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Title: ETF Communication Week 2013 **Division A:** Internal Communications.

Overview

The European Training Foundation (ETF) is a European Union-funded agency that supports the development of education and training systems in 30 non-EU 'partner' nations. These include countries that border or are close to EU member states, from the Balkans and the former Soviet republics of central Asia to the Middle East and North Africa. The ETF's core mission is to help these EU 'neighbours' develop the skills of their populations in order to promote political stability, economic development and human rights.

This work includes initiatives in education governance; skills assessment and planning; national and regional strategies; and the ETF has an excellent reputation for knowledge and expertise in improving the quality of vocational education and training systems, even in countries facing very challenging political and economic circumstances.

A staff survey in 2012 indicated a widespread view among ETF staff that they could achieve better outcomes by increasing their capability and confidence in a range of communication skills. The survey, conducted by respected consultancy ORC International, tested levels of employee engagement and satisfaction against previous survey results and external benchmarks. The survey revealed a healthy overall engagement index of 74 per cent, with above-benchmark results for items relating to job satisfaction, pay and benefits and teamwork. Moreover, the number of employees willing to recommend the ETF as 'a great place to work' rose by 18 per centage points compared to the previous staff survey.

Alongside these strong headline results the survey revealed an opportunity to improve internal and external engagement in the ETF's objectives, and build the staff's ability to explain the impact of their work. By doing so, the ETF aims to strengthen its relationships with funders in EU institutions and break through the complex, technical nature of its projects to share the story more effectively.

Senior management asked the Communication and HR teams to respond to the staff's stated desire for better communication skills and this request was met by organising a 'Communication Week' training programme from 12 to 20 September 2013.

Stakeholder analysis

The ETF is based in Turin, Italy, and there are 27 different nationalities among the staff. The working language is English, and all the events and materials for the Communication Week were produced in English. Communication Week was open to all 133 ETF staff, the majority of whom are country and subject experts working on geographic and thematic projects, with the usual support and administrative functions. The largest group is the Operations team with 77, then Administration (11), Communication (11), Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (9), Human Resources (8), Director's Office (7), Finance and Procurement (6) and ICT (4). The gender balance is 70 per cent female, 30 per cent male, with an average age of 46.

The nature of the ETF's work as a development agency specialising in vocational education and training along with its reputation for excellence in service delivery have attracted loyal and long-serving employees, with the average length of service being close to 11 years. This is a highly educated, multi-lingual and internationally experienced staff group with extensive knowledge and first-hand experience of education and training in terms of policy development, strategic planning, operational activity and evaluation.

Goals and objectives

Goals

The overall goal was to provide the right mix of training opportunities to meet the needs of ETF staff as articulated in the employee opinion survey. The sessions also needed to be sufficiently high-quality to meet the standards of an organisation that is all about education and training, and attractive enough to tempt colleagues away from their busy schedules as participation was entirely voluntary. Additionally, the Communication and HR teams wanted to demonstrate the ETF's commitment to a more strategic approach to staff training and development needs.

Objectives

- Participation of 50 per cent of all ETF staff in at least one of the Communication Week activities, measured by registered attendance
- Satisfaction ratings averaging 90% for the programme sessions, measured by feedback forms provided at the end of sessions
- Staff confidence in their ability to make use the skills learned at Communication Week, measured by a post-event survey
- Reinforce the strong employee engagement index in the all-staff survey, also measured in the post-event survey.

Planning

Given the need for a solution that would deliver the necessary skills, accommodate diaries and attract colleagues from a range of functions – including many who would not consider themselves 'communicators' – the Communication and HR teams devised a week-long festival of skills that was designed to be:

- distinctive
- accessible
- high quality, and
- enjoyable

Senior management supported the festival idea, and consultations were made across the organisation to establish which skills would deliver the most benefit. It was clear that strategic internal communication was top of the list as, despite being a relatively small organisation, many people expressed the view that going beyond basic approaches to internal communication would help them to better understand and deliver the ETF's goals. Secondly, since most of the ETF's employees are non-native English speakers, help with writing skills was identified as being important too. The rise of digital media, particularly social networking tools and digital asset management, was also high on the list. It was also suggested to include sessions on the use of theatre to explore communication challenges and organisational storytelling to ensure that participants would have the opportunity to experience a diverse set of perspectives.

Finally, two informal networking events to top and tail the week and give participants an opportunity to share their expectations and experiences were planned. ETF Director Madlen Serban signed off the plan in May, and preparations began with a view to delivering the programme in the autumn.

Execution

Having set the dates and sourced the required training suppliers we implemented a programme with a total of 15 sessions, including writing, visual communication, e-mail and intranet management and organisational storytelling. The programme featured well-known, specialised communication figures as the core trainers, along with local providers and internal expertise where appropriate, covering the widest possible range of communication disciplines.

The programme activities were based on engagement and involvement of staff and different event formats were used. In addition to sessions with presentations and dialogue, the theatre group accompanied a story telling session with a mimic performance and the photo session included a “photo haiku” engaging participants in finding motives in their near surroundings.

Results

Colleagues from HR monitored attendance at all the Communication Week events. Feedback forms were provided at most events. A post-event survey was published on the ETF intranet in October.

The breadth of training available in the Communication Week programme matched the areas identified in the staff survey, supported by the pre-event consultations. This was the first time that a training programme delivered internally had been so closely based on specific employee input.

- By the end of Communication Week 61% of staff had attended at least one event, and average attendance was 2.33 events per delegate, representing almost 8 hours of training during the course of the week.
- The average satisfaction rating for the sessions was 92%, demonstrating that the overall experience was of a sufficiently high quality to match the type of events at the ETF enjoyed by external stakeholders.
- Staff confidence in their ability to make use of the skills learned was measured by a post-event survey. 41% of Communication Week attendees completed the survey, with 47% saying they were able to use the skills they had acquired to some or a great extent in their work.
- Improvement in internal communication is slow, with only 19% of survey respondents saying that the ETF’s internal communication had improved to some or a great extent following Communication Week.
- However, staff engagement remains strong as measured by repeating the employee opinion survey question on whether staff would recommend the ETF as a great place to work, with 61% responding positively.

These results, along with anecdotal feedback received by the Communication and HR teams, show that Communication Week created a positive impact across the organisation. By setting the bar high in terms of the breadth and quality of the sessions, securing high-profile international names among the presenters and including a ‘feel-good’ hospitality element in the programme the overall goals of delivering training to meet the staff’s stated needs while providing a relevant and appropriate experience were met.