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Introduction

Hosted on World Kindness Day, this ROI Talk session gathered leadership panel members Sheryl Lewis, Melanie Barna, Linda Pederson, and Liz Taff to analyze 2025 trends and forecast the focus for 2026. The discussion targeted three main areas: Employee Engagement, Digital Employee Experience (DEX), and the role of AI in Communications.

1. Employee Engagement: Combating Disengagement and "Job Hugging"

The Current Landscape

Employee engagement has hit low points, with data indicating that 79% of employees are not engaged. A prevailing trend is "job hugging," where employees cling to their roles not out of satisfaction, but due to risk aversion caused by slowed hiring and layoffs. This is compounded by economic uncertainty and companies adhering to rigid, pre-pandemic work models that do not meet modern employee expectations.

Key Strategies for 2026

- **Creating Certainty:** With external uncertainty high, employees require internal certainty, which relies on consistent, honest, two-way communication to build trust in leadership.
- **Focus on Managers:** There is a notable gap in manager capability, yet they are essential for engagement. Companies are encouraged to prioritize 1:1 coaching to help managers better recognize contributions and connect daily work to the broader mission.
- **Career Architecture:** Employees want clear growth paths. ROI cited a client example where they implemented a formal job architecture with defined levels and competencies, moving away from ad hoc promotions to provide employees with a clear vision of their future.
- **Purpose and Recognition:** Engagement improves when work connects to a larger purpose, such as a safety mission focused on getting employees home to their loved ones. Frequent, personal recognition is also a powerful, low-cost motivator. AI recognition was more common practice in 2025 and will continue to be a focus in 2026.

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2. Digital Employee Experience (DEX): Managing Content Overload

The "Noise" Problem

While employees desire consumer-grade digital experiences, 2025 saw stalled spending on DEX platforms. A major challenge remains the overwhelming volume of content, or "noise," employees face.

- **Case Study:** An analysis for a client undergoing rapid growth revealed that a single employee persona would need to spend 7.2 hours per week—nearly a full workday—just to consume all produced content and events.
- **Solution:** This data empowered the team to adopt a "less is more" approach, streamlining content to reduce the burden on staff.

Strategic Metrics

Internal Comms is leveraging data to elevate its strategic value

- **Sentiment and Silence:** Teams are moving beyond simple open rates to analyze sentiment (tracking trust velocity) and "silence" (identifying segments that are not interacting to pinpoint disengagement). AI is playing a role in expanding this capability.
- **Search Analysis:** Monitoring what employees search for after reading a message is a critical KPI that helps identify confusion or curiosity.

3. AI and Communications: From Efficiency to Strategy

Shifting the Narrative

Companies should avoid framing AI solely around efficiency, as this often triggers fear of job loss. The recommended narrative positions AI as a tool to handle repetitive tasks, freeing employees to focus on creative, strategic, and relationship-driven work.

Governance and Maturity

- **Governance Structure:** Effective AI adoption requires clear ownership. Best practices suggest an AI Governance Committee that includes representation from IT, Comms, and HR alongside Product/Innovation.

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- **Workflows:** Current "quick wins" include using AI to transcribe flip charts, timestamp videos, and draft emails. Looking to 2026, the trend is moving toward "agentic workflows," such as specialized agents for event management or project charters, and eventually "multi-agent meshes" where different AI agents (e.g., Comms, Legal, HR) collaborate on tasks.

4. The Evolving Communications Function

- **Strategic Evolution:** Communicators are transitioning from tactical "order takers" to strategic business partners who understand business goals and culture
- **Skill Requirements:** The role now demands a blend of technical skills (data analysis, AI prompting) and human-centered skills (empathy, storytelling, crisis management).
- **Organizational Integration:** There is a continuing blurring of lines between functions, with Comms increasingly integrated with Change Management, Employee Experience, IT, and HR.