutes, that doesn't work, the maths is wrong. So we need to figure this out because there will automatically be 50% of that stuff that's not gonna happen or not gonna be read and you might get annoyed because it's something that needs to be done. We can't make those priorities as an internal communications function. We can't decide that. But what we can do is we can play that back to you and say, this is what it's like, this is the experience we're giving our employees. This is why you're, some of your stuff is being ignored and not done. That's not helpful. We want to help. How can we do this better and have a conversation at sort of project management level, or feed that back up to wherever their people are able to have that conversation. And I was able to do that a couple of times and sort of feed it back and say, this is what we're showing you versus what the capacity is, but this is what we're throwing at people. And if we know that intrinsically the employee experience affects the customer experience, particularly if you're in a service organisation or retail organisation, what we are doing here with internal comms for the employee experience is going to have an adverse effect on the customer experience and that's not what you want. So we need to figure that out.

Jen (25:46)

Something strikes me as well as you're talking Janet, it's so helpful is that almost like, you know, we want this mandate, but we need like our own internal comms, playbook input, output, outcome, and this is what we can do, and this is the things that we put in one of the anecdotal polls that we did recently about, you know, we want to scale up our functions, we want bigger things, we've got more on our plate, there's more opportunities to do that.



But what's the biggest barrier to that is, well, people still don't get what we're there to do. Leaders don't tune into us. And is it that we need to dial up, I guess, our playbook in terms of quite articulating, if you come to me, this is what I will give you back and this is why it is valuable. Do you think we're good at doing that as a profession or do you think that's something we need to work on?

Janet Hitchen (26:31)

I think we could work on it more. I think some people are good at it, I think some people are less good at it. I think within the organisation, that's probably where people want to, within the function, that's where people want to get to. But what happens is outside of the function, as you say, the education isn't there. And I had a conversation earlier this year with, I was asked to talk to some MBA students in the US. And I got on the call and they said, and they started talking at me, so this is what you do and this is how you work. And I said, I'm just going to stop you there. No, it's not. They went, what? And I said, no, that's not how that's not how it works. And so I started to talk to them about the things that I'd done, the work that I'd achieved, the things that I'd explored, the analysis that I'd done, the employee listening that I'd done in order to be able to then start to do something strategic and to put a strategy in place, first of all, before we even got to the plan. And they said, but why aren't you, why aren't you using employee engagement scores? And I said, because there's nothing in the engagement score that talks about communication, internal communication. I said, I've done the analysis anytime communication has mentioned it is linked to the manager and it is linked to team communication. And what I can help, that's not really my sphere of influence. That's not the space I'm playing in. I'm playing playing more centrally handing that across to a manager and then they might do some work with that. But so that it's different. So the information that I'm looking for is about the channels, about how it's working. Do you have the right information? How do you like to be communicated with? None of that is in the engagement survey. I said, so you can come back to me and say, yes, it's all marvelous. We've got, you know, 85%, 90%, whatever. I'm not finding that. And here's the things that I've found. And here's the things that I've discovered.

And that's very different to, oh, it's fine, because we've got 90% in engagement on happiness. So therefore that means internal comms is great. No, it doesn't. You've got to get your hands dirty, kind of roll your sleeves up. And these two MBA students said, but that's what we're being taught on our MBA. And so I started to have a huge conversation with Mike Klein about that and sort of say, why is it on an MBA?

Janet Hitchen (28:39)

We are teaching future leaders, CEOs, C-suite, that internal communications is about figure out what's going on in the engagement score and then tick a box. So I think there's a huge opportunity to educate people who are in position, but I think there's a huge opportunity to work with all organisations and educational institutions that are running MBAs, anything that is sort of further



education about... What is internal comms and how could it really be the differentiator and the business driver to support your business?

Dom (29:10)

Janet, can I ask you a question about that? Because you started off by saying you've been doing this 20 odd years and that not much has changed. And I have a similar sort of vintage. Like, we listen to what you say and I share all your frustrations and all the things that you've explained. So what do you think it is about the future of work that will enable internal communicators to do more of the good stuff you talked about? So the strategic analysis, looking at outcomes, asking the right questions, rather than things they may feel that they've been forced to do over the years, which don't have the most value. What's going to change do you think that we should be looking to expand upon?

Janet Hitchen (29:48)

That's a really great question. I'll come back a little bit to something that Jen said about, do we need to have playbooks? Working at Apple retail was basically doing an MBA in internal communications for nine years. I feel like I deserve an MBA. One of the things that we learned was a lot of people would come to us and then expect us to create wonderful stuff within 24 hours, which is just completely not possible.

So one of the things that we worked hard on was on one hand, yes, we're going to keep doing some of the work that you need us to do. On the other hand, we need to figure out what our processes are. And I think one of the, one of the challenges that internal communicators have is because suddenly they get very quickly on the hamster wheel because people are just shoving stuff at them. We need this and that needs to go out and we need to tell people stuff. And, oh my goodness, there's no opportunity to just kind of slow down and think, okay, how do we work?

What are our processes? Do we need all of these channels that we've, we, and that's one of the first things I do when I look at an organisation that's got an internal communications function in and they say, Hey, can you help us kind of evolve and move on? I go, well, why do we have all of this? What's the purpose of each of these things? And there was a moment, I think, when people said, Oh, well, we put it out on the five different channels and we do exactly the same thing because we, you know, some people prefer that channel to that channel.

But also what you're doing is you're putting so much noise out that people are self-selecting channels because they're going, well, there's nothing new on that channel. So I don't look at that channel anymore because I found it on the first channel I go to. So what, what? So it's all a bit of a hodgepodge. It's all a bit of a mess. And I think one of the most valuable things that we did was to figure out what are our processes, how does our process work so that then we can go back when somebody would come in and they would say, this needs to go out and it needs to go out in tomorrow.



We say, okay, well, we can help you with that, but the answer that we can give you or the thing that we can help you with is going to be this big. This is the amount of help we can give you because you've given us this much time. If you give us more time, we can consider more ways to actually be able to look at what you're doing. So if you give us a short amount of time, it's going to be very operational, very tactical, very yes no, it's not going to be sexy, it's not going to be, it's not going to be beautiful. It's going to be very does it do the job? Yes, done. Will it actually work? We don't know. You've not given us time to actually consider that. But we can do that if something is absolutely hair on fire. Oh my goodness, it needs to go out and it needs to happen now. We can do it. Will it work? We're not sure. So understanding and being able to have that conversation first, then the second thing is to be able to try and figure out like, get a win. You need a win and you need a sexy win.

So you need a business partner who gets it. And in my first year at Apple retail, I was really lucky. Somebody came to me and she said, I want to work on this thing. I want us to work together. And she wanted to collaborate. That's a big difference. So instead of it being, hey, do this thing for me or do as you're told, it was, hey, I'd like to collaborate with you on a project. This is the problem I'm grappling with. Can we think about how we could do that? And we spent six months working on this thing.

We put together briefs. We figured I put a brief together to go to and the video team in the US to say, we've never done this before, but we think this is really cool. Is this something that you would be interested in? The video team went, yeah, we would, but we kind of need sign off. So let's figure out how we can do an even better brief so we can go to the next level of person who needs to sign this off and say yes. And we went through all of it. We jumped through all of these hoops, but we jumped through them together and we collaborated. So it was the business partner. It was me.

It was the guy who was heading up video who's like, this is a cool thing to do. Oh, and guess what? You've not come to me with five minutes to go going, quick, shoot a video. You're saying, actually, you know, we're quite happy with this being in the next six months. We've not got an exact time scale. So somebody's like, I can sit and think and slow down and try and figure out how to do this right. Long story short, we shot the thing. It was great. And suddenly I had business partners knocking on my door going, I want that.

I was like, okay, let me talk you through that. And I was able to use that as a case study. And I was able to talk to them about that whole thing took six months. And they were like, what? I'm like, yeah, looks really easy, doesn't it? Cause we shot, I think it was something like six videos, head, you know, sort of talking head stuff. And it was, it looked really simple. But the narrative that we've come up with, the wording, how we set it up, the whole thing, what we were trying to achieve. We knew exactly what the outcomes were.

Janet Hitchen (34:28)

We'd identify people to be in the videos that were absolutely the right people. We'd make sure that it was a diverse group from all over the world. And we really done our homework. And I said, all of the thought and the care and the attention and the love that we've put into that, that took six months. I said, so absolutely I want to do this kind of stuff for you, but you need to work with me. So



it's help me make you great. Help me give you really cool stuff. Let's figure that out together and if we work together and we collaborate and it's no longer a I tell you what to do orders and it's suddenly become that I'm going to keep repeating the collaboration. If we do that, then we can start having some real fun and then we can start doing some really cool stuff. Now you might not get loads of it. You might get one of those a year but actually let's make sure we get the right thing and we get the right outcome for you when we figure all of that out. And suddenly I started to have people say, so we've got this project starting and we'd love you to be in at the beginning. And it's only gonna be in nine months time. Well, we're not really sure and we're at the beginning of that, but we want you to know about it. Suddenly we were in. Now that also means that suddenly you get invited to every single meeting that everybody ever wants, oh, we must have you in the meeting.

Well, no, you mustn't. So you then have to sort of also again, back to process where do you need to come in and work and you say, actually, you know, what I can skip out of that. So understand again, what your process is, where do you need to be coming in? Where do you not need to become? And then you're able to say, here's how our process works. And here's how our process can help you achieve what you need to achieve for the organisation. And it becomes a partnership, and not a please go and do that thing for me.

Cat Barnard (36:16)

There's a piece as you're talking here about self belief, believing in yourself, having the confidence to see yourself in a collaborative partnership capacity which I don't know about you Jen but sometimes I feel that the conversations that we have with internal communicators suggests to me that they don't see the value that they bring to the equation. So confidence building strikes me as being a key requirement to up the profession's game in the future of work. How else do you feel that internal communicators should be evolving their skillsets, Janet?

Janet Hitchen (37:06)

So I think business acumen. Business acumen sounds really complicated and technical. It doesn't mean you need to understand absolutely everything. It means that you need to be able to ask good questions and not be afraid to ask a question. And a lot of people sort of say, oh, you're so confident, Janet. No, I'm not. I'm terrified inside. Inside, I'm thinking, oh, my God, everyone thinks I'm stupid. But if I've got that question, somebody else has got that question. I can't be the only person in the world that's got that question.

And there will be somebody within the organisation that will also have that question. So you've got to ask that. You've got to put, and it's part of your job. If you sort of figure out that the work that you're doing is taking what the organisation needs and all the things that the organisation is doing, helping employees get on board with that, aligning, focusing, all of those good words, focus is a great word. Because you say align and some people kind of look at you and go, ah.



Just allow people to focus on the right things at the right time, which is the right thing for the organisation. If you're doing that, if you believe that that's what you're doing and that's your ultimate goal is to make sure that the employee is protected in a way so that there's not loads of noise coming at them from every different angle and that they can focus on the stuff that you need them to focus on, which is actually going to allow the business to achieve their objectives in that lovely strategy deck that everyone keeps, you know, hiding and won't allow you access to. If that is what you believe, then asking those questions suddenly becomes quite easy.

Cat Barnard (38:44)

There's actually a book written called Questions Are the Answer. I think it's by an MIT academic called Hal Gregerson. It is such a good book because essentially his premise is, look, none of us have any of the answers anymore and pretending that we do is the worst thing that any of us can do. So, you know slip into asking questions, just do it.

Janet Hitchen (39:10)

And that's the thing, I think because I had that training of, you know, working at Credit Agricole where nobody was doing internal communications, I was the first person and the CEO just went, do you fancy it? Pop along and try and figure that out. So nobody was doing this. So I just asked loads of questions because I was trying to figure out how to stop emails being sent out that were sort of, you know, five scrolls long.

I'm not going to read that. Nobody else is going to read that. Although the person who was sending them was absolutely adamant that everybody was reading it word for word. I had to bust his bubble. It was a hard job, but you know, someone had to do it. When we were at Apple, same thing. Nobody gave me a playbook and said, here's how we launch iPhones. We had to figure it out and every year it would be slightly different. So we'd just continually be amending and looking at, okay, well, I know I'm not going to be perfect.

But how can I be the best that I can be putting the employee first, always making sure that the employee is, I'm doing this for the employee so that the employee has the information that they need or the feeling that we want them to have or whatever it might be, that outcome that is actually going to then impact the organisation in the way that the C-suite or leadership want the organisation to be, to have that impact. That's what you're doing. That's the job. So you've just got to put yourself as that you're not asking personal, it's not personally coming from you. You're asking it so that you can do the job properly. And sometimes that takes courage. There's also a part of it, which is, well, what's the worst that can happen if I ask the question, everyone thinks I'm stupid. Okay, fine. Big deal. But I asked the question. And I was also very lucky in Apple retail. I would sit project teams where I was given the psychological safety to be able to ask questions and I could see other people asking questions. And if you sort of say, I don't really understand this, somebody would take you to one side and say, actually, I'll talk you through this, or we'll take you, we'll take it offline and we'll walk you through this. But you have to be able to do that. You have to be able to do that. And you're going to have to tell me the name of that book again, Cat, because I want to read that book now.



Jen (41:23)

But I also think as well it's an important thing as IC leaders that we role model that behaviour to create the safety. So if you're building those functions and people into your IC team that you are the person in front of them that asks other people or engenders that questioning way of doing things so it sort of spreads down. And you know business acumen is one of the things we say at IoIC is you know one of the things you need to do but I don't know if some of the language that we use to say these things makes it feel bigger than it is. But it is about, as you say, just kind of go, well, if I, at the end of the day, our job is to make something understandable. And if we read something and we don't understand it, then we found the problem that we can solve, haven't we?

Cat Barnard (42:03)

I worked in mobile telecommunications and started as a 24 year old in the early nineties. And as you will imagine, because I'm sure Apple was very similar, it was a very skewed towards men. It was, I think the industry was probably about 90% male oriented.

And I found actually the easiest thing to do was to say, explain the technology to me as though I'm an idiot. And actually 99 times out of a hundred, people love explaining, they love showing what they know. And so I accumulated a huge amount of knowledge simply by saying continuously, help me understand this better. Help me understand it better. Help me understand the end to end architecture of a mobile phone network so that I can serve you better. And what I found was there is no such thing as a silly question because if a question is genuinely asked in pursuit of knowledge enhancement that improves the whole, everybody wins. And I think one of the challenges that we have is that we live in this really weird social media vortex where we assume that everybody's playing out a very perfect finished product life and we forget that we're all kind of treading water and making it up as we go along and actually I think if we can role model the asking of pertinent questions as internal communicators then tacitly we give permission to all our colleagues to ask similarly relevant questions, right?

Janet Hitchen (43:52)

Absolutely. I mean there's a couple of things that sort of spring to mind. The first one is I was working in an organisation and suddenly we were talking about sustainability and everyone was talking about, I can't remember if we were talking about net zero or carbon neutral, but we were talking about one or the other. And then suddenly overnight everyone said, right, we're changing and we're talking about the other one.

And I said, why? Which I think is a perfectly reasonable question. And the people who were telling me this, no, we've just decided this is what we're doing. We don't talk about that anymore, we talk about this. And I said, but again, why? Because if I suddenly start changing things, an employee is going to ask questions. And I don't have an understanding for that. So I sort of said, no.



And I want to find out why I need to understand what the differences between these two these two terms, carbon neutral and net zero. What does it mean? Because we're throwing these terms around and going, oh, we're just changing it. We're just making what does it mean? Like, what is the impact on the employee? Is there an impact on the employee? Why should I care that you're changing these words? So I kind of dug and I dug and I dug and I dug and I ended up talking to the chief sustainability officer by chance because I wanted him to come and do an event that I was working on. And I asked him and he gave me a brilliant explanation and I said, and because I asked very genuinely, I said, can you please explain what the difference is? I'm kind of struggling and I don't really understand what the difference is. The difference is, could you please explain this to me? And he said, yeah, absolutely. Because he got the opportunity to educate me. So he was feeling like, oh, great. Yeah, you're interested. That's fantastic.

Janet Hitchen (45:30)

And I was able to go away and I was able then to put a plan together around, okay, how are we going to talk about this shift? What does that shift actually mean? What is the impact on the organisation? What is the impact on the employee? And we were able to do something, which wasn't just, we've now moved from red to green or from rhubarb to custard. It was almost as farcical as that. And I think it's important if you're an internal communicator, someone says, do something, don't just say yes. Why are you doing it? Does it make sense? What do your Spidey senses say? Does your Spidey senses kind of go, oh, that feels a bit weird. If they do lean into that a little bit, figure that out. What is it that feels weird? What doesn't feel quite right? Is it other people that can help you with that? Is there somebody you can ask a question of? Is there an expert in the field that you can ask a question of? Can your manager help you with it? Figure out who you can ask the question of. But there's too much that's kind of just passing through and not being dealt with, whatever way that may be analysed, thought about, cogitated on, all those kinds of lovely words.

Dom (46:38)

We have to come into land Janet. We've mentioned a lot of things which are incredibly useful. I've been just taking lots of notes. You talked about the importance of business acumen. You've talked about the vital nature of asking questions, about demonstrating confidence, even though you may not have that confidence within you, about being focused, about being the voice of the employee and thinking about and asking the questions that they could ask. Many of the people listening to this are going to be practitioners, some of them starting out early in their careers. So if you could bring us into land on just saying what's one action, and it's hard to distill a lot of great stuff, but what's one action you would recommend that internal communication professionals can take and start to do based on what you've learned.



Janet Hitchen (47:20)

I would ask one question. Are you doing the work you think you should be doing? Take a moment, end of December, January, depending on sometimes early in the year, is always a good time to go with everything that you know, with all of the CPD that you do, with the events that you attend and the information that you hear and the keynotes that you see delivered and the theory that you read about.

How does that equate to what you're doing? Actually doing. So are you doing the work that you think you should be doing? And if the answer is yes, great, crack on. Have a lovely time, off you pop, that's great. If the answer is no, then figure out where are you now? Analyse what is, you know, what's right, what works, and use whatever format you want to, if you want to do a SWOT analysis, knock yourself out. If you just want to do advantages and disadvantages or yes and no, or I like, I wish, what if, however you want to do that, do it. There's no set template. Just figure out where you are now. Where do you want to be based on what you've read, heard, seen, explored, et cetera, and then map out how to get there.

And don't try and do absolutely everything all of the time. Once you've mapped it out, go, okay, what's the most important thing? What's the thing that if I don't do that, everything else is gonna fall down? Figure out what your foundational piece is, do that first. Do it well. And even if that's the only thing that you do next year, but that you know that is in place, that's brilliant because you're already one step ahead of where you were before. If you can get to the next step, then go to the next step but constantly be looking to build slowly and incrementally so that you are always improving and you are always getting towards that goal of doing the work that you think you should be doing. If you're doing the work you think you should be doing it will bring greater purpose, it will bring greater joy to your team.

Janet Hitchen (49:30)

And if you can do that as a team and you can collaborate, doesn't need to be the head of who sits there, or the director of who sits there having all these big thoughts, do it as a team and figure out what is the most fundamental thing that is going to make a difference that will allow you to get on that journey. Journey word again, sorry. Two times in one podcast. Awful. But figure out what that is. And I think that for me is the one key, the one big thing.

Cat Barnard (49:56)

So listening to you there, you have brought home to me a recurrent theme in these podcast conversations, which is that internal communication is artwork, it's craftwork, and it's hyper contextual. There is an element of, like you were talking about process before, and clearly yes, we can create playbooks once we have created something to kind of map and track so that next time round, it's not as difficult as it was to create it from scratch first time round. But I think, again, for the last couple of years, we've been talking tentatively about internal comms as artwork and bringing the art back into business, where the pervasive narrative is very much skewed towards the science of



business in a way that I don't think feeds our souls as human beings. So there's a huge amount to go out there and I really, I'm even more grateful now that I nabbed you. At the workshop it's like, whoa, go me for nabbing Janet. Thank you so much for coming and chatting with us today. I can feel that we'll be bringing you back at some point for further conversation because a year from now goodness only knows what we'll be staring down the barrel of but it's been an absolute joy to hear you talk about your lived experience of setting up functions and operationalising stuff and having the confidence to say no and having the confidence to ask great questions I mean that is all rich food for thought. So on behalf of all of us, thanks so much, Janet, for coming today.

Janet Hitchen (51:52)

No, this has been super fun and I'm very glad that we connected when we did at the Do Lectures Cat. It was great fun. So thank you very much. Thanks, Jen. Thanks, Dom.

Cat Barnard (52:04)

Brilliant, thank you.