

6 Steps to Create Connections During the COVID-19 Pandemic

How leaders can connect, recognise and support their people during times of uncertainty





Introduction

Hi there,

When your work environment goes through an abrupt upheaval, it can be difficult for HR leaders and communications professionals to know how to act. Where do you start, when your focus has to be shifted to crisis management?

During this time of change, connecting and supporting our employees with meaningful communications that tell them exactly what they need to know is key to ensuring any plan of action is a success.

You could put together the best recovery strategy in the world but if your people don't know about it, can't understand it or aren't sure on why it's being done that way you're going to run into further difficulty.

That's why I've developed a 6-step plan on how to create crisis communications to make sure your people stay connected to the business, and to one another through difficult times.

Let's walk through how to pull together a communications plan in times of uncertainty. We're here for you, every step of the way.

Catrin Lewis

Head of Global Engagement and Internal Communications

www.linkedin.com/in/thelittleunicorn

First of all... it's OK to pause before you react

The COVID-19 pandemic has tested every organisation on how they react to stressful, uncertain circumstances.

As a leader, now is the time to work with your teams and organisational leaders to craft a communication plan that delivers important information and gives your employees the confidence they need to get through what lies ahead.

Here are the steps that helped us navigate COVID-19 as a template for our response to crisis management communications:



STEP 1:
Identify the risks for your company



STEP 2:
Define your communications objectives



STEP 3:
Identify your audience



STEP 4:
Decide on your communications tone



STEP 5:
Create a list of channels to distribute information



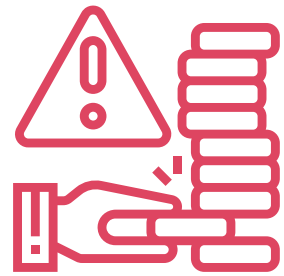
STEP 6:
Develop an open feedback loop to refine ongoing strategy as the situation progresses



Before you dive into the details, stripping back to your core steps helps anchor your planning, and gives you points of reference to guide and inform other stakeholders on the project.

STEP 1:

Identify the risks for your company



You can't begin to solve a problem unless you can identify what this is. Sometimes, you have the luxury of time to spot trends in your business through employee conversations and general observation, but when a crisis hits, you need to act fast.



To identify what problem you're solving, tap into your champions – those trusted team members across the business who people listen to, and probably even look up to.

You might already have a cross-functional team that exists for spotting trends in the business (we have our global Culture Team), but if you don't, then getting opinions and feedback from a couple champions in each department of your business can be enough to get the ball rolling.

Coupled with the opinions and feedback of your Leadership Team, you should have enough information to develop the scenario which your communications are up against.

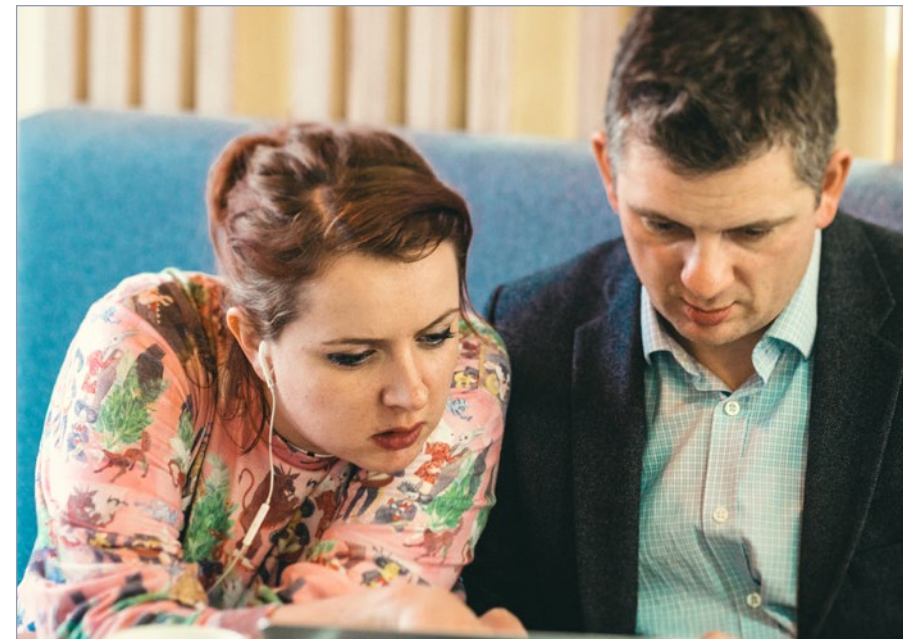
If you're really at a loss on who to go to, I suggest pulling together a quick pulse survey to ask your employees what their priorities and biggest concerns are. This can help you narrow your focus as you develop your communications plan.

STEP 2: Define your communications objectives



This is always important, but in times of high-stress, I always emphasise the importance of keeping your communications **relevant, purposeful** and **true to company values**.

Create a set of objectives so you can constantly question your plan. If an idea comes up, or extra communications are being created, use this opportunity to ask yourself does this fit into our objectives?



Determine whether it belongs in your initial outreach, or if it's something that can be written or spoken about later in your campaign.

For example, for the COVID-19 pandemic, I came up with three objectives:

- 1. The safety and welfare of all employees**
- 2. Ensuring business continuity**
- 3. Preventing further escalation**

This tied into our plan of focussing on “need-to-know” information, maintaining “business as usual” and creating a feel-good, open environment for our employees.

STEP 3: Identify your audience

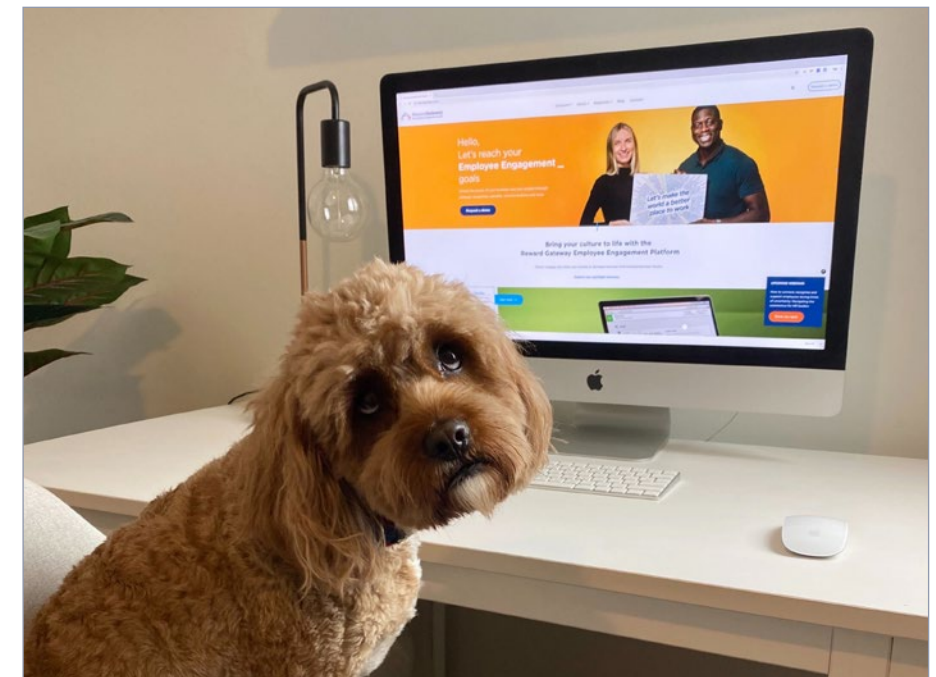


When defining your audience, the obvious answer is your people. But you'll want to break it down more than that to define specific audience demographics and location.

A study by International Workplace Group showed that almost 50% of the Australian workforce works remotely for at least half the week, and up to 70% works from home at least once a week.

Fast-forward to now and technology has come even further. Meaning, year-over year this trend will only continue to rapidly grow along with technology's speed.

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, many found remote working as the new normal. It's more important than ever to reach these employees so they feel supported and connected to the business through frequent updates.



When it comes to deskless workers, those who are frequently on-the-go or frontline workers who are still working on-site, it's important to consider how you'll get your message across to them.

It's our job to reassure our employees that we know they're there, we know they're listening and we value them. But they can only understand that if our communications reach them.

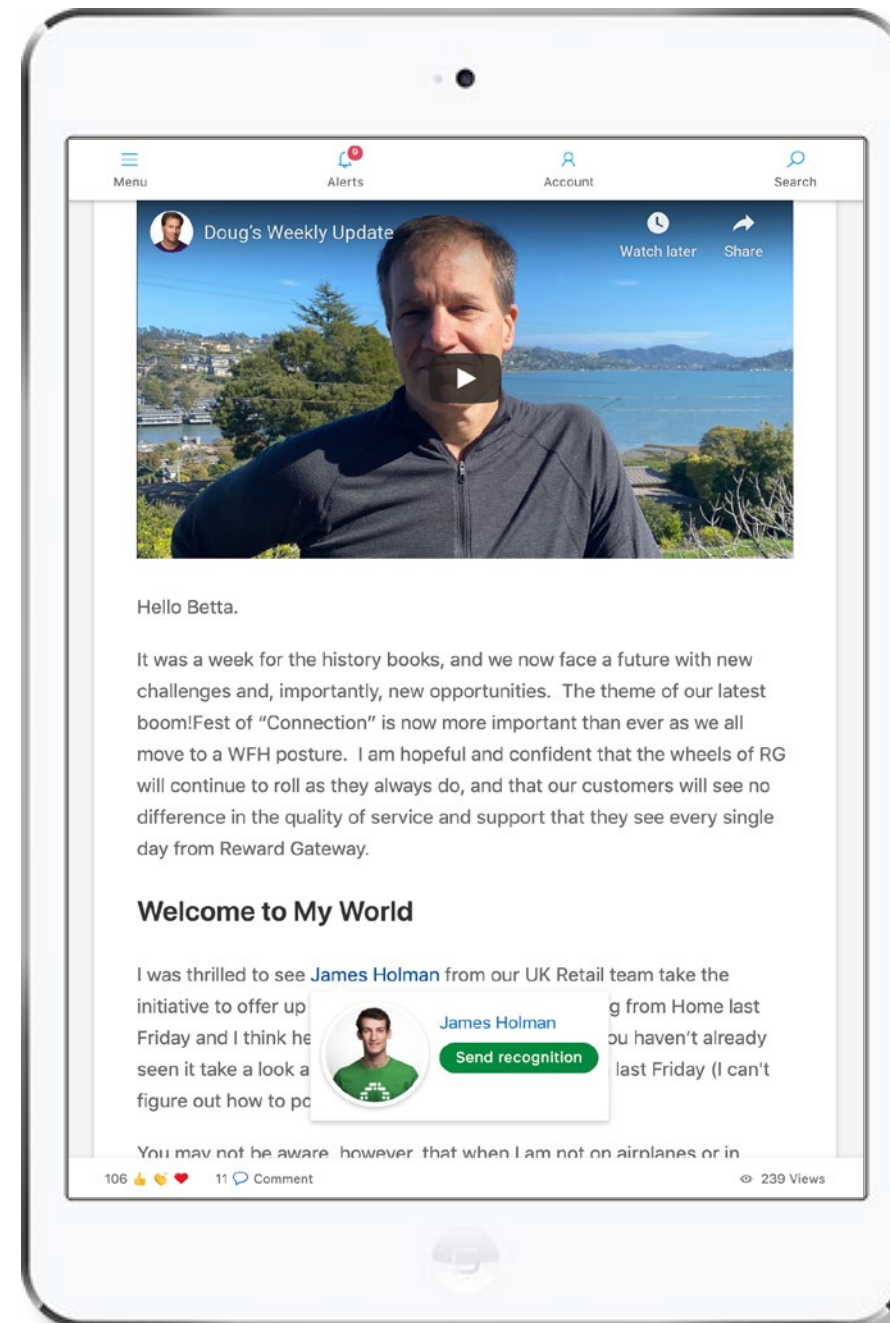
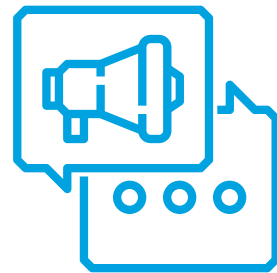
Ask yourself, are your communications:

<p>Available on multiple devices</p>	<p>Flexible in case you need to make changes after you publish!</p>	<p>Engaging with the opportunity to mix in multimedia and more traditional written content</p>
<p>Immediate to get the news out to every employee, no matter where they are</p>	<p>Tailored in case you need to get different news out to different people</p>	<p>Centralised to manage the flow of information and make it easy for employees</p>



STEP 4:

Decide on your communications tone



You've no doubt overheard or worked with your Marketing Team and heard them talking about tone of voice. In order for a company to build a brand which their customer resonates with, a carefully crafted tone of voice which speaks directly to that target customer is extremely important.

A relatable tone of voice tells the customer a lot about the type of business they're dealing with and helps build trust.

You want your workforce to be able to understand the type of business they're working for, relate to what you're saying, and trust the message you're sending. That's why I recommend keeping it jargon-free and breaking down any complicated messaging to a level you'll be sure your people will understand.

In times of uncertainty or high change, this is critically important to make sure that employees can quickly understand what the core message of your communications is.

If people can grasp the “why,” then they’re less likely to dwell on it and you can allow room to give employees instruction on things your team might need them to do, such as updating their contact information or shifting their work priorities to suit the changing needs of the business.

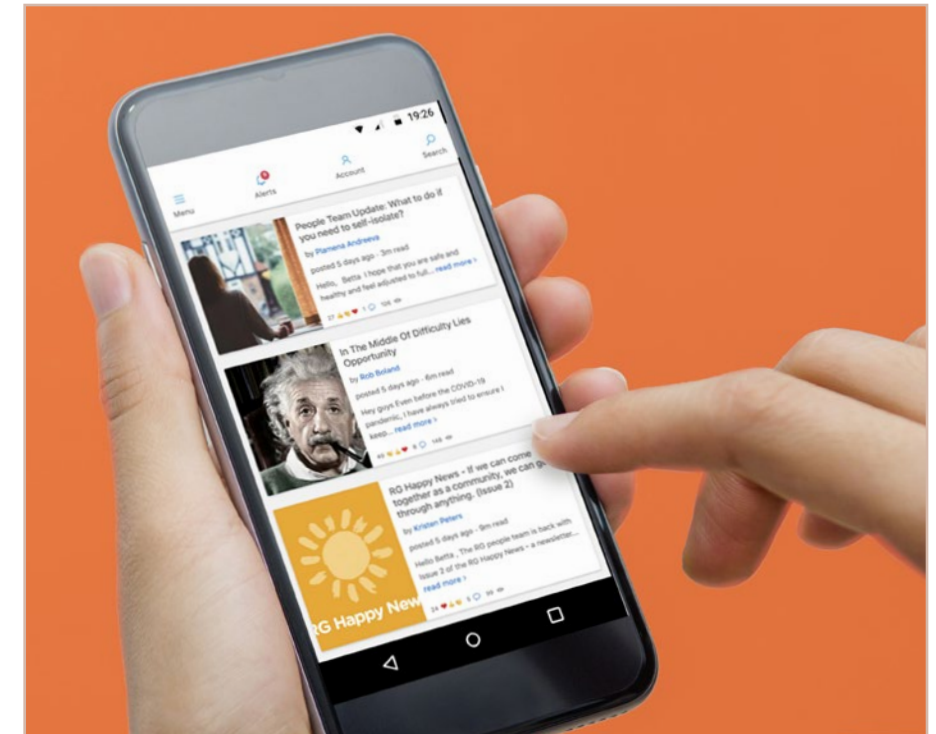
When you create a unified tone of voice among your core contributors to internal communications, your message is stronger.

Remember that whole saying, “united we stand, divided we fall?” That’s the same with your internal communications.

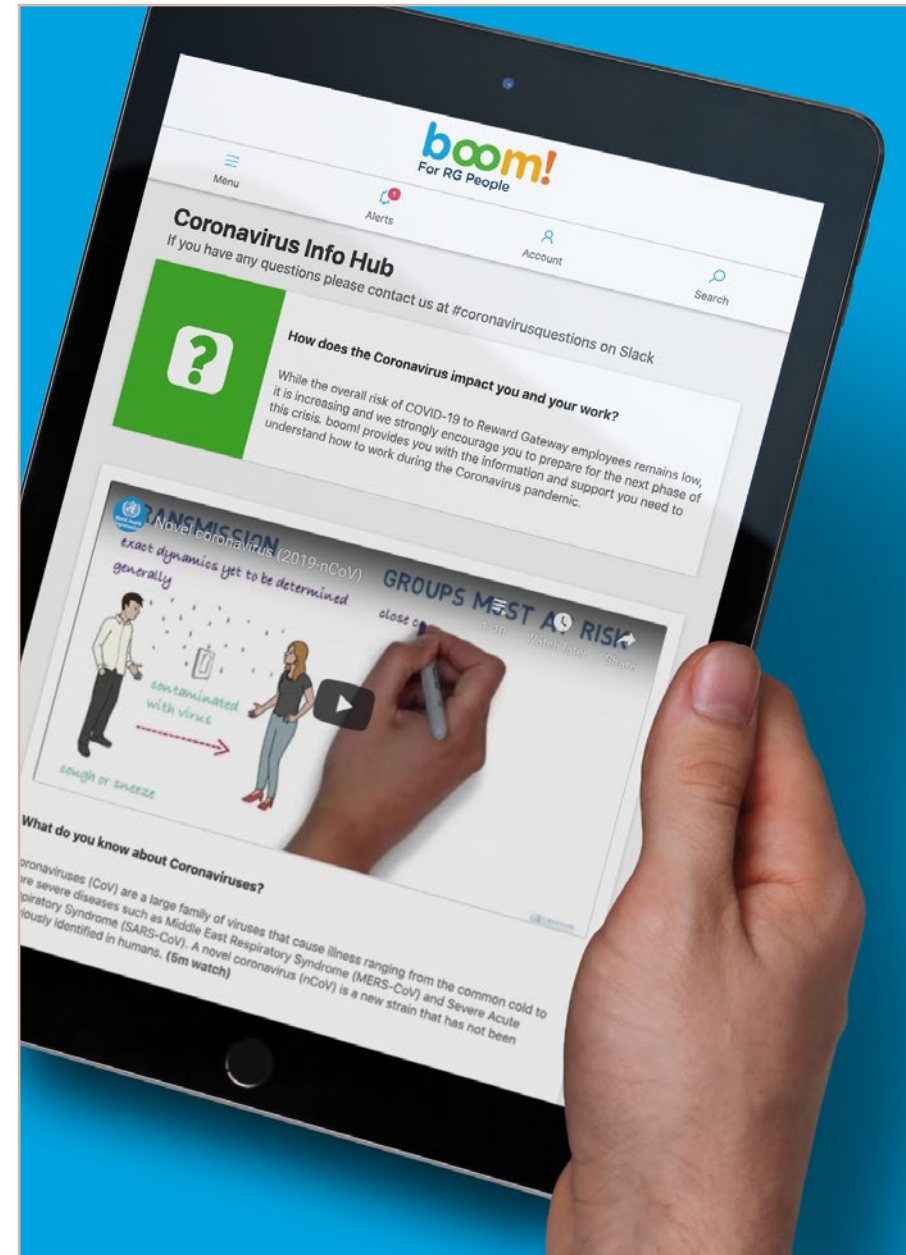
For crisis communications, you want to maintain a human tone to create trust, but equally important is that your tone should also be credible. Make sure you’re not just putting something on your channels just for the sake of it, but that it has a purpose and again, links back to your core objectives.

For instance, in the recent COVID-19 pandemic, the immediate need was to keep our employees and their families safe, which is why this was the focus of our CEO Doug Butler’s Monday post on our internal communications platform.

All of our communications use tagging so we are speaking to one person rather than the whole company. Written like a personal letter this adds to our reader feeling that their employee cares about them as an individual and recognises them as a person and not a business unit/number.



STEP 5: Create a list of channels to distribute information



This is the hub my team and I set up for our employees, which took just a few hours to create.

There are so many different channels for communications – face-to-face, instant messaging, text messaging, social media, email, carrier pigeon. How do you know which one is right for you?

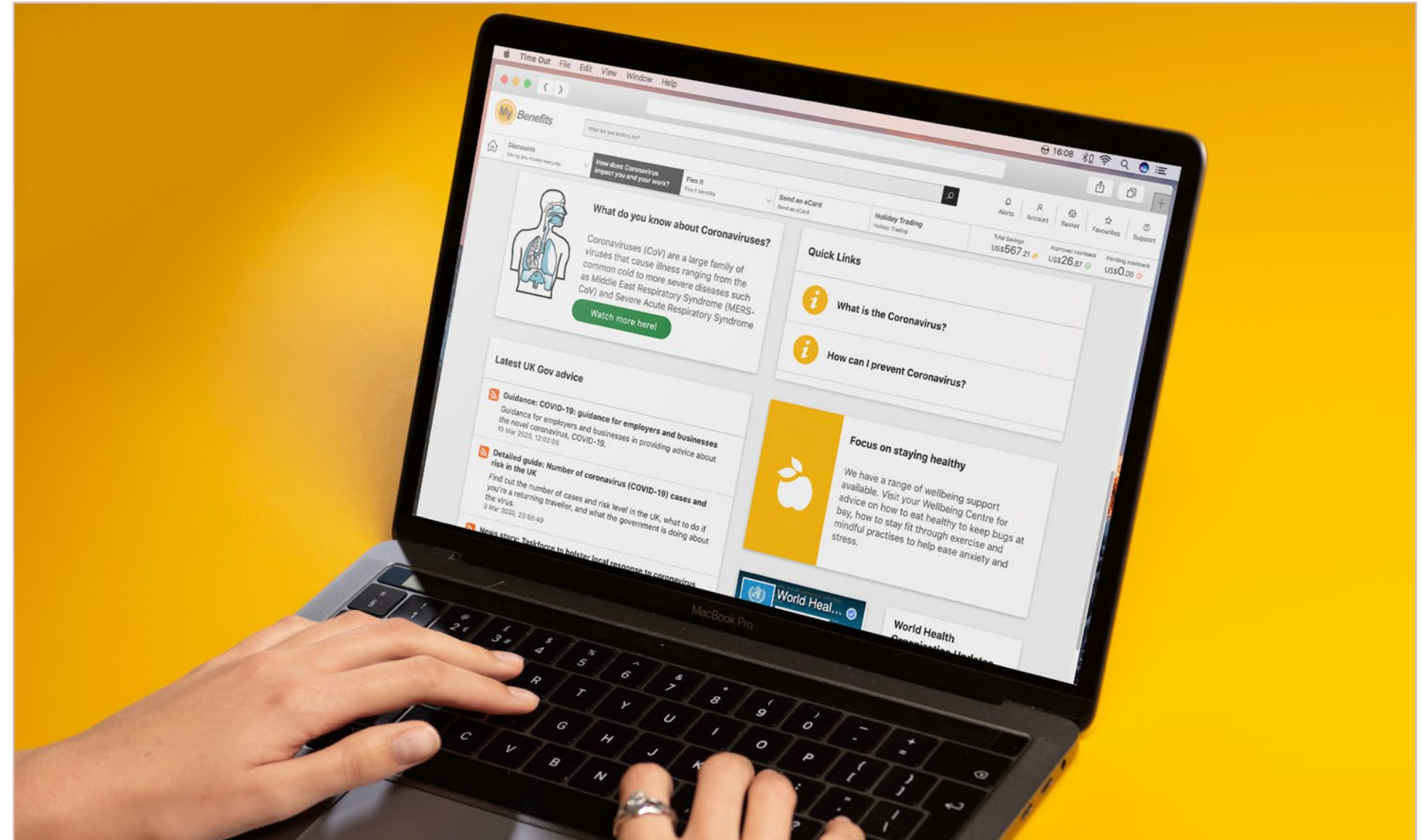
First, create a place to centralise all information so that employees can be self-sufficient in getting critical bits of information, such as upcoming office closures, any new policies you're rolling out, and also have a look at past communications that may have gone out that they missed or want to read again.

We use boom!, our name for our employee engagement platform, to centralise all of our communications in our daily newsfeed of blogs and other content.

During COVID-19, we quickly put together a dedicated section on boom! for our people so they could find out more about the virus and stay up to date with credible news sources, and pushed this information out to them all at once via a push notification.

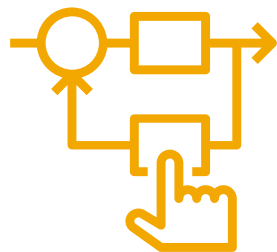
I've even worked with our internal teams to develop a template that even new clients can have up and running in less than two weeks to communicate COVID-19 updates.

Remind your people where they should expect to find important information that will impact their everyday work, so they understand what's business as usual and what might be changing.



Here's an example of our client Wesleyan Assurance's COVID-19 Hub, which its Client Success Manager was able to create in less than 24 hours.

STEP 6: Develop an open feedback loop to refine ongoing strategy as the situation progresses

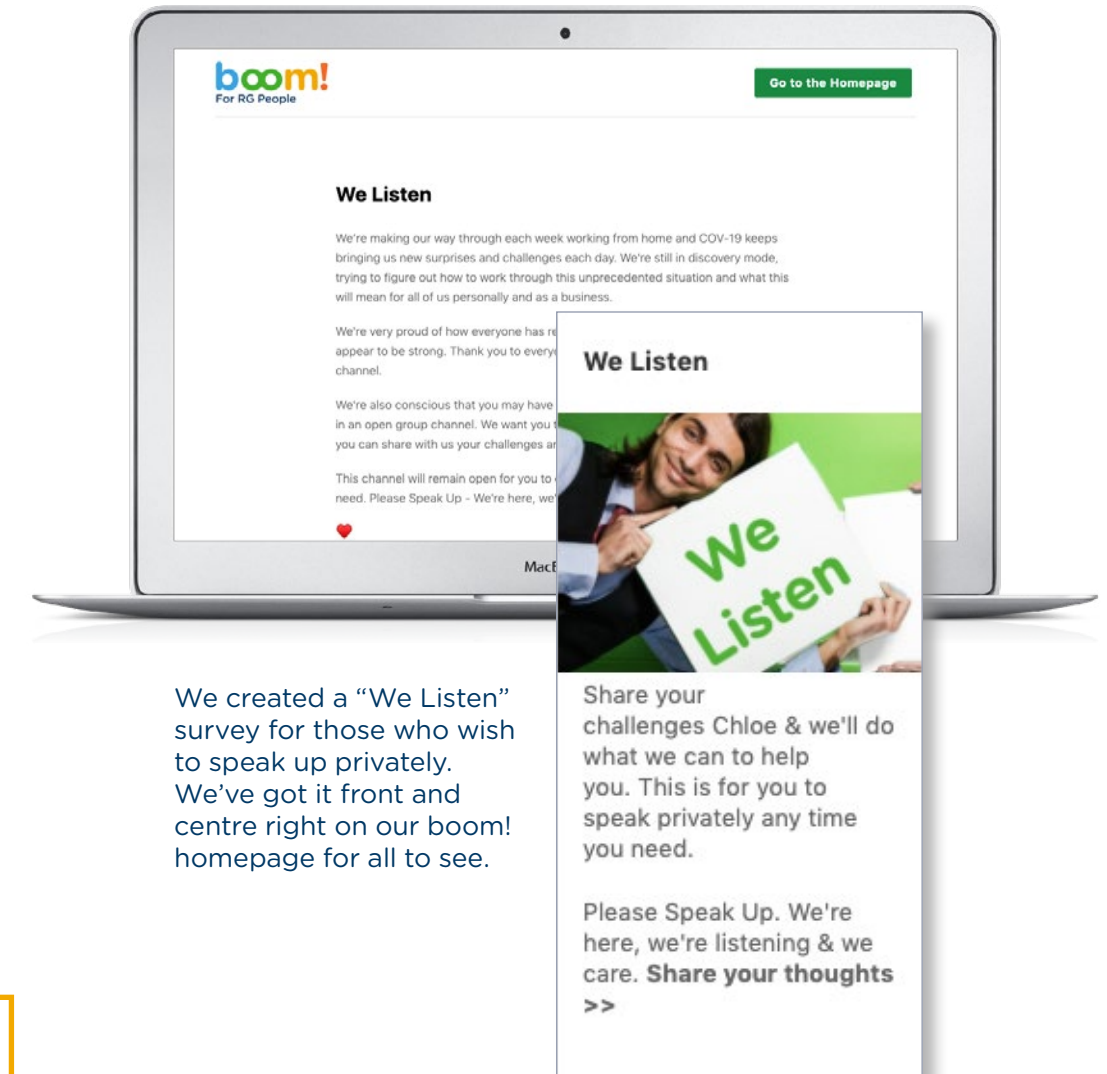


Ever been speaking with someone who talks at you, keeps the conversation about them, and doesn't let you get a word in edgeways?

Chances are, you'll be wanting to get away from them as quickly as possible. The same rule applies to your internal communications.

Social media has radically changed online behaviour. Every picture that's posted invites a comment or response. Every opinion invites a conversation and asks people to share their thoughts. Facebook asks you each day "What's on your mind?".

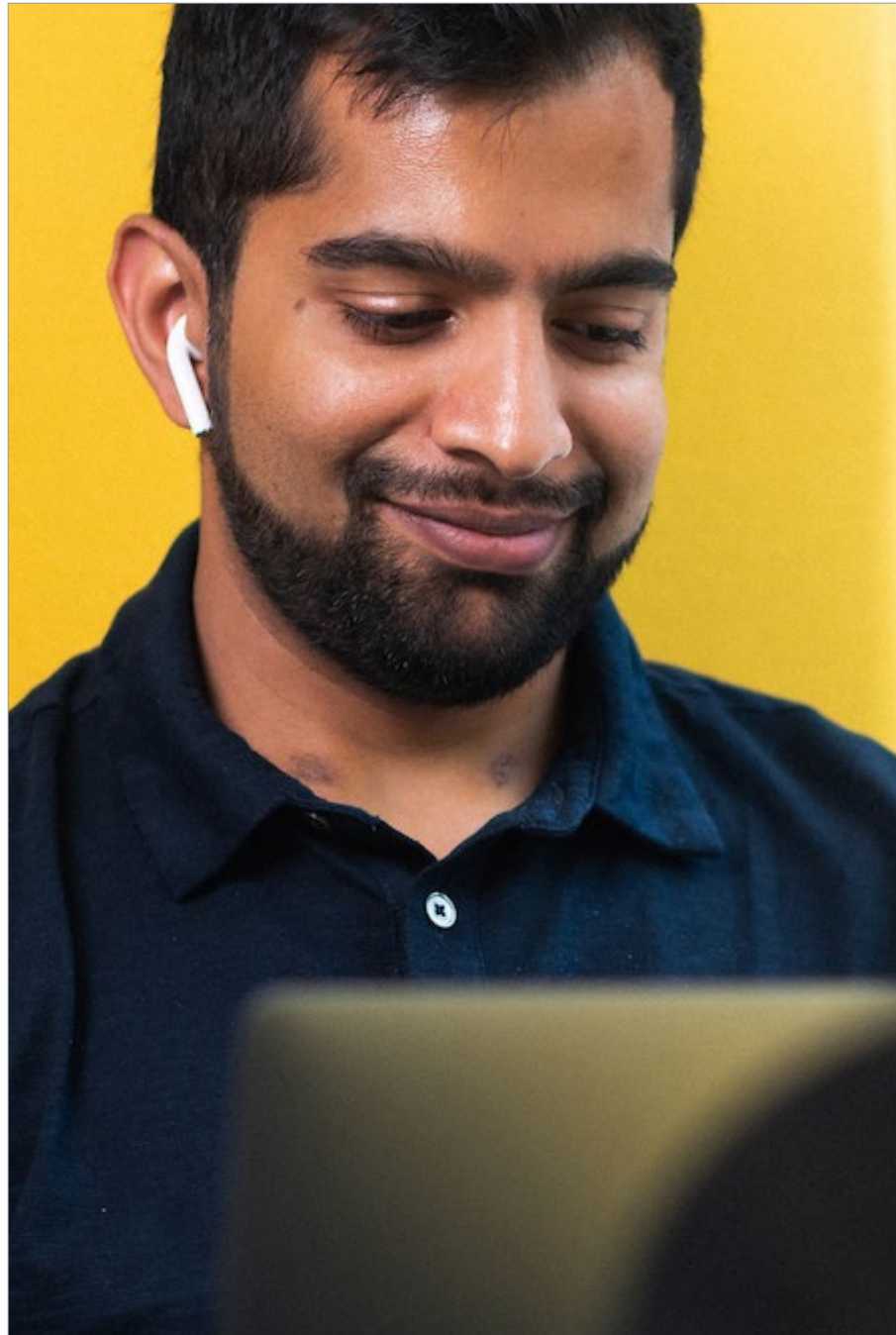
Everyone else is asking for their thoughts, inviting two-way conversation and asking for openness and so should you.



We created a "We Listen" survey for those who wish to speak up privately. We've got it front and centre right on our boom! homepage for all to see.

Share your challenges Chloe & we'll do what we can to help you. This is for you to speak privately any time you need.

Please Speak Up. We're here, we're listening & we care. **Share your thoughts** >>



Making that available through your own internal technology helps facilitate connections among your employees.

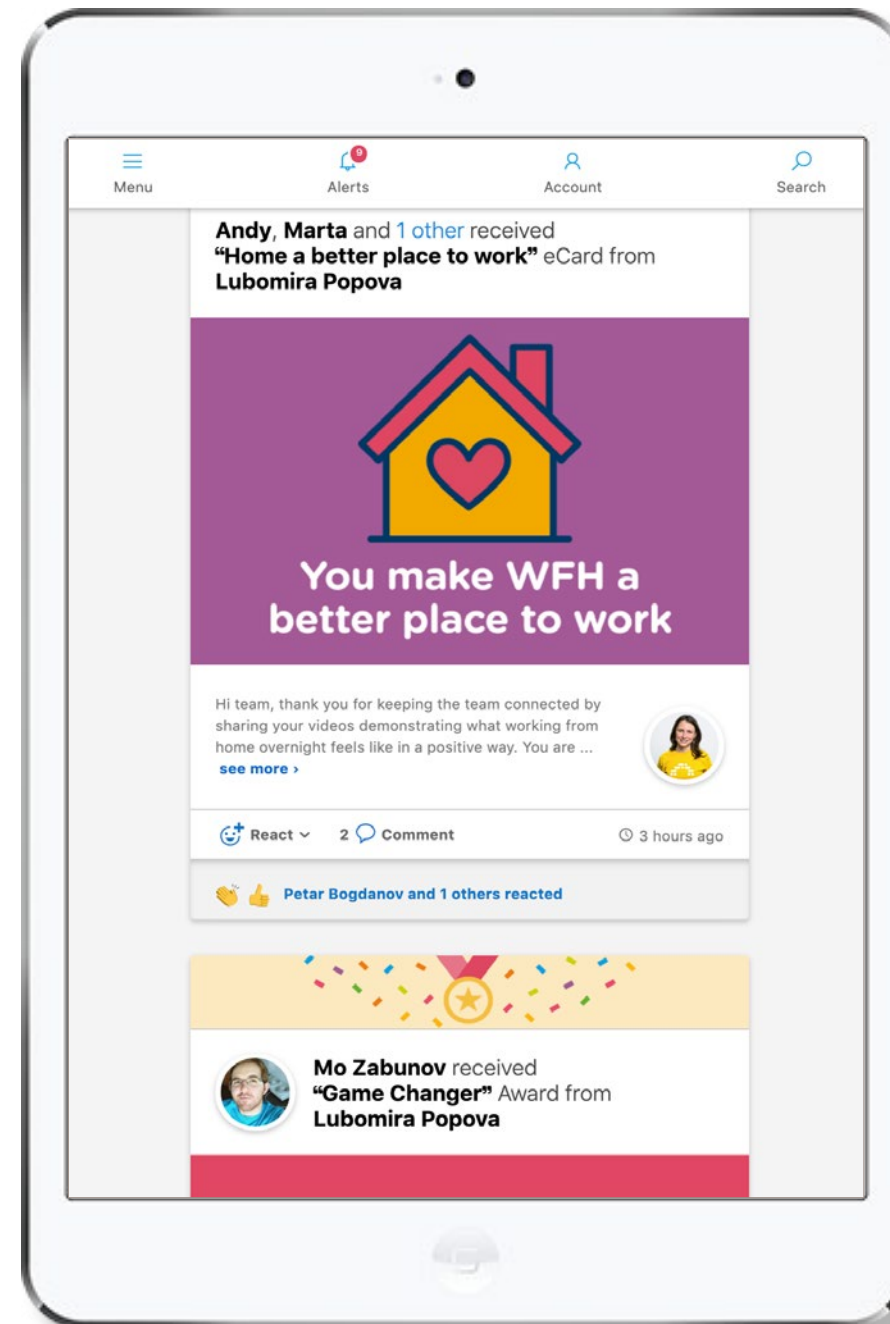
From my experience, two-way communication through allowing employees to freely comment on blog posts and keeping leadership visible and transparent in an open setting is what keeps them involved, engaged and active with our content.

When the company is going through a lot of change, I like to randomly pick three people in the business and simply ask them **how they're doing** and **what are their challenges**, so we can continue to develop and refine our communications strategy through a broad array of perspectives.

Make a commitment to update your people as and when things happen. Keeping employees up to date on health and safety policies and key business decisions shows them care and concern and helps minimise anxiety by giving them information quickly and consistently.

Under-communication is damaging, especially during times of uncertainty, so it's important to be proactive and use multiple channels, multiple times, to make sure messages are getting through.

How to drive even more connections across your business with recognition



I've had a lot of time to reflect on the tools that we need to support our long-term communications strategy, and the value of peer-to-peer recognition and bringing those stories to life through your communications is huge.

In times of high-stress or uncertainty, we've found that our internal recognition increases as people look for ways to connect. This is especially true in environments with high percentages of remote or deskless workers, who don't benefit from the face-to-face connection.

Having a digital space to recognise colleagues for their contributions can help them feel less isolated, and more connected to their fellow team members and the wider business.

While a feel-good eCard or personal note is never a bad thing, organisations can use recognition strategically in times of uncertainty to drive specific behaviours that the business needs. Here are a few examples:



You make WFH a better place to work



Distance makes the heart grow fonder



Friends

show their love in times of trouble

MISSGUIDED

Sending you virtual hugs

#teammissguided

High five from home

#teammissguided

You make working from home sweeter

#teammissguided



Thank You

for helping during these difficult times



You're Amazing

for going above & BEEyond



We Are Supportive

...and you showed it!



Rembrandt Hive

More than ever, we need to prioritise open and honest communication, and make sure that achievements are recognised and visible throughout the entire business.

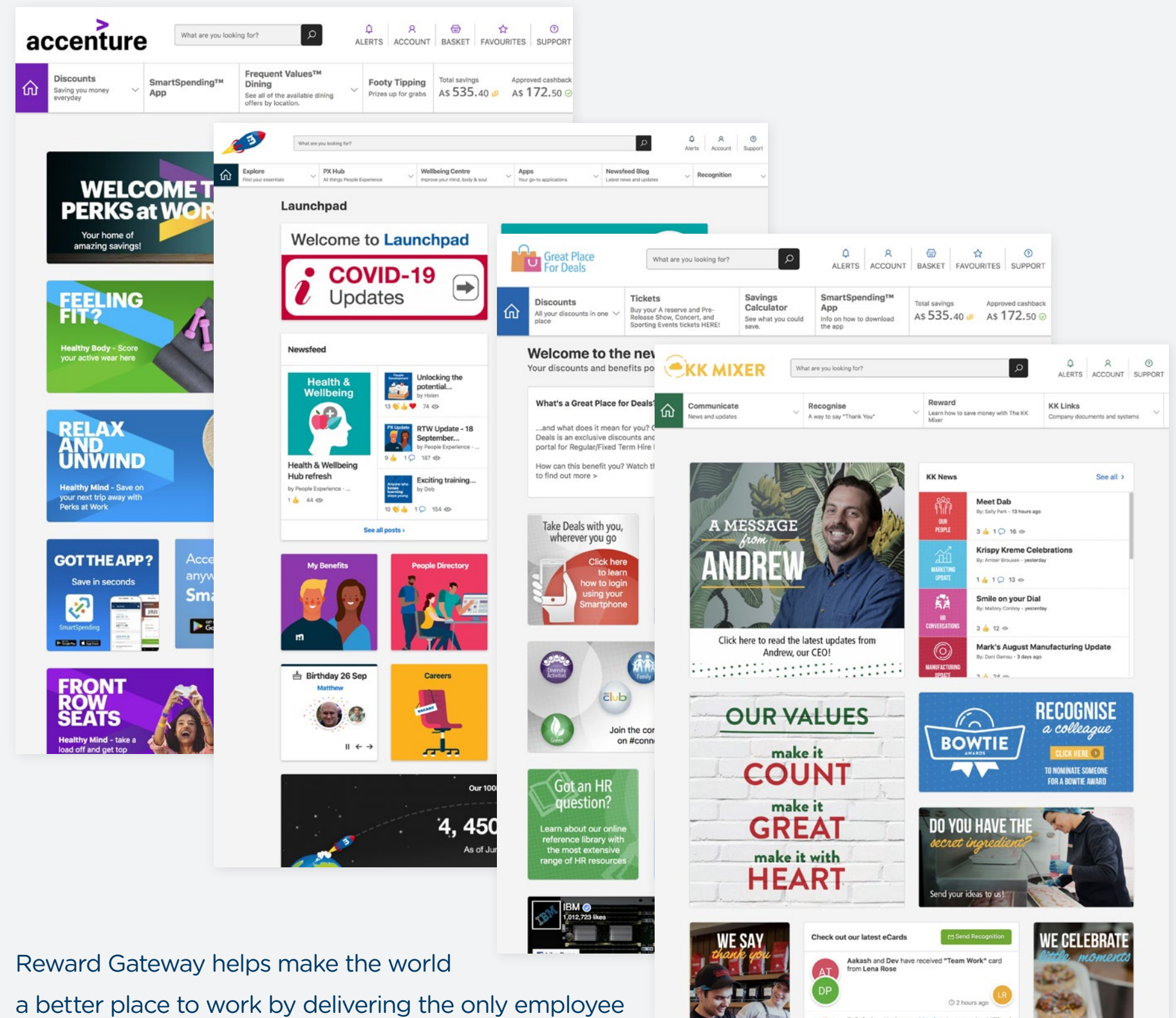
If you need help crafting your communications strategy, or want to learn more about the tools we use to connect, recognise and support our people during times of uncertainty, please get in touch.



Catrin Lewis,
Head of Global Engagement and
Internal Communications
www.linkedin.com/in/thelittleunicorn
catrin.lewis@rewardgateway.com



Email: engage@rewardgateway.com



Reward Gateway helps make the world a better place to work by delivering the only employee engagement platform with industry-leading employee benefits, reward and recognition, communication tools and surveys all in one place.