

2021 NASPE Award Nomination for the
Eva N. Santos Communication Award
“Excellence in State Government HR Communications”

Communication Strategies for Human Resources During a Significant Crisis

NOMINATOR:

Emily Rajakovich
Director of Human Resources

CONTACT:

Barbara Bratcher
HR Deputy Director, Operations
Barbara.Bratcher@azdoa.gov
Office: (602) 542-4918

State of Arizona
Department of Administration
Human Resources Division
100 North 15th Avenue, Phoenix, AZ 85007
Main Line: (602) 542-5482
Fax: (602) 542-2796

Summary

In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 Coronavirus a pandemic, and significant public health directives were issued that dramatically changed the nature of work and how it could be safely performed. This created challenges for employers who had to communicate information on ever-changing policies, procedures, guidance and resources to address workplace and stakeholder needs during the pandemic.

Background

The State of Arizona Department of Administration, which provides administrative and human resources support to agencies, boards and commissions throughout Arizona, has a Continuity of Operations Plan including many components to ensure that business can be continued in the event of a critical incident or set of circumstances jeopardizing operations. Communications is a major part of our operations, and with the pandemic, the State recognized the need to control the narrative to ensure the delivery of timely, accurate, and responsive information to its 40,000 employees.

Challenges

Because the pandemic was unprecedented, information was coming from multiple sources at a rapid and changing pace as knowledge of the virus and its impact grew. Misinformation and disinformation, some of it contradicting that of the public health experts, created misunderstandings and miscommunication. State agencies have myriad organizational structures, with employees performing roles in more than 1,700 employment classifications. One approach for communication could not meet the needs of all HR offices and employees in all state agencies. Further, new pandemic-related employment laws were enacted during this period, which required the State to develop procedures and tools to ensure compliance. In this environment, it was important to build confidence in our employees that issues would be appropriately addressed.

Solution: Applying Multilayer Communication Strategies

Agencies looked to the Arizona Human Resources Division (HRD) for guidance and leadership during this time. With input from stakeholders, leadership identified a multi-pronged approach to ensure that communications were made available in a variety of ways to meet the needs of our different agencies and all State employees. HRD was tasked with relaying reliable information from CDC public health experts and the Arizona Department of Health Services in a number of formats and venues to ensure accessibility. Moreover, due to the nature of the pandemic, HRD needed to ensure timely information was provided that was in alignment with ever-changing guidance on keeping workplaces and employees safe, while remaining candid to instill and maintain the confidence of state employees.

Multilayer Communication Strategies Applied

HRD leadership immediately saw the need for new and enhanced communication strategies and sought the input of other leaders and practitioners regarding their ideas for solutions to address this using a multi-layered approach.

Layer 1: Enterprise-wide Virtual Meetings

The State's HR Director initiated twice-weekly virtual meetings and invited all HR practitioners seeking information and updates on COVID-19 to join. These meetings are now weekly, and include updates from the Governor's Office; updates on public health guidance; legal and other subject matter expert guidance on new employment laws. The number of participants varies, but many of these calls have included more than 120 HR professionals from around the state to obtain information and ask questions.

Layer 2: COVID-19 Email Box, Webpage and HRD Website, HR Guidance & FAQs, Monthly Benefits Newsletter to All Employees

An email box was established as a one-stop-shop resource for HR practitioners and agency leaders with any questions regarding COVID-19. The email box, covid19questions@azdoa.gov, is staffed by a team within HRD, and the goal is to provide a response within 24 hours. More complex questions are elevated to senior leaders, who respond directly to requestors to ensure that the most appropriate and accurate information is provided. The feedback received on this service and timely response has been most positive. A [webpage](#) was developed to house HRD Guidance, FAQs, other communications, tools, forms and references to other COVID-related resources.

In collaboration with the Arizona Department of Health Services, the State established several COVID-19 testing sites and a vaccine program for employees. Ongoing updates about the State's employee testing and vaccine programs were provided via the website. Communications were sent to **every** State employee via email, meetings, and messaging from leaders about the testing and vaccination programs to ensure that every State employee who wanted to be tested or vaccinated could be. Ongoing information to State employees was provided via the website.

Layer 3: Tools for Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA)

The State developed tools and forms for the Emergency Paid Sick Leave and Expanded Family Medical Leave Act provisions in the Families First Coronavirus Response Act. Tandem communications with guidance and additional information were also made available to help to ensure full understanding of and compliance with the act. All of these tools were reviewed in the weekly virtual meetings and maintained on the [COVID-19 webpage](#).

Layer 4: Returning to the Workplace Toolkit

For agencies that assigned staff to remote work during the pandemic, questions arose about when and how employees could be safely brought back to their workplaces. HRD developed a toolkit¹ to provide agencies with some of the decisions they may need to make, steps they may need to take, changes to policies and procedures, and communications to employees about what the new expectations would be as they returned to the workplace.

Layer 5: Training

Many agencies developed training in response to the pandemic to better educate employees on a variety of topics. The State contracted with LinkedIn Learning in 2019 to make online training opportunities available to all agencies. When the pandemic was declared and many State employees were assigned to remote work, the resources available through LinkedIn Learning became even more important. LinkedIn Learning activation and utilization increased from 15% pre-pandemic to 70% today.

Layer 6: Reporting

In critical situations, the ability to succinctly report activities and progress to agency leaders is vital. In March 2020, Arizona launched the [COVID-19 Workforce Dashboard](#), utilized by HR professionals, senior leaders, and decision makers in Arizona State Government to monitor utilization and costs associated with key programs, policies, and laws resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic that impact the state's more than 100 agencies, boards, and commissions and 40,000 person workforce. Key areas include Telework, Administrative Leave, Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA), Front-line Worker Incentive Pay, Child Care Assistance, and Pandemic Response Work. Over 47 million work hours have been collected as of April 2021 enabling government leaders to target efforts toward increased adoption and usage of

¹ The Returning to the Workplace Toolkit is currently under revision due to updated CDC guidance.

key programs such as the State's telework program which grew from 5% in Feb 2020 to 45% in April 2021. The [dashboard](#) made it easy to track analytics and how things were changing over time.

How long has the submission been in existence?

HRD initiated these communication improvements in March 2020, and strategies and communications have evolved during the pandemic to better address the needs of the more than 100 agencies, boards, and commissions served.

Why was the submission created?

The pandemic is unprecedented, and its impact on the workplace has been significant. The State of Arizona needed a way to communicate timely, accurate and helpful information to its 40,000 employees in the most effective ways. It was important for us to maintain or enhance the confidence of employees. We feel the multifaceted communications strategy not only provided the most timely and accurate information to employees and state agency representatives, but it also built confidence in our agencies' and leaders' abilities to address employment matters during a public health crisis.

How does this submission support the goals and objectives of your agency/department?

ADOA and its Human Resources Division provide customer-centric support that creates strong agency partnerships that lead to the adoption of enterprise standards while using continuous improvement methodologies. Key areas from the Strategic Plan are outlined below.

1. **Transform the Employee Experience:** Ensure ADOA's workforce is inspired and enabled to function at the highest level.
2. **Drive Innovative IT Solutions:** Maximize the deployment of innovative technologies while enhancing the security of those networks and information.
3. **Optimize State Data:** Deploy impactful solutions that create value and meet statewide needs in real-time.
4. **Enhance Customer Service:** Create a customer value proposition to improve customer experience.

The multilayer and comprehensive communications strategy that was implemented to lead through the pandemic transformed our employees' experience. The strategy used IT solutions for research, web page design, content, forms design and vital communications. Emails to every employee ensured they received information on the testing and vaccine program in the most timely and effective way. Users of the many services and tools provided through this communications strategy have been overwhelmingly appreciated. Leaders of customer agencies of HRD services have repeatedly acknowledged these efforts and level of response. We made data-driven decisions and reporting has not only met needs, but also helped leaders to make the most fully informed decisions. This strategy has not only supported, but in many ways, furthered these important goals.

Have you been able to measure the effectiveness of this submission? If so, how?

The [dashboard](#) report referred to above was created to track key metrics during this time, including the number of emails received in the COVID-19 email box and the number of employees appropriately placed on leave in accordance with pandemic-related leave laws. This report shows that by taking a multilayered approach to our communications, we were able to ensure that HR practitioners around the state took a best practices approach in implementing directives and guidance.