North Tees and Hartlepool Foundation Trust was keen to explore ways to widen its communication channels in order to share valuable information and resources with all staff across the trust. The trust is already very proactive with its communications and circulates information regarding staff benefits, news, health and wellbeing and values and culture on a regular basis. These messages are sent out to all staff, across different locations and are accessible by a number of different means, but the trust recognises that:

- It could not be sure that all staff would receive important messages at the same time, in the same format.
- Many staff did not have access to PCs, emails or the internet.
- Staff did not always have the opportunity to read email communications.
- Staff may prefer to access some information, for example, health and wellbeing in a private environment.

The trust reviewed the age profile of new starters and it noted that increasingly, staff joining the trust were born around 1980 or later. These generation Y employees are used to electronic communication and their desire for regular feedback is strong. The concept of an app was put forward which would provide an accessible communication channel for the generation Y staff as well as others.
What they did

The trust is a member of the NHS Employers Total Reward and Engagement Network (TREN) and contacts there were able to suggest a potential supplier. A company called Ark was selected because it offered a customisable app which could be developed and maintained easily at no cost to the trust. The employee relations team led the project along with a working group which included HR, nursing, occupational health and key stakeholders. The group chose the content to be provided in the app by identifying the most valuable resources for staff, which were already in circulation. This included information and documents on health and wellbeing, HR, attendance management policy, organisational aims and values, latest trust news and useful contact numbers. A three-to-six-months communications plan was designed to ensure awareness from an early stage and to help embed the app with staff. The app was trialed for two weeks using 50 volunteers who provided positive feedback, encouraging the trust to go live for all staff immediately after. At the launch of the app the supplier provided promotional banners to put up in busy communal areas such as the restaurants. Representatives from the app company were on-hand to provide guidance on how to use the app. Members of the communications and employee relations teams visited departments to publicise the app and place notices on billboards. The trust was really proactive during the launch as this provided the opportunity to talk to staff, promote the benefits of the app and deal with any teething problems, such as downloading the app.

The app

The app automatically downloads via a secure portal onto staff’s personal mobile phones or tablets. It’s only compatible with Android and IOS operating systems. It’s not designed for use on laptops, PCs or phones that use Windows. The trust wanted to restrict public access to the app so it is hidden from the App or Google stores.

The trust’s commercial team helped to develop a suite of icons that are used in the app for specific subject areas. Each user of the app is given a suite of icons relevant to them.

Some icons provide access to PDF documents, for example, an abbreviated staff handbook and others provide links to further information on topics such as health and wellbeing. No personal data is stored on the app.

The trust has access to information on which icons are being used most. This is helping the trust to decide what subject areas to concentrate on for new icons. A new icon dedicated to organisational culture has been added to the app in relation to the current culture work being undertaken. No icons have so far been removed but this can be done easily if needed.

The supplier recoups development and maintenance costs by using the app as an advertising vehicle to obtain revenue from local businesses. The trust approves all advertising before it goes live and can veto material if it wishes and has control to remove and update material at any time. This works well as staff benefit from having access to local and national promotions on consumer products.
Staff Feedback
Staff feedback so far is positive:
“Love the App”
“Great App, easy to use”
“Looks great, easy to navigate”
“Really easy to access and informative”

Challenges
The trust has identified a few barriers to the app:
- Not everyone has a smart phone.
- There has been some confusion about how to download the app however this has been easily overcome.

The employee relations team has been quick to help staff who have experienced any issues when downloading the app and they have responded to any queries and concerns promptly.

Benefits and key learning
Being able to share information in this way benefits nearly everyone and helps to reduce inequalities. The other benefits of the app identified are:
- It’s a central point to access information and resources on a user friendly interface.
- The app is easy to use.
- The information is up to date and current.
- The trust can quickly send notifications to specific groups of staff.
- The app allows us to target groups of staff and provide protected content to them which is password protected.
- Staff can use the app in their own time and use it in a private setting should they wish.
- The app takes little administrative effort. Choosing what to upload takes the most time.
- The app provides a hyperlink to the trust’s staff bank register.
- The supplier continues to attract local and national discounts for staff.
- New starters can use the app in the period after obtaining employment and starting in their new job. This helps to embed the trust values and principles even before employment starts.
- Another method to communicate and engage with employees.
Steps to success

It is important to get support early on from senior leaders within the organisation. In the early stages the trust promoted the app with a picture of the chief executive on the pop-up-banners using the app on his mobile phone.

- Run a pilot to identify and deal with any teething problems.
- Choose content carefully and provide information staff really want to see.
- Don’t put too much information on the app, keep it simple and clear.
- Make sure the app is easy to use

Top tips

- Listen carefully and understand what information staff want.
- Design additional content based on what proves most popular so you are always responding to the audience.
- Look for a self-financing solution which does not tie the organisation into long-term costs.

Further information

For more information please contact Roshni Devgan, Employee Relations Advisor. Email roshni.devgan@nth.nhs.uk.