

Good morning. It's Midlands Weekly and Suzanne Jameson, Communications Manager at LWP, has joined us to discuss the effect of new technology on companies' communication. Welcome, Suzanne.

Thank you.

Let's start with the internet and intranets. They seem the perfect way for companies to communicate – but is this the case?

Well, as workers in some companies become more geographically separated, often as a result of cost-cutting measures where operations move to cheaper areas, managers need a way to boost staff morale and build a corporate culture, that is, get employees to feel part of the same team wherever they are and teach them to understand the core qualities of the business.

And this is where intranets have a major role?

Exactly. In some companies, certain staff rarely come into the office. For example, a quarter of IBM's workforce is mobile, spending over 80% of their time off-site, working from home or on the road. Key people might even be based in markets abroad, a day's air travel away from head office.

That's true. And things are changing faster and faster these days, so I imagine a company intranet allows you to explain to employees what's happening, and why.

Exactly. It allows companies to ensure that every employee shares the same corporate news, views and vision. Some use it to teach employees (and suppliers and customers) their ethical code, like the policy on accepting free gifts from suppliers. Boeing, for instance, offers an online 'ethics challenge'.

So what other uses are made of company intranets?

Well, another key use is that bosses tell staff the direction they want the company to go in. For example, at Ford, which claims to have the world's largest intranet, 170,000 staff around the world are emailed a weekly note from Jac Nasser, the CEO. A purpose-built newsroom there maintains a website that's upgraded several times a day, and is available in English to Ford's employees around the world, as well as to staff at its new acquisitions such as Volvo.

Aha. Suzanne, we've been speaking about the benefits of new technology, particularly company intranets. Are there any negative effects?

Oh yes. All this communication from on high can certainly cause problems. At SAP, the German business-software giant, for example, they found that some middle managers objected to the Chairman emailing all employees. You see, their authority had rested partly on their role as a source of information, and without it they felt undermined or threatened. So what appeared to be a simple, time-saving innovation turned out to be more complex and politically sensitive.

I see.

And there might be some sensitivity as communications become increasingly bottom-up as well as top-down. The Chief Information Officer at Siemens, a person called Chittur Ramakrishnan, for example, has noticed a significant number of emails going directly to top management. The idea of going through a secretary has altered. People can send emails to anyone and expect a response. It's all very democratizing,

So it sounds. Suzanne, I'm afraid we're going to have to stop there. Thank you for joining us today.

You're welcome.