

## Use of Interims in Internal Communications

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A recent survey by Comma Partners asked for views on using interims within communications functions. While there were few surprises in the data, the key findings did support several well-held beliefs about using interims within internal communications and the value they bring to an organisation.

So, why use an interim? With almost two thirds (64%) of organisations using or considering using communications interims, perhaps a better question might be, “Why not?” “Using interims is always part of my resourcing strategy” says Andrew Routledge, Head of Internal Communications at Vodafone UK. “Interims are the “shot-in-the-arm” for meeting a particular business need. By nature proactive, they know their purpose and deliver with quality. I have a really strong team here with good core skills but they are all busy supporting their business areas. If a project requires a skill set that isn’t core, I’ll bring in an interim. But only when I am crystal clear on the role and its objectives.”

Alana Renner, Head of Communications at The Post Office, agrees:

“The boundaries of what the interim is coming in to do have to be clear. Like Andrew, I would usually bring in interim support for a defined programme or project work. But there has to be a cultural fit too. At interview I always make sure the team members and business owner meet them too. It’s important that they don’t feel somebody has been dumped on them.”

Renner’s words hint at a problem that a hastily hired interim may bring: if the home team don’t understand why the interim is there, misunderstandings could occur. With the on-boarding process for an interim rarely as thorough as it would be for a permanent hire, clarity around the role and remit is critical for those within the function and anyone whose own role is closely linked to that of the interim.

### Adding value

Routledge and Renner’s point of view is not surprising with 55% of survey respondents hiring interim resources for a specific project.

Routledge says, “A great interim will make use of the core in-house team and the existing infrastructure. Being able to share best practice and demonstrate their worth by challenging current thinking is essential. I don’t hire an interim as just another pair of hands – I expect them to offer me something extra.”

For Routledge, interims “pave the way for new permanent headcount. Having a network of high quality interims to call on is great for the evolution of internal communications as a professional discipline.”

Like many interims, Jenny Nabben, an experienced career interim currently working with Coca-Cola Enterprises never sees her job as merely “keeping someone’s seat warm”. She



continues, “I’ll always be looking to see where I can add value to the client. I want to be able to bring my insight, expertise and richness of experience gained in a wide variety of organisations to effect a positive change in any organisation I work with.”

For some interims, economic turmoil and market dislocations provide some of the best opportunities to demonstrate value to an organisation.

“Any change in an organisation can be messy, be it structural, organisational or cultural. As interims, our objectivity allows for compassion as well as pace and we are well-positioned to deliver fast,” Nabben says.

It certainly helps that an interim is typically less constrained than a permanent employee. This allows them to focus on the job in hand, ask the difficult questions and challenge the status quo. But it’s also essential that an interim is respectful and sensitive to the permanent team. “It’s a balance of not undermining the permanent work yet challenging the programme,” Nabben points out.

### **Insight**

Angela Gostling has been an interim for six years and works almost entirely around change and transformation.

According to Gostling, “Relevant industry experience is now no longer a pre-requisite. Clients realise the insights from experts who have worked in other industries are adding real value. In my view, the best interims are those who have a few ‘grey hairs’ and have been ‘around the block’ a bit. We have a broader recognition of what’s happening in businesses and this helps to identify what’s required to meet the business needs. And with the cost of an interim coming straight from the bottom line, we’re often tight on time but always focused on delivery!”

Katharina Auer, Head of Internal Communications at Rio Tinto, feels “The right interim brings a wealth of diverse experience, a strategic and business-focused outlook and a fresh pair of eyes. A good interim hits the ground running, picks up cultural nuances quickly and has a strong delivery focus.”

All of these comments back up Comma Partner’s survey results which revealed that only 7% of organisations saw sector knowledge as essential and 65% valued the fresh perspective an interim brings.

### **Focus**

Interims are typically over-qualified for the role, delivery focused and not distracted by other things going on in the business. From an objective viewpoint they provide an invaluable blend of thinking and doing.



Sam Taylor, currently engaged on a global project with Unilever, points out, “Unilever has embarked on a huge project to harmonise the way in which it manages the artwork production process for all its brands. It’s a business project not a comms project, but with around 10,000 employees across 180 countries affected, good communication is critical to its success.” Taylor’s line manager - Thomas Schurr, Global Artwork Director at Unilever – gives her high marks.

“Sam brings huge experience and focus to the project. She challenges our thinking, is demanding on others to deliver and understands her remit totally. She gives our communications the professionalism and consistency that are vital to the success of a project of such scale and span. On that front she is doing an outstanding job.”

### **Creating a legacy**

With so much change in both the private and public sectors, internal communication is emerging as one of – if not the - most critical thing to get right in any organisation.

Lisa Attenborough, Director of Communication at Premier Foods, and who was previously an interim for nine years in a corporate affairs career spanning over 20 years, says “Internal communications can turn a business on and off – it’s that vital. Sometimes the home team doesn’t see the link between what they do daily and business success. A highly experienced interim can come in and do a job really well and it opens their eyes – not just the eyes of the communications team, but the eyes of the wider organisation. In some cases, a great interim can change the way an organisation views its communications team, earning respect and demonstrating its enormous value. There’s a lasting and positive legacy across the organisation.”

### **About Virginia Hicks**

Virginia Hicks has been running Comma Partners since it was first established in 2007. Previously Virginia was an independent communications practitioner for Unilever and Network Rail.

With an early career in PR and marketing, Virginia specialised in internal and change communications at Thorn EMI, then at GSK (Manufacturing), and Marks & Spencer, where she was the company’s first Head of Internal Communication.

### **About Comma Partners**

Comma Partners provide internal communication managers to clients who need high calibre expertise on an interim basis. Copies of the survey findings, “Interims: putting value on a fresh perspective” can be requested from [virginia.hicks@commapartners.com](mailto:virginia.hicks@commapartners.com)

