

# **Creating employee advocates**

**The role of internal communications**

Portland



# Foreword

When Nick Ciubotariu read an article in the New York Times alleging his employer, Amazon, to be a ‘bruising workplace’ which treated staff disrespectfully, he was furious. He took to social media to express his anger, telling everyone in his circle that, from his point of view, the New York Times had got Amazon completely wrong.

His impassioned defence of Amazon from an employee perspective was viewed over one million times, and created headlines around the world. This simply could not have happened a decade ago. Social media has completely transformed the level of influence that one person, or one employee, can have on the reputation of a business. Today, public recommendations from employees generate positive outcomes for businesses – lifting trust in brands; attracting and retaining talent and boosting morale. Organisations that have been successful in empowering their employees have seen their reach increase and their reputation enhanced. The #Lifeatloreal campaign where employees shared their experiences on Instagram received more than 200,000 impressions. Active, connected workforces are not always good news of course, as Sainsbury’s found out just last Christmas. Their multi-million pound festive advert was hacked by a Tweet from a disgruntled employee who pointed out the double standard of celebrating family at Christmas time while requiring employees to work.

For better or worse, the rules of the game have changed, and it is clear that the way businesses engage their employees must change also.

“ Funny that @sainsburys xmas advert is all about being at home wi family at xmas, yet they’ve got me down to work xmas eve and boxing day”

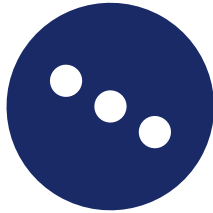
A tweet by an employee generates negative coverage

## Portland’s point of view

We believe that the role of employees as spokesperson and public representatives of their organisation is set to grow; and that organisations need to design and deliver integrated communication strategies that respond to employee expectations and lead them on the path to advocacy. To better understand the triggers that encourage employees to become brand ambassadors; we conducted a survey of over 2,000 employees across the US and the UK, covering all industries, seniority level and company sizes. We have found that a large majority of employees are ready to become advocates; and just need to be provided with the tools, the information or a wider sense of context to become active advocates. The next pages present the results of our survey.

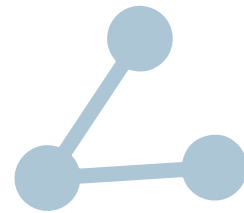
# The current landscape: An opportunity

## ADVOCACY IS CURRENTLY LIMITED



**5%** of employees share company news on social media

Only **30%** could recall when they were last inspired to speak positively **about their company**



## BUT EMPLOYEES ARE PROUD...



**88%** are proud of the work their company does

And **80%** are prepared to speak about the positive aspect of their work



## ... AND CONNECTED



**77%** of under 34s use social media at work at least once a day

**Half** of all employees are connected to colleagues on Facebook and WhatsApp



# Mapping the path to advocacy

Our research sought to segment employees according to their propensity to support their employer externally.

We have identified five steps which would lead employees from disengagement to active advocacy.

The first two steps relate to employees' personal beliefs. We believe that for an employee to become a company advocate, they must feel proud of the work that the company does and be willing to talk about this with others. If these two beliefs are not present, then an employee will be unable to be activated as an advocate.

The second two steps relate to information available. While an employee can be proud and willing to share information, it is critical that they understand the wider context their company is operating in; and is equipped with the tools to explain it externally.

The final step moves beyond stated beliefs and relates to behaviour. It measures the conversion of key beliefs into action, namely the sharing of information both internally with colleagues and also externally with people outside of the company.



# Where are your employees?

“80% of employees are willing to support their employers externally”



## Active Advocates

Will speak about community outreach and new developments in the organisation.



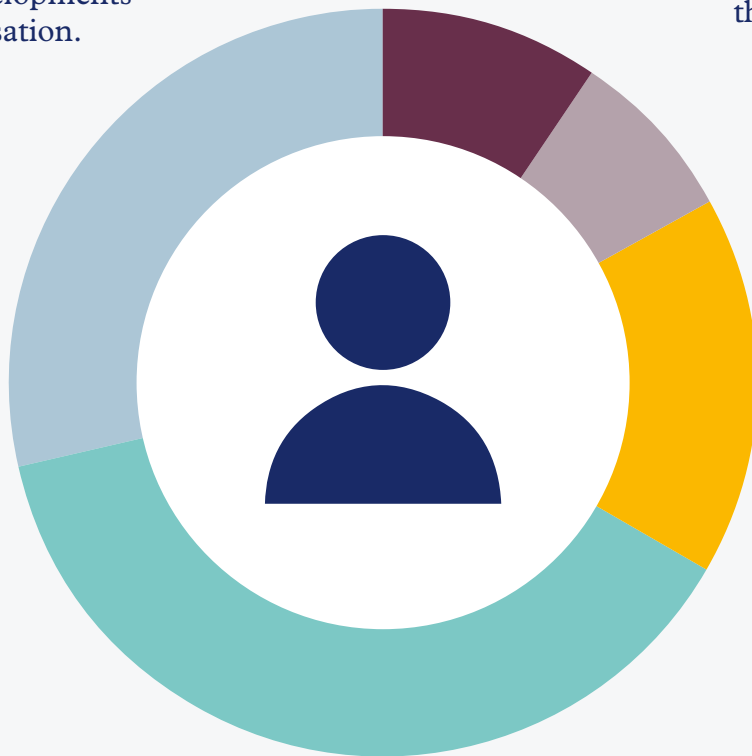
## Detractors

Are not proud of their employer and will spread negativity.



## Silent Supporters

Less connected than others and unwilling to speak out.



## Almost Ambassadors

The largest employee group. Lack a sense of permissibility to turn willingness into activity.



## Loose Cannons

Are prepared to support their company externally but do not feel equipped to do so.

# Detailed analysis

## 1. Detractors

“Only 12% of employees are not proud of the work that their company does”

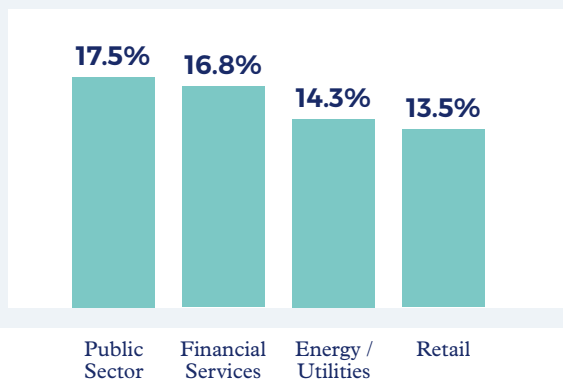


Detractors fall at the first hurdle towards advocacy. They do not feel proud of the work that their company does, which makes it incredibly unlikely that they would act as company advocates. They are slightly more common in the UK versus US, but appear across a range of ages, seniorities, sectors and company sizes.

### What prevents employees from feeling proud ?

- Work – life balance
- My salary
- Colleagues and other staff
- CEO and Exec leadership team
- Company strategic vision

### Industries with the highest proportion of detractors



**Aim:** Neutralise negativity.

**Risk:** Spread of disengagement.

**Why?:** Detractors most commonly attribute their lack of pride in the work that the company does to personal issues such as work-life balance, salary and colleagues. Ensuring that these aspects are clearly understood and managed will therefore be important to neutralising any negative sentiment that might be spread to others.

**Approach:** Those who feel proud about their company also mention the company output as a driving factor, including the quality of work, products and customers, client service. Reinforcing these aspects of the business may help to shift detractors along the advocacy activation model.

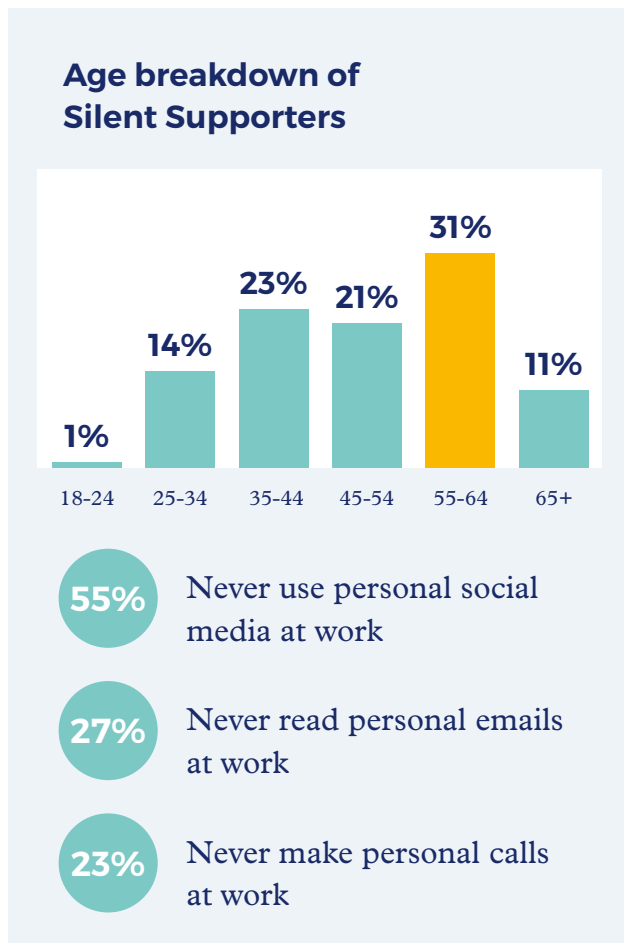
# Detailed analysis

## 2. Silent Supporters

“8% of employees are proud of the work that their company does but not willing to tell others about it”



The Silent Supporters hold their company in high esteem but something is stopping them from sharing positive aspects of their company with others. They are slightly more common in older employees suggesting that this might be a generational issue. They are also less likely to read personal emails or use social media at work than other employees.



**Aim:** Specific calls to action.

**Risk:** Lack of connection leads to loss of pride.

**Why?:** This group has the potential to be advocates if they can be persuaded to share their positive sentiment. However, this could be challenging as they appear less well connected generally.

**Action:** With this group, it will be important that you are very explicit about what you want them to do. Clear messaging that is consistent internally and externally, with guidelines for sharing will be key. In addition to the correct information resources, they may also need the necessary tools to bring their positive message into the world. Additional social media training will attempt to encourage silent supporters to feel more comfortable in the digital space. Increased company visibility online can also allow proud bystanders to share this content with their online networks.



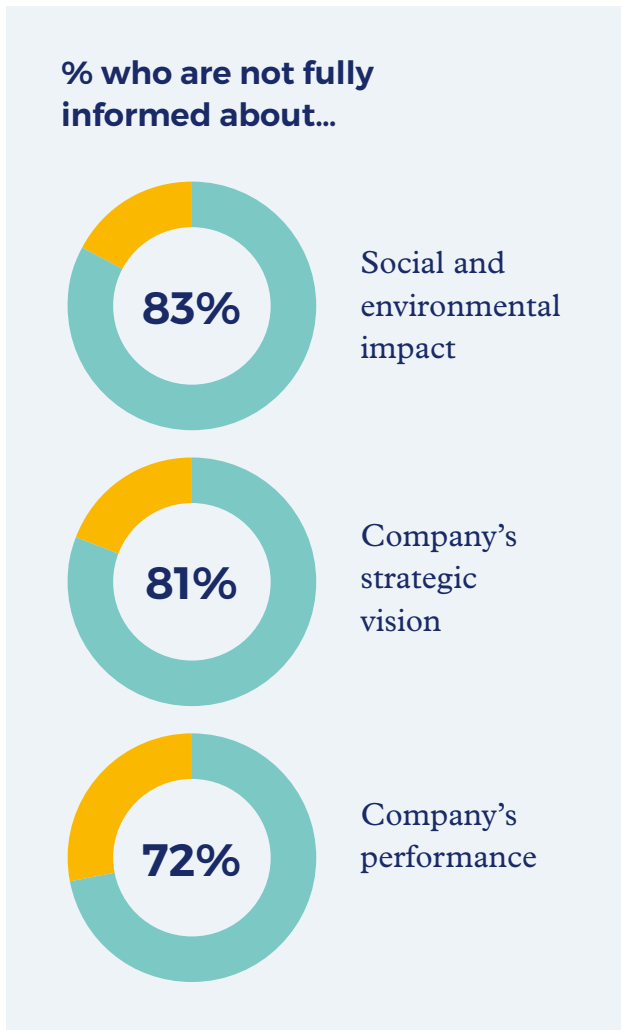
# Detailed analysis

## 3. Loose Cannons

“81% of employees in this group feel uninformed about their company’s strategic vision”



Loose cannons are particularly crucial for companies to address as they are both proud and willing to share positive information about their work but feel they do not receive enough support from their company. They also present a risk of sharing dissonant or incorrect corporate messaging.



**Aim:** Provide adequate and consistent information.

**Risk:** Lose opportunity to ‘win’ middle ground.

**Why?:** Employees need to be equipped with the tools to understand their position, as well as that of their company.

**Approach:** The priority should be ensuring that these employees are fully informed about the company’s strategic vision and current performance, as well as their own performance and the wider social and environmental impact. The traditional methods of sharing this information are still preferred.

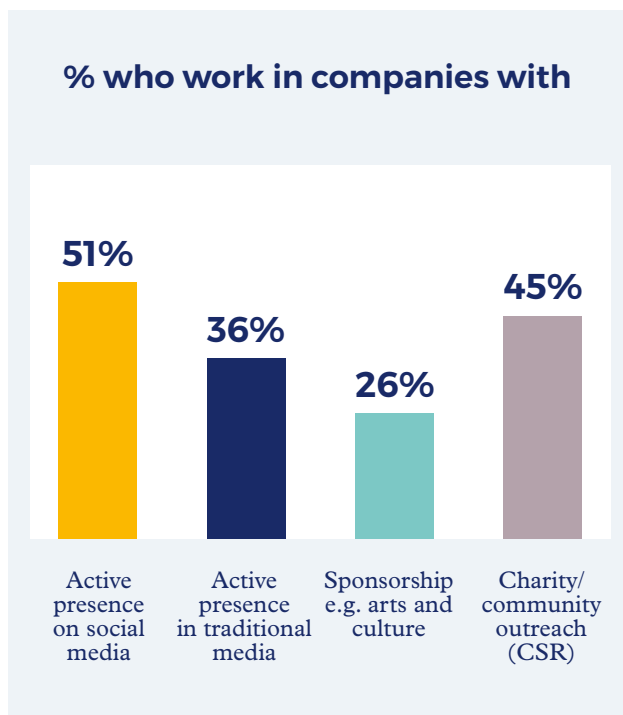
# Detailed analysis

## 4. Almost Ambassadors

“38% of employees are proud, willing and supported but still do not share company information externally”



Over a third of employees are reaching the Almost Ambassador stage of the model, where they say that they are proud of their organisation, willing to speak positively about it, and supported to do so – but they are effectively inactive.



**Aim:** Convert pride into action.

**Risk:** Passive employees, inactive when needed.

**Why?:** Engaging employees could have a huge impact. This group is the largest and the most important to convert, as they are just one step removed from being full ambassadors.

**Approach:** It is striking that it is among this group of employees that company’s social outreach is the same, and presence of external and internal media is lowest. This suggests that comprehensive communication strategies that seek to promote both internal and external communications campaign would be most effective.

# Detailed analysis

## 5. Active Advocates

“57% of active advocates are below the age of 44”



This group of employees have all of the characteristics of an ideal advocate. They are proud of the work that their company does, they are willing to tell others about it and they are supported by their company in sharing information. Current drivers for employee activity are community outreach, new developments and sound financial results.

### When is the last time you posted on social media in relation to your company?

- 1 **Community activity 28%**  
“When my company decided to do a fundraising”
- 2 **New product development 25%**  
“Launching a new fantastic product”
- 3 **Financial results 19%**  
“New capital development plan meaning significant expansion”

**Aim:** Increase advocacy.

**Risk:** Employees would stop being active advocates.

**Why?:** Employee advocates have a strong impact on your reputation, your talent retention and your customers.

**Approach:** In order to keep your employees active and constantly engaged, you should run regular communication campaigns to provide an opportunity to be active on a given topic. The insight from our research shows that these should focus on corporate and social responsibility programmes and innovation.

# Conclusion: Building effective communication strategies

Employees are extraordinary assets for any organisation's reputation.

- **They are trusted.** In a “post-truth” world where authorities are discredited, people are looking for recommendations that they see as honest and authentic. Employees embody this ‘grassroots’, first-hand perspective.
- **They are well connected.** Employees are connected to social networks larger and deeper than the organisations they work for. Social media means these networks can be activated and amplified very quickly.
- **They understand the business.** They have an understanding of their role and that of their employer which is valuable to many – potential recruits, journalists, politicians, local and national stakeholders.

There is clearly enormous potential in harnessing employees' voices to support the objectives of your business. But businesses must also be aware that disengaged employees have more ability than ever to cause reputational harm. This is the new reality for chief executives, heads of HR and communications.

Portland's employee advocacy activation research offers a clear point of view on the strikingly different stages of the relationship between employee and employer. Some employees lack detailed knowledge of their organisations, others don't feel enabled, and others still do not have access to the tools to share news or speak about their company externally. Our research helps to harness the incredible power of employee advocacy, using employees as a champion for your business, and defending organisations against reputational risk in our connected age.

Contact our team of employee engagement and research specialists for more information.

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