



Employee advocacy engaging your staff as ambassadors

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Speakers: Truus Yperman (Trainer European Parliament), Dana Manescu (Head of Social Media team, DG Communication, European Commission), Davied Van Berlo (Strategic Advisor, Netherland Enterprise Agency, The Netherlands), Phallyne Tiv (Head of Recruitment and Branding, Sibelga, Belgium)

Moderator: Anthony Lockett (DG Human Resources and Security, European Commission)

Is your organisation doing everything it can to harness the communication potential of its employees? In today's era of declining trust, many businesses and institutions are finding that staff are among their most authentic and credible ambassadors. Tapping into employees' networks can considerably extend the reach of communication activities (more than tenfold, according to some estimates). In addition to the organisational benefits, employee advocacy programmes provide great opportunities for engagement, motivation and personal development. This workshop will look at several examples of successful programmes both online and offline.

Anthony Lockett opened the session by reflecting on how the trust between an authority figure and the staff can be undermined, and how employee advocacy can be mobilised in a workplace in order to improve the external communication of an organisation. He then provided a brief introduction of the speakers and their different links to employee advocacy.

Truus Yperman opened the session by describing the *Back to School* programme implemented by the European Parliament. This voluntary initiative allows staff members to be sent to a school in order to talk about the work of the EU institutions. The project thus adopts a personal approach, which allows students to put faces to the names of those who work for the EU, instead of learning about their work from anonymous reports.

Since the beginning of *Back to School*, around 80 staff members have taken part in the project per year. They are provided with one day of training, but are free when it comes to the content and the format of their talk at the school. This initiative clearly demonstrates that EU staff-members are the best ambassadors for the work of the institutions, and that offline content can help mobilise people as much as online content. It also shows that the institutions trust their staff and can help them in terms of community building.

Ms Yperman further explained that the *Back to School* Programme has had a positive impact for the European Parliament in three different ways. First of all, this initiative helped in reaching out to new people and strengthening the message of the parliament. Secondly, the programme was engaging for staff at a personal level. Finally, *Back to School* had a positive influence in terms of communication because it had enabled them to reach out to other bubbles, without the help of specific communicators.

The second speaker **Dana Manescu** explained how the institutions foster trust amongst their staff by engaging them as ambassadors on social media. She started by explaining that the work of the social media team has expanded in recent years, and that now her team have access to more professional and comprehensive tools. She then argued that this came from the fact that the social media team at the EC felt the need to humanise the work of the institutions through various online platforms (Facebook, Twitter, etc.). At the same time there had been an urgent need to promote the EU on social media, even among staff. This is why the EC uses an online tool called SMARP, which enables the organisation to create, schedule and publish content for employees to discover and



share. Ms Manescu noted that SMARP saw peak engagement during President Juncker's speech on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome.

A platform like SMARP clearly has demonstrable benefits for both the staff and the organisation. Ms Manescu argued first of all that such a tool allows the staff to become "influencers" for the EU, and helps to improve skills in terms of online media use. It also enables users to communicate beyond hierarchical barriers or boundaries. On the other hand, the organisation can benefit in terms of communication, because its employees can provide content in different languages, which in turn can help advance the organisation's communication strategies, or even help with managing fake news and misinformation. Finally, Ms Manescu suggested that an interinstitutional effort using SMARP could be useful in the run-up to the 2019 EP elections.

Mr Lockett further outlined the different examples of EU staff advocacy the speakers had talked about and how they had influenced staff motivation. He then opened up the floor for questions and the first set of questions addressed how to build trust between staff and management and how to get staff out of their comfort zone in terms of communicating about their work. **Ms Yperman** for instance, noted that it was also the staff's responsibility to gain the trust of their employers in order to communicate independently.

The third speaker, **Davied Van Berlo**, from the Netherlands Enterprise Agency described staff advocacy methods in the context of national civil servants and their interactions with the outside world. His presentation was driven by the following question: do you see your employees as an extension of your communication channels, or are they your organisation's interface with society? In his view, new ideas and tools, such as social media or channels dedicated to specific topics, can be used by agencies for staff advocacy. He went on by stating that, besides boosting the visibility of the work of an agency, staff advocacy could also help employees to develop their digital skills and shift their focus to the outside world.

Later, Mr Van Berlo argued that staff advocacy could be used as a stepping stone to reconnect the daily work of civil servants with citizens. Also, the government should play a pivotal role by allowing and advocating for the co-creation of content. In this regard, he explained that SMARP could be seen as a very safe tool for employees to use, but also argued that some civil servants would be comfortable communicating independently. He took, for instance, the case of the Dutch police force, which, while being a very hierarchical institution, had some staff members who were sharing their activities online through blogs or video platforms.

Finally, Mr Van Berlo described the potential challenges that staff advocacy could entail. He stated firstly that some organisations remained reluctant to use such communication processes as it could be perceived as a risk to their overall communication strategies. In the same way, employees do not necessarily receive adequate support and training in communicating with the outside world and, as civil servants, they can become more vulnerable to personal attacks from the public or pressure groups.

The last speaker, **Phallyne Tiv**, described the ambassador programme set up by the Belgian electricity provider Sibelga. The company uses its own staff as ambassadors, and they promote their work for recruitment purposes. In this regard, Ms Tiv stated that around a third of Sibelga's employees have been recruited through this programme.

She explained that an ambassador should be perceived as an extension of the company's values and work to the outside world. Moreover, as the ambassadors' own credibility is at stake when advocating for a position, they usually help to provide very high-quality resumes and applicants.



Consequently, Ms Tiv stressed the importance of the ambassadors' programme for Sibelga and explained that her company is now setting up information campaigns in order to encourage employees to join and to provide them with a clear understanding of their role as ambassadors. For instance, volunteers are promoted through various channels, as part of the company's external and internal communication strategy. Finally, Ms Tiv explained that 2018 will be a pivotal year for the ambassador campaign, as Sibelga will launch a new round of advocacy, the main idea being to use social media – and particularly LinkedIn. Also, the company will hold a sharing session in order to get ambassadors together and to come up with improvements for the programmes.

Finally, **Mr Lockett** opened the floor to remaining questions and debate. The first set of questions asked how to address threats and cyber-bullying of staff, and how an organisation could mitigate the involvement of employees in social media fights. **Ms Manescu** and **Mr Van Berlo** recommended offering training sessions in order to help the staff members protect themselves, but also to help them communicate more effectively. She added that the EC had very clear guidelines about how to address aggressive messages, and that staff should avoid getting dragged into controversial debates.

Another question asked about the target audience, and what type of strategy could be used to reach a broader audience. **Ms Manescu** stated that the EC was not monitoring target audiences, which could vary from one person to another. However, social media could be used in order to help staff capitalise on their own network and improve their messages. To close the session, Mr Lockett asked the audience to stand up if the organisation they were working for had an ambassador programme, and enquired as to whether the rest of the audience, given the success of this session, would support including one in their communication strategies.