Collaboration Tools

Building Management and Collaboration
Tools for Communications Teams

By John Schweizer

THE **TANTALUS**GROUP

Efficiency in content production and media relations can make the difference between being heard and being forgotten. More Efficiency = More Time and More Pitches = More coverage. Management and Collaboration Tools for Communications Teams improve workflow and get greater results.

What are Management and Collaboration Tools for Communications Teams?

This practice area focuses on building new business processes and tools to make modern communication teams more efficient and more effective. Tantalus does so in a way that eliminates redundant activities, such as costly duplication of content and multiple content archives. What's more, our management and collaboration tools for communications teams provide the foundation to enable people to work better remotely and provide solutions to help teams learn more from each other and improve the way they communicate.

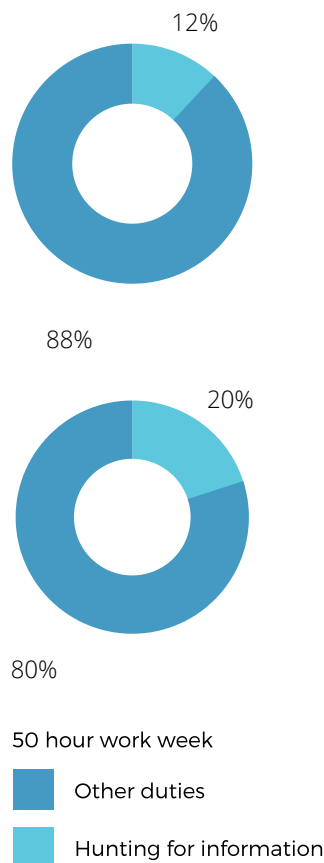### Why Communications Collaboration Management matters?

Marketing and communications teams are wasting millions of dollars per year through duplicative and uncoordinated work because they lack the right collaboration tools. I've seen that as large international teams grow, their regional and functional teams become more siloed. That's often coupled with a reluctance to invest in standardized internal tools and processes that are sometimes perceived as unnecessary "over-engineering," and detrimental to the creative process or, at worst, something that will slow people down.

In fact, the opposite is true. What I have found over the last fifteen years working at Microsoft and Renault-Nissan-Mitsubishi is that modern, easy-to-use collaboration tools make it easier to eliminate redundant activities, such as managing multiple stand-alone calendars and content archives at headquarters and in the field. Most importantly, they reduce redundancy in costly content creation.

What's more, since our tools are generally built within an organization's private and secure network, we've recently seen how these same communications collaboration tools and processes are enabling people to work remotely, wherever they are. Our experience also shows that as communications improves, new relationships develop across large teams and deeper connections develop among managers.

In my experience...

Communications teams at large successful companies like Microsoft and Renault-Nissan-Mitsubishi often have corporate cultures that support independence and foster strong, semi-independent regional groups, yet this often comes with little sharing between teams. Content creation is often duplicated across regions since no one knows what others are doing. In interviews across the teams, managers reported very different experiences, where some were highly autonomous and independent, while others felt isolated and wanted help.

Where communications managers lost productivity:

1. People were unable to plan or prioritize their time because there was no "pipeline" to identify upcoming announcements and activities, nor was there any formal planning guidance.
2. It was difficult for communications professionals to find content they needed, and in many cases, it only existed as email attachments, not in a shared online content library.
3. Content was delivered late and via different distribution methods, without advance warning, making people less dependent on a centralized source.
4. Different teams scheduled conflicting external activities, such as announcements and events occurring at the same time, sometimes even for the same journalists, because no one knew what others were planning.

12% to 20% of time spent looking for information

12%

88%

20%

80%

50 hour work week

Other duties

Hunting for information

Tantalus can help you benefit from communications collaboration tools in three areas:

1 Planning

2 Content Sharing + PR Guidance

3 Measurement + Recognition

1

Planning – Searchable Calendars

One of the easiest and fastest sources of cost savings is the reduction of duplicative work in multiple regions. For instance, without a common planning calendar, it is all too easy for different regions each to develop their own independent calendars and to create similar stories and content assets. With a searchable calendar, someone who wants to develop a certain kind of story can look at the calendar to find others already working on the same topic and thus reduce the risk of expensive duplication.

Thus, one of the first tools we recommend is an online, confidential planning calendar for the communications team. The key is to create a very simple tool where we minimize the necessary information, but at the same time, require enough information so that others can search the tool and find what they need.

Moving calendars and other tools online makes them more flexible, accessible and easier to manage.

- Moving calendars online means the process to add and update items eliminates the need for a centralized function to maintain current versions, because each person can make changes themselves
- The current version is, by definition, updated at all times and reduces the likelihood for mistakes
- It's easier to identify possible scheduling conflicts with others
- Exporting online data to an Excel file makes it easy to organize, filter and analyse information by region, activity, audience or topic. In this way, one could array the data to see all the corporate or product activities planned for the next three months in each region

Calendars are also not just for planning. A calendar's content over time becomes a record of an organization's activities, and analysis of the items by topic can provide valuable insight on weaknesses and strengths in different areas

Reducing redundancies

Moving online and consolidating tools will increase efficiencies. At one company, we were able to **eliminate more than 20 independent and redundant work calendars** and move that information into one single confidential tool. What's more, everyone now has access to the communication activities planned across the business.

Calendars can help reduce the average cost of developing content

Online calendars that identify stories and other activities are also sources of ideas in a communications team. Within one year at one company, **39% of managers reported pitching a story that replicated someone else's idea** they found by scrolling through the new calendar, and within 6 months, An additional **31% reported pitching a story based on someone else's idea** after we introduced an internal social media tool where people shared information about their best work.

2

Content Sharing + PR Guidance

It is an art to inspire and manage remote teams, and one of the most important tools we've mastered is the internal "PR Advisory" process. Weak content sharing processes are often fragile and informal, where content is ad hoc, inconsistent and not shared broadly, resulting in reduced media coverage and weak or conflicting message pick-up across the world.

Tantalus and PR Alerts

Our PR Advisory process anchors on something we refer to as a PR Alert. These are usually built around confidential emails, sent to some or all of a communications team, and from time to time, depending on the subject, also sent as a heads-up to senior execs. In this way, alerts become the single communications pipeline across the company, and they become a crucial and familiar way to share content and guidance, both for proactive and reactive activities.

Creating a PR Alert system means building and maintaining email lists so that it is easy to confidently share messages with a defined set of people. The larger the team and the more complicated the organization, the more email groups we tend to create, but we do so in ways that make it easier to keep them up-to-date, and with business rules that are logical enough that the alerts go to the right teams each time.

Writing PR Advisories the Right Way

Part of getting the process right is developing the skill to write an advisory that really helps the recipient understand what to do. Too often people neglect to clearly tell others what to do, or they believe that everyone will just know what to do. In interviewing field communications teams, we are consistently struck by how isolated people sometimes feel without strong guidance on the best way to pitch a story.

We also have strong feelings against email attachments because while attachments are easy to deploy, they are even easier to abuse. First off, if a document is published within an email and later updated, another email is needed to share the new version, and very quickly, a campaign can become an endless stream of difficult to manage email strings with corrections over corrections. Additionally, if someone was not a recipient of an email with attached content, it will not be easy for them to find that content, let alone the most current version.

The Importance of a Single Shared Content Archive
To compensate for email's shortcomings, one of the most important tools we can provide is a single, confidential online space to share and archive content, where people can find up-to-date documents and digital assets. It is usually an internal website where all content is shared, with standard filenames so that people understand what a file is before opening it. The archive is also built in such a way that PR Alert publishers can create an evergreen hyperlink for all related content. The use of meta-data tags on the documents allows people to search for already published content. With such a system, for instance, one could search the library for all "external" executive speeches on a specific topic.

Without a single content archive people struggle to find desired content.

The lack of a common repository also makes it more likely that different regions will create their own independent and duplicative internal content repositories, resulting in wasted resources and siloed content. Lack of proper storage for digital assets like social media posts, photos and videos, along with their associated rights and usage guidance, also limits proper usage.

**Reducing the total cost of content creation**
The largest savings are recovered from an increase in content re-use, where the marginal cost of content creation is minimized by creating it only once.

Comms portals become an online "home" for other online tools to help manage day-to-day activities as well. Some companies have used online lists as places for people to record internal and external company awards that have been won, or those that they are pursuing. Also popular among communications collaboration tools are those that help manage the development of content for an event, particularly where interdepartmental approvals are needed.

Others have used online lists to manage complicated scheduling for executive interviews at events. Instead of emailing individual interview requests to a central coordinator, everyone can post their requests online and the list can then be reviewed and approved by central staff, thus avoiding the nightmare of hundreds of email requests and responses.
As with all of our tools, we can build the processes defining how our clients should manage email lists, PR Alerts and Comms Portals, and alternatively, we have shown that we can manage the tools day-to-day for our clients.

Gains from collaboration tools

Comms managers benefiting from collaboration tools

82% gain in 18 months

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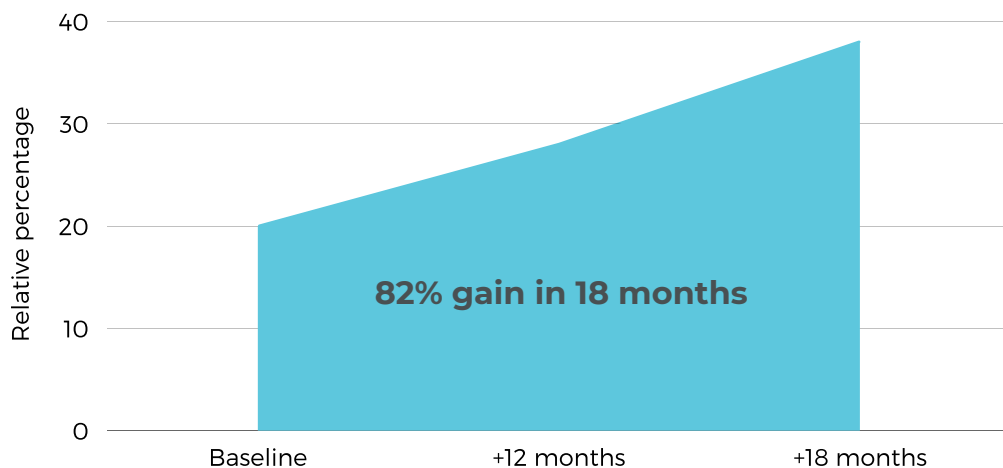
Measurement + Recognition

Isolation can be painful for smaller regions and countries. It's often difficult for people to know where to go for help and hard to find great examples of media coverage from others around the world, particularly when conventional PR measurement systems deliver volumes and statistics, as opposed to quality and outcomes. What this also means in a practical sense is that there is often little or no recognition for great proactive or reactive communications work outside one's region since there is no easy mechanism to share it.

The availability of internal social media tools for businesses, like Slack, Yammer and Facebook for Work, and "online lists" on an internal web portal where people can share their best work, have made solutions easier to implement.

Introducing a social media tool means there is an easy way for people to share great ideas, images and accomplishments, and at the same time, a centralized place to ask for help. People can react to others' ideas and answer questions, and all of this is automatically shared with colleagues using the tool.

Top Story Programs

For more formal result measurements, we build on the work done at Microsoft in creating their well-known "Top Story" measurement and recognition program, where managers submitted their best work and regional leaders validated the best. We can offer a simple tool where communications managers share their single best story or activity, based on defined criteria, each month or quarter. The submissions are then judged as "Top Stories" or other notable coverage. The resulting Top Stories then form the basis for annual awards for the best communications outcomes across a broad range of activities.

A Top Story program is not meant to be a replacement for more conventional volume-based coverage mechanism, but the resulting online library itself becomes a searchable, ready-to use "Best Practices" library to help people re-use great ideas.

Problem: We generally expect that the best coverage is the result of a proactive pitch that the company makes to a journalist, but if a company wants its communications team to drive more perception-changing coverage, it can be challenging to motivate the teams to change how they create and pitch stories. Traditional measurement programs that measure coverage volumes also don't help. Because of prohibitive costs, they rarely look deeply at the "quality" of coverage, which makes it difficult to understand how stories were landed and the impact they had, let alone identify "best practices."

Consequence: When we measure quantity, managers are motivated to chase volumes, not quality, with no guarantee that that a company will be able to improve public perceptions and grow sales. Additionally, without a quality measure, it's very hard to know what PR managers are actively pitching and landing. In this way, it's difficult to use traditional measurement programs to judge a team's accomplishments.

Solution: We generally expect the best coverage is the result of a proactive pitch that the company makes to a journalist. Our belief is that the best coverage best serves a company's business goals, is positive, includes relevant key messages, both within the journalist's reporting and through a company spokesperson. Further, research tells us that coverage is 25% more favorable and believable when a third party, such as a partner, customer, analyst or thought leader, endorses the business in some way.

Once a leadership team defines the characteristics that define great coverage for them, we can build and manage simple reporting tool and processes where communications managers once a quarter post their single best communications activity and identify these quality elements in their work. The proposed work is then judged, and leaders identify those pieces that fulfill the Top Story criteria for the quarter. The results can then be used cumulatively to determine annual recognition for the best work across a communications team.

There is also a secondary effect, which is that the Top Story program itself becomes a mechanism to drive the desired behavior, such as more "proactive stories" and increased use of company and external spokespeople to make the coverage even more powerful.

Watch John's full series of Collaborations Tools videos.

To learn more about how you can benefit from John's experience creating and implementing communications collaboration tools email us.

The Tantalus Advantage

Our experience building and managing these collaboration tools over the last 15 years reveals some best practices that set apart what we call "technology leaders," as well as the things other companies need to do to catch up. In particular, we can show how powerful and easy-to-use technology tools and underlying business processes can help change the culture of a team and improve the way teams and individuals work.

Things We've Learned
We have also learned the things that don't work well and recommend the following.

- Ask questions: We recommend starting with selected interviews across an organization to identify problems and establish interest in building the solutions. This is also a way to identify volunteers for a virtual team to help validate the solutions as they are being built. These same team members can also become regional experts and provide help locally.
- Work with IT: We also recommend working with a company's IT department from the very beginning, so that we gain their approval for software choices. We also been able to get help from IT in building the basic portals based on our specifications and handing off maintenance to us or to someone in the communications team.
- Keep it simple: We've learned that our tools and processes need to be simple, easy to learn, off-the-shelf, adopted quickly, and easy to maintain. They also need to be flexible and easily updated for organizational changes. This is why we always recommend standard software platforms, without lots of heavy customization. In this way, ongoing costs can be minimized.
- Training: While some communications professionals are comfortable with modern technology tools, others find internal websites, content searches, online forms – and even hyperlinks – challenging, so ongoing training needs to be planned. Once mastered, these tools are not unlike public social media tools, so these new digital skills will continue to be useful.

- Build a culture that values great content: We are convinced that great content can be created anywhere, and in this way, the larger team is better served when content is shared, discoverable, and developed and adapted to be used by everyone. Many organizations use headquarters teams and agency partners to create the majority of content for stories, announcements and events, but great work is being created in the field as well, yet that content is often hidden and hard for others to find. Our collaboration tools and processes, like PR Alerts, Top Story programs and a single content library mean that anyone can share their stories or communications assets for others to localize and re-use.
- Get endorsement from leadership: New tools must be endorsed and used by an organization's leadership team. If the leaders use the tools themselves, particularly for recognizing great work, it's more likely that team members will use these tools and be motivated to share and re-use content. Another strategy is for a communications leader to provide information that is only accessible within the communications portal or via a social media tool, thus stimulating the use of these tools.
- Be an evangelist: Finally, this work is really a part of the larger practice of "change management," and a crucial part of the job is to be an evangelist, showing people how new ways to work can build bridges between us instead of silos.

Conclusion

Understanding how to get the most out of existing processes and information technology can be daunting to communications teams, and trying to keep abreast of new technologies can be harder still. No wonder that lots of decision makers struggle with IT investments and keep older solutions far longer than they should. The Tantalus Group can help by providing our combined communication and technology expertise to make the entire journey more manageable, from concept to implementation and training. Embarking on a such project offers a rare opportunity to rewire how a team works.

About John Schweizer
Communications Collaboration Expert
Senior Consultant | Paris, France

John has 30 years of experience working at the intersection of communications, information technology and team leadership in North America and Europe. For the past 15 years, he has held global operations and change management roles in Paris, France at Microsoft and Renault-Nissan-Mitsubishi, where he served as an evangelist for integrating technology tools to build modern communications teams.

Prior to this, he was a writer on information technology, food and drink, and venture capital for The Economist Intelligence Unit, the research arm of The Economist Group.

Before moving to France, John spent the majority of his career California, where he was the chief of staff for the honorable Jackie Speier, who currently serves as a representative for California's 14th congressional district. He also had a long career at Pacific Bell, California's telecommunications utility, where he last served as director of consumer affairs, focused on public policy, government relations, executive speechwriting and crisis communications.

John has a BA in History from Pomona College in Claremont, California and studied History at University College in Oxford. He speaks English and French.

"John built a backbone for what we do in communications, knocking down silos and setting standards for how our teams work together. He'll leave his legacy in the form of many systems people will continue to use for a long time, and I hope his successor has the same combination of patience, passion and attention to detail."

Nick Maxfield, Global Corporate Communications, Nissan Motor Corporation (former); Communications Officer, Machine Learning for Healthcare, University of Cambridge.

The Tantalus Group
Global Management Consulting

The Tantalus Group is a global management consulting firm. We advise leaders on business opportunities and threats, from strategy, marketing, communications, organization and digital, to business transformation, change management, sustainability and mergers and acquisitions. Our business cuts across all sectors and geographies.

We have a team of consultants in Asia, Europe and North America and draw on decades of practical experience advising CEOs, CFOs, CCOs and executive committees. We also work closely with teams within companies, to better understand the unique demands of working in a fast-paced, changing global environment.

Our differentiator is our people. Team Tantalus work in the far-flung corners of the globe, speak many languages and know how to listen. We also have a long list of business-tested case studies to help you create the right strategy for communication, including straightforward timelines, budgets and measurement.

How we work
Are you looking for good counsel on how to engage employees, customers, government officials, non-governmental organizations, the media, analysts and investors? Do you need both strategy and execution? How about an understanding of global markets, issues like climate change, trends like social media and the great barrier to communication, cultural differences?

As a global management consulting firm The Tantalus Group provides management consulting services that improve a company's economic performance by analyzing strategic goals and objectives, determining shortcomings or areas for improvement, and providing best-practice strategy, execution, training and development.

Contact Tantalus to ascend faster with the Communications Collaboration Tools used by the world's top companies.