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COVID-19 Communication Scorecard: Where Can Businesses Do Better?

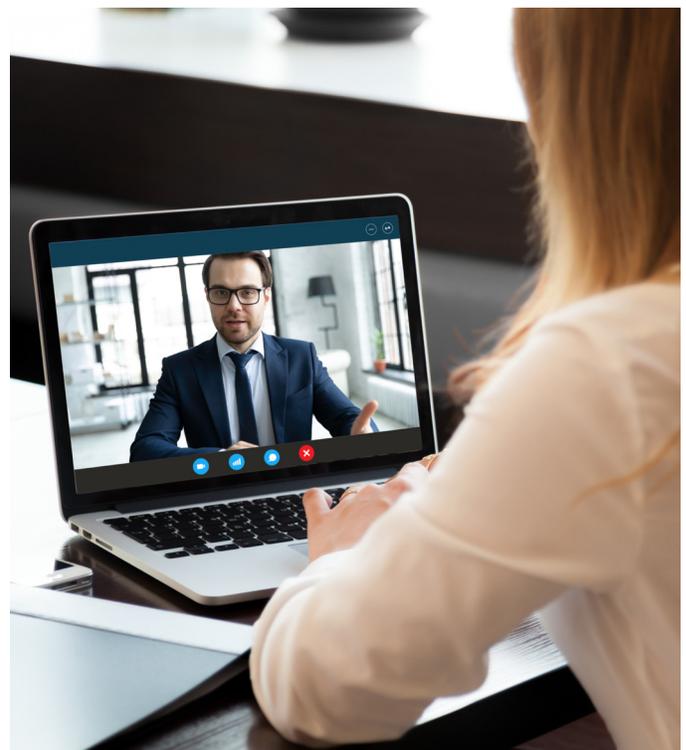
Businesses face no greater threat than that posed by COVID-19.

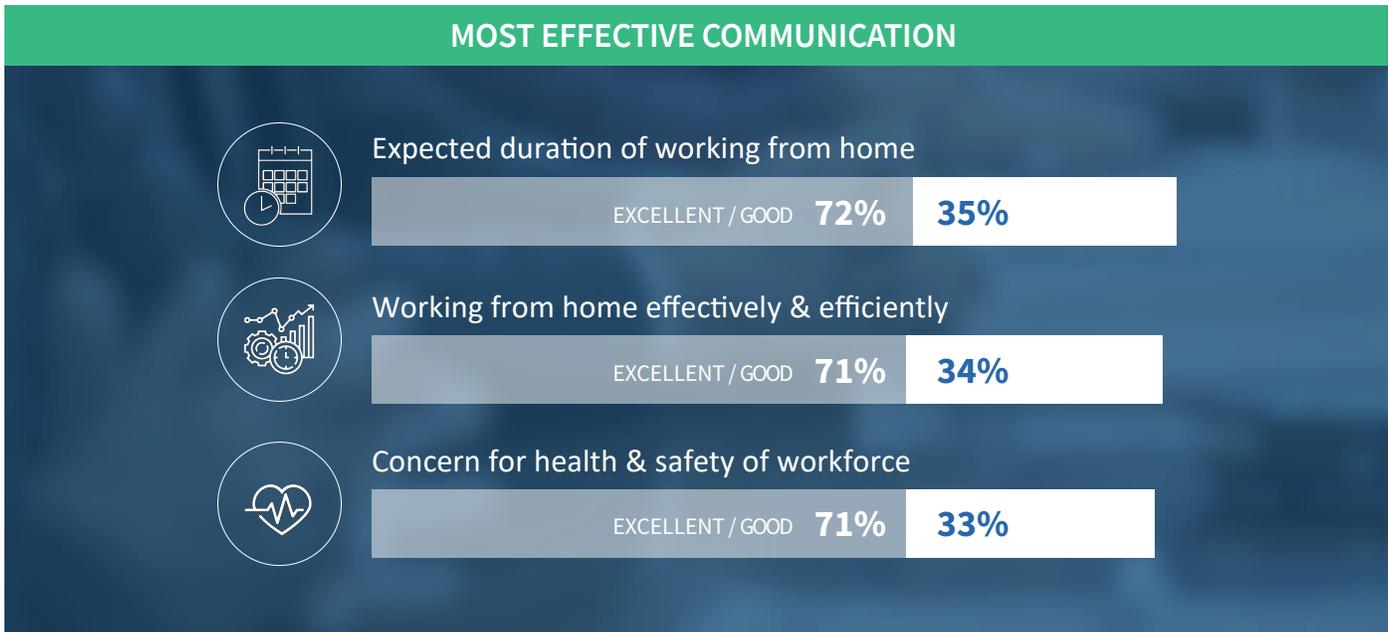
The tectonic plates of expectation from both internal and external stakeholders are shifting and despite businesses overall being better equipped to respond to large-scale crisis events than they were in 2008, this unique situation is one few had foreseen; planned for; or even considered a possibility.

This pandemic has permeated throughout business and industry at every level, fundamentally changing the professional and personal lives of every employee and placing businesses firmly under the microscope in how they respond and adapt to this new reality.

Against this backdrop, it is now more crucial than ever for businesses to communicate openly and honestly with their employees; but in which areas is communication more clearly resonating, and where do they need to be doing better?

FTI's new "Shifting Expectations" research across the USA assesses the strengths and weaknesses of business communications from the perspective of the American workforce.





Expected duration of working from home

This topic is particularly difficult for business to manage right now with legislative and medical experts debating the right time to present a so-called “exit strategy” from lockdown. That said, companies are perceived to be communicating transparently and positively on this, particularly to those who are ‘extremely concerned’ about COVID-19, with 77% of this group rating communications as either ‘excellent’ or ‘good’.

However, businesses need to be doing more to communicate effectively with their junior level employees. Just over half (52%) rate their employer’s communication in this area as ‘excellent’ or ‘good’, compared to 82% of those in senior positions.

Working effectively & efficiently from home

Overall, employees feel supported in their transition to working from home, with 71% rating their companies as ‘excellent’ or ‘good’, particularly so if you’re a parent (73%).

Once again, the challenge for businesses is reaching out to the junior level, who are 20% less likely than their senior equivalents to rate this communication positively.

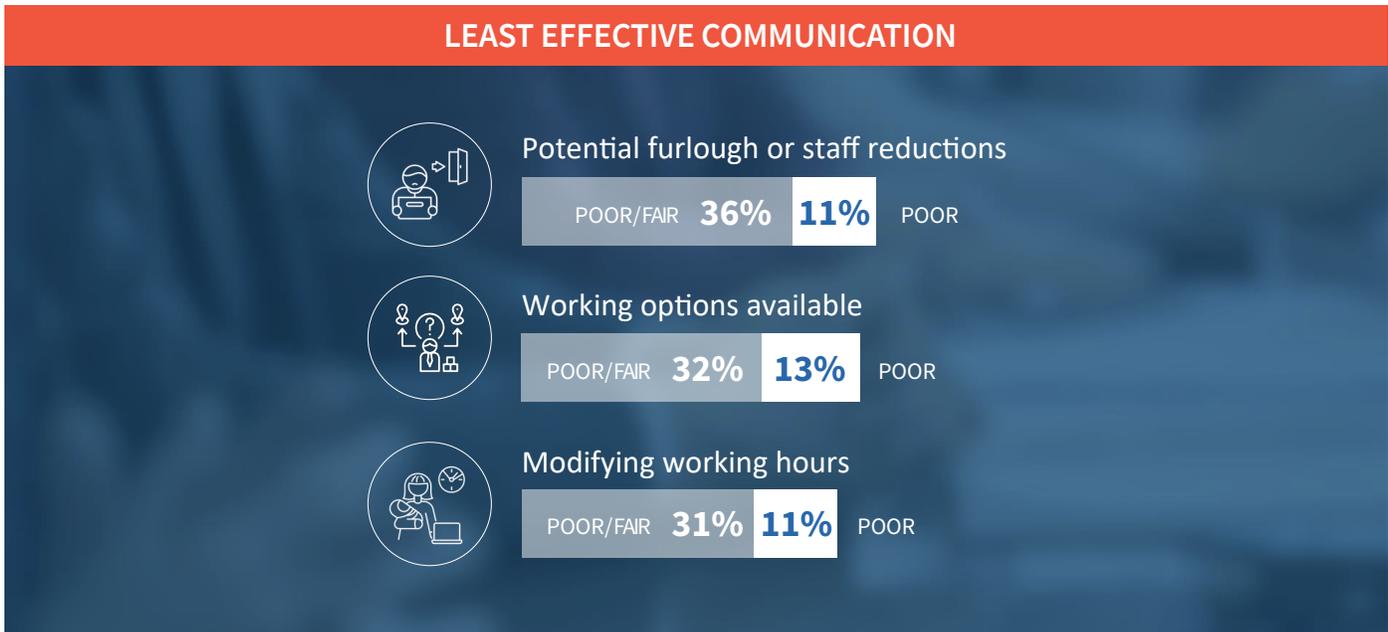
More also needs to be done for those in rural locations, with less than half (49%) responding positively, much less than their urban-dwelling counterparts (82%). Whilst unsurprising, this increases the expectation on businesses to ensure something as foreseeable as this is managed and prioritized, particularly so with many employees moving out of built-up, urban areas amid this crisis.

Concern for health & safety of workforce

The role of business in protecting and caring for their workforce has been thrust into the limelight and they have responded well, with 71% rating their communication on the health and safety of their workforce as ‘excellent’ or ‘good’.

That said, a tale of two workforces begins to emerge. Employees who are required to work from home are more likely (79%) to rate the concern for health & safety more positively than those who are working on location (64%).

Moreover, those with a household income of \$150k+ rate communication on their health and safety much higher (85%), than those with an income of <\$50k (64%).



Potential of furlough and staff reductions

Naturally, every employee right now is either concerned about their own job; the job of a family member; or the future of their employer itself.

Our research points to this frustration, with the workforce not hearing consistent, relevant information about potential furloughs or staff reductions, reflecting with over one-third (36%) rating communication from their employers as ‘fair’ or ‘poor’.

With personal finances and concern over supporting their families as key factors driving anxiety across the US and the lives of employees, this cannot be ignored by businesses.

Whilst many employers may genuinely not have the answers right now, that’s ok. An open and honest communication channel should be established, particularly to connect with the 41% of Gen Z + Millennials who are increasingly anxious and impatient for relevant communication to filter to them, uncertain of whether they will still have a job post-pandemic.

Working options available

One-third of employees (32%) rate communication about their working options to be ‘fair’ or ‘poor’, with the key dissatisfied profiles of workers likely to be those under 30 (43%); junior level employees (43%); and women (35%).

Businesses should be looking to harness the positivity towards effective and efficient working from home communication and go a step further, laying out clearly what options employees have available to them, whether it’s health benefits, equipment or sick pay initiatives.

Modifying working hours

The blurring of social and professional lives drives concern in relation to modified working hours and it’s important for companies to encourage a balance.

Business can do better here, with 31% rating this communication as ‘fair’ or ‘poor’; echoed also by parents (30%). Parents will be looking for greater flexibility in their working hours, whether that’s working later in the evening or early morning to accommodate the needs of their families and processes should be put in place to encourage and promote this.

Modifying working hours also impacts more junior-level staff, be it reduced/increased workloads or not having regular communication with line management. The seniority divide here is emphasized with 4 in 10 (39%) of junior level employees rating communication on this negatively, compared to just 19% of those in senior positions.

We face a time like no other in recent memory and every business is journeying through the unknown together. It's that togetherness that underpins why businesses need to be communicating not just as employers, but as humans.

With 86% of Americans paying more attention than usual to “how companies care for their employees’ safety and well-being”, and 50% significantly increasing their social media usage, businesses can use this opportunity to lead the way and do what is right by their employees, customers and communities alike.



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