02

How to organise your communications network
The core business of a European Works Council or an SE Representative Body is ‘information and consultation’. Both concepts are based on communication. Information is the transmission of data by the employer in such a way that it enables the employees’ representatives to undertake an in-depth assessment of the possible impact and, where appropriate, prepare for consultations. Consultation is a dialogue, an exchange of views and an opportunity to express an opinion about the proposed measures.
An EWC’s communication tasks encompass much more than that, however. Above all, the EWC is a network of committed trade unionists and other works council members, who can learn a lot from each other by exchanging experiences.

EWC members are also expected to represent collectively the interests of all employees and they have an obligation to inform local representatives or, where there are none, the workforce as a whole of the content and outcome of the information and consultation procedure.

It is clear that communication is the oil that keeps the engine of European representation running. It should therefore be closely monitored at all levels. This booklet aims to help you do just that.
1. A little theory

When considering communication, it is useful to distinguish three elements. There is (1) a sender, (2) a message and (3) a receiver.

Sender
- Think before you speak (or write); organise your thoughts.
- Express yourself clearly, use simple words and avoid abstractions.
- Do not transmit too much information at once.
- In verbal communication, focus on the signals of the receiver and look for feedback.

Receiver
- Listen (read) without prejudice; try not to be selective.
- Listen actively and check if you have understood the message correctly.
- Ask questions for clarification.
- Let the sender know if there is something you don’t understand.

Apart from this, communication problems may also arise from the message content. It may be too complex, assuming a level of prior knowledge that the receiver does not have. It may be too simple or may not contain enough details to be properly understood. Messages can also be confusing. If the sender and/or receiver has a hidden agenda, clear communication can be very difficult and can often lead to misunderstandings or even conflict.

2. The communications network

Communication is the lifeblood of the EWC. This means that it has to flow constantly. It should never be one-sided or a one-off event.

As most EWCs meet only once or twice a year, communication between meetings is crucial to keep the lifeblood flowing. Workers’ representatives must therefore have the necessary communication means, including tools (e-mail, phone), mobility (access to all sites) and time off. This should be guaranteed for all members through a specific article in the agreement.
Communication flows between

**at European level:**
- EWC members;
- the EWC and all employees;
- the EWC and central management;
- the EWC and the Select Committee;
- the EWC and the European Trade Union Federation;
- the EWC and board-level employee representatives;
- the Select Committee and central management;
- the European Trade Union Federation and local trade unions.

**at national level:**
- EWC members from the same country;
- EWC members and their local constituencies;
- EWC members and their local trade unions;
- EWC members and their local management.

You can use this as a checklist. What are the most important flows for your EWC? Do you organise them effectively? If not, how can this be improved?

IT tools are essential for internal communications. Every representative should have a computer, internet access and a secure mail address. However, the fact that not everyone is used to working on a computer is often overlooked. The agreement should therefore also include the option of undergoing basic IT training.

Moreover, an efficient EWC is the heart of an extensive communications network that encompasses many different parties, which are all ‘senders’ and ‘receivers’.
EWC members should be notified of when and where the SC will meet, and what issues are on the agenda. A short e-mail notification 10 days before the meeting will allow everyone to forward their comments or add other topics for discussion. After every SC meeting, a short report with the main conclusions should be sent to the members.

Some Select Committees organise regular video or conference calls in which all EWC members can participate if they so wish. In that case, interpreters may be required to assist the individual participants at their location. These types of calls can never replace face-to-face meetings but they can be a useful addition to the communications network.

3. The roots of the EWC

The EWC collectively represents all employees in Europe. Therefore, it has to be firmly ‘rooted’ in the local subsidiaries. It is not an honorary institution for super-delegates or some far-off anonymous bureaucracy. It must be familiar to, supported by and promoted by its constituencies in every country. The more an EWC is ‘rooted’ in this way, the better chance it will have of influencing company policies to the benefit of employees.

Indeed, a firmly ‘rooted’ EWC will have a stronger voice in its dealings with management. It will be better informed about what goes on in the subsidiaries, it will be able to suggest alternatives that will be accepted at local level and it will be able to provide an early warning.
about decisions that could lead to conflict. In this way, management could see the EWC as an important partner with which it should engage in serious dialogue. On the other hand, if the EWC is not ‘rooted’, nobody outside the meeting room will care about what happens there, and it will be easy for management to brush other opinions aside.

To have strong roots, EWC members should make sure that they have ongoing exchanges with local workers’ representatives and the employees they represent, both as ‘senders’ and ‘receivers’. As a ‘sender’, an EWC must make sure that the employees know who the European representatives are and how to contact them, inform them when a meeting is scheduled and, afterwards, provide a report on the content and outcome of the information and consultation procedure. Any opinion expressed by the EWC should also be published within the company. Detailed minutes are probably unnecessary, but a short newsletter is a good way of organising this flow of communication.

As a ‘sender’, many different tools can be used. Existing channels can be a quick and simple solution. The company may have an internal newsletter and/or intranet that the EWC can use. National or local works councils and trade unions may have their own channels, such as pamphlets or billboards. You could even ask for some time to speak about the EWC at staff meetings.

When ‘sending’ information as an EWC, it is important to look at the issue from the perspective of an average employee. What important information should he/she know about the EWC? What would trigger his/her interest? In general, the answer will be to make the information as specific as possible.

The EWC should also be a ‘receiver’ in its communications with employees. In order to represent them properly, but also to give informed feedback to management, the EWC members cannot just depend on their own observations and experiences. In particular, when one person represents more than one site, it is crucial to ensure access to all sites, mobility, the means required for travel, and so on.

In countries with group or central works councils, such as the Netherlands, Germany and France, this should not be very difficult. In other countries, however, it can pose quite a challenge.

It is therefore useful to take an inventory at an internal meeting of the workers’ representatives.
or at a training session of all of the available channels and bottlenecks in communications with the local workforce. The EWC should not leave it up to the individual members to solve problems in this respect. The EWC as a whole should be ‘rooted’, paying special attention to countries where this might be problematic. Both central and local management must be involved in finding adequate solutions.

Another way of improving the relations between the EWC and employees is to hold regular meetings at alternating locations in or near subsidiaries of the company. If this is not possible for the entire EWC, then the Select Committee at least should make an effort to organise its meetings at different sites, thus acting as ‘ambassador’ for the European body. This makes even more sense in exceptional circumstances, when decisions with a significant impact on employees’ interests require an extraordinary meeting to be organised. Holding this type of meeting in one of the locations concerned sends a strong signal to the local workforce that the EWC is taking up their concerns.

4. Linking the local and the European level

Communication between the members of the EWC and making sure that the EWC is firmly ‘rooted’ are two sides of the same coin. Without input from the local level, EWC members will not have a great deal to talk about. The importance of the information that the workers’ representatives can share with one another is often underestimated.

- Members from countries with a well-developed system of industrial relations will often have earlier or more detailed information than others.
- New projects are often tried out in one location and then ‘rolled out’ in other countries.
- Future restructurings can often be foreseen by analysing investments and production flows.

Every member holds a piece of the puzzle. If you put these together, a surprising picture may appear!

Many EWC agreements exclude discussions on collective bargaining issues or strictly local matters, but there is nothing to prevent employee representatives from exchanging best practices and learning from one another’s experiences. If an agreement has been reached on a particular subject in one country, it can be very useful as a basis for discussion in another country.

When preparing for meetings, it is now common practice to send out a questionnaire. This should not be overly biased towards one country, but should be easy to understand in every country. It should refer to information that the member can obtain without too much effort or time and it should be relevant.

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### Example of a questionnaire

This form should be completed in full and returned to the EWC secretary by e-mail every three months on the 1st of February, May, August and November. The information in this questionnaire should focus on any changes in your site or region over the last quarter or any follow-up to situations that have been previously communicated.

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<th>Compiled by (name):</th>
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<th>Representing (country):</th>
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<th>Location (site):</th>
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#### Investments
Have any investments been made or announced?

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<th>yes – no</th>
<th>details</th>
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#### Employment
Has the workforce increased or decreased considerably or have any significant changes in staff numbers been announced?

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<tr>
<th>yes – no</th>
<th>details</th>
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#### Outsourcing
Has any work that was previously carried out in your site or region been outsourced or has any such plan been announced?

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>yes – no</th>
<th>details</th>
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#### Sales
Is business booming, poor or relatively stable?

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<th>booming – bust – stable</th>
<th>details</th>
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#### Organisational changes
Have any structural changes, new working methods or production processes been introduced or announced?

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<th>yes – no</th>
<th>details</th>
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#### Well-being
Is the employees' level of satisfaction improving, declining or relatively stable?

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<th>up – down – stable</th>
<th>details</th>
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#### Other questions and observations
If you have any specific questions or if there are any other matters you wish to bring to the attention of the EWC, please outline them below.
You can of course add any other subjects of interest, such as environmental measures, equal opportunities or vocational training, or ask for specific input on the integration of newly acquired companies. The results of the questionnaire may be presented and discussed during a country round at the pre-meeting. Alternatively, the Select Committee could prepare a summary and identify potential transnational issues, which could also be included on the agenda of the meeting with management. In any case, this is a good way of keeping the European spirit alive between official meetings.

5. Intercultural communication

What about cultural differences between representatives from so many countries? It would seem that these are not really an issue after all. Experience shows that the more the EWC members really work together, the less the impact of their cultural background. People are different: genders, jobs, education, ages, political orientations and ethnic origins all differ. It is important to recognise, respect and understand these differences. A strong EWC knows how to deal with this and use each person’s strengths to best effect, while avoiding putting people in a position in which they do not feel comfortable. One colleague may feel confident enough to enter into difficult discussions with management, while another might prefer the task of welcoming new members and making them feel at home.

Different styles of communication may be used. In general, two are two main types in most EWCs: ‘position-building’ and ‘problem-solving’. Combining these styles incorrectly can lead to frustration, but when wisely applied they can be a useful tool. Position-building is required when you need to develop your strengths. This can be done by making strong and firm declarations. Problem-solving, on the other hand, can help to break a deadlock and move forward. These types of contributions will provide solutions, alternatives and practical suggestions.

More confrontational industrial cultures tend to focus on position-building, while colleagues from a more cooperative background are generally better at problem-solving. One is not better than the other, but it is crucial to ensure that they are used in a balanced way in the appropriate situation.

Europe has a rich pattern of cultural diversity. This does not have to become an obstacle, as long as every EWC member is patient, and has a sense of humour and an open mind. In addition, it is important for the EWC to become a team. Dedicating some time to team-building will certainly bear fruit in this regard. In a team there is room for different styles, but also the possibility of correcting behaviour that might be harmful to the group. There is no cultural excuse for being aggressive, making unfounded accusations or taking too much time in a meeting to express a very personal opinion if it means that others are no longer able to speak.

6. Languages

With so many countries around the table, language is an unavoidable complication. Even if your language skills are well developed, you will never be able to understand or participate fully
in a discussion unless you can do that in your mother tongue. Therefore, it is best to stipulate in the agreement that simultaneous interpretation will be available at meetings at the very least to anyone who requests it. Indeed, all documents should also be translated into the languages concerned.

That does not solve every problem, however. Even the best simultaneous interpretation cannot avoid misunderstandings. Working with interpreters requires certain skills.

During breaks and after meetings, communication between members should continue to flow. However, you cannot have an interpreter by your side at all times so it is very beneficial if at least some of the representatives can speak

**Interpretation etiquette**

- Use the appropriate technical equipment (booths, microphones, headsets).
- Start the meeting by explaining how the equipment works and which languages can be heard on which channels.
- Send the interpreters as much written information as possible in advance so that they can familiarise themselves with the content and technical terms.
- If the documents are only available at the last minute, make sure that the interpreters receive a copy before the presentation starts.
- Only one person can speak at any one time; request the floor by raising your hand.
- When taking the floor, wait until the interpreters have finished interpreting the words of the previous speaker.
- Speak at a natural pace, neither too quick, nor too slow.
- Speak into the microphone, but not too close.
- Avoid word play, jokes and metaphors. They are often very difficult or even impossible to translate.
- Pronounce names and numbers clearly.
- Take off your headset and keep it away from the microphone while you speak in order to avoid annoying feedback.
Speaking in tongues

- Use e-mail rather than calling each other over the phone. This allows you to take your time to understand the message and consult a dictionary.
- Keep your messages short and simple. Avoid very technical vocabulary or ambiguity.
- Familiarise yourself with free online tools such as Google Translate or BabelFish.
- As e-mail does not guarantee an immediate response, agree in your internal rules that e-mails will always be answered within 48 hours, for example.
- A does not necessarily have to communicate directly with B. Maybe C speaks both languages and can act as an intermediary. Analyse the language skills within your EWC and develop a hierarchy of communication on that basis.
- Other colleagues or even family members or friends may be able to help you to understand messages in a language that they speak.
- Never use language differences as an excuse not to communicate. Do not be afraid to make mistakes and, in the end, there is always body language...

different languages. You do not need to be fluent; some basic knowledge may suffice to make yourself understood. Language training can be helpful, although this should not be used as an excuse to reduce the support of professional interpreters. Some EWCs have agreed to use only English. This can be a viable solution when it is already the corporate or professional language, for example in the financial sector or in IT companies. Nevertheless, it is advisable to ensure that there is always a fallback option of interpretation in case members with insufficient knowledge of English wish to participate fully in the discussions.

As far as members of the Select Committee are concerned, it is best if they speak a common language as this will facilitate constant communication between them. Here, too, however, the ability to speak English should not be a condition for joining the Select Committee and interpretation must be made available.

Nevertheless, there are ways of overcoming a language barrier without professional assistance. You may find the tips in the adjacent box helpful.

7. Setting the example

Communication has to flow: during meetings, but especially between meetings. It is the heartbeat of the European Works Council. Some may still be searching for ways to organise their network, others are very advanced and use video and telephone conferencing for constant updates or have appointed their own webmaster to manage a dedicated EWC website. To help you find your own solution, here are some examples of best practices.

example 1 Nokia EuroForum, 13.06.2002

‘General information and summaries will be posted on a web-based team room equipped with login identifications and passwords ... The objective is to improve access to information amongst EuroForum employee representatives and the dissemination of information to Nokia’s EU-based employees.'
A EuroForum e-mail address will be established in order to facilitate the collection of questions from Nokia’s EU employees.’

**example 2** Lagardère European Works Council, 1.01.2003

‘In order to facilitate internal communication, the members of the EWC shall receive a list of the addresses of the undertakings, telephone and fax-numbers and e-mail addresses of all of the members... As an experiment during this first term of office, the EWC shall have a computer forum at its disposal ... which shall be reserved exclusively for the 30 full members and 30 deputy members.’

**example 3** Tyco European Works Council, 22.02.2007

‘In order to allow all employee representatives to consult with local employees in advance of and following a ... meeting, local management in each Member State will, if so requested, arrange for up to two confidential teleconferences as soon as practicable ... The confidential teleconference shall be between the relevant employee representative and such national works council and or trade union representatives in that Member State as the employee representative wishes. Local management will also allow the employee representative to have reasonable and confidential access ... through fax, telephone, e-mail or other such available facilities.’

**example 4** Hilton European Consultative Forum, 2.09.2004

‘The company will provide an intranet site for the ECF on ‘hiway’. The site will include a historical record of the work of the ECF, the agreement, notes of meetings and joint communications.’

**example 5** Air France KLM European Works Council, 28.04.2010

‘The Group Management will provide the necessary means to start and maintain an internet site dedicated to the AFKL EWC (information, forum, etc.). In all undertakings and/or establishments of Air France KLM Group where the employees’ representatives are authorised to use an intranet portal, the AFKL EWC will be also.’

**example 6** Carlson Wagonlit Travel European Works Council, 6.06.2014

‘The EWC members will maintain close contact with the national employee representatives throughout the year. This should enable them to identify the consequences any project under discussion could have locally and optimally prepare for the discussions at the level of the EWC.’
This booklet was developed by the European Workers’ Participation Competence Centre (EWPCC). It is the second of a series of practical and helpfully illustrated manuals for workers’ representatives in transnational information and consultation bodies.

Editorial team Sjef Stoop (FNV Formaat), Bruno Demaître (etui), Romuald Jagodzinski (etui)
Illustrations © Juan Mendez
Graphic Design Coast-Agency

For more information, please contact: Bruno Demaître (etui) bdemaitre@etui.org