

Companies rely on workplace apps to improve communication

When the Edney Innovation Center opened its co-working space in Chattanooga, Tennessee, to 70 different entrepreneurs and start-up companies, the building's managers knew they would need more than a drinks machine to bring people together.

The building needed some kind of central hub. Email wasn't ideal: messages could get lost among the post, and tenant meetings wouldn't help much because everybody worked at different times.

The organisation decided to adopt Slack, a messaging app that allows team members to carry on a variety of group and individual conversations via different 'channels' – essentially, chat rooms devoted to different projects or topics of conversation.

The Slack group, which now has around 250 members, crackles with conversation. The 'Announcements' channel carries all-building updates like electrical maintenance or an evening happy hour. 'Job Board' is where companies share job offers and there's even a channel for posting interesting articles and local gossip. Then there's the building's most popular channel, 'Food and Drink', where tenants alert each other to leftover pizza on the fifth floor or tortillas on the sixth.

"We're all trying to do our jobs, but we're also trying to build community," says the centre's program manager, Mary Stargel. "Slack brings all of the people together in one place. It assists in problem-solving and information-sharing, but also in building personal connections."

As the number of cloud-based communication tools continues to grow, many companies are changing the ways they keep in touch and exchange information.

But the use of collaborative platforms isn't limited to people who share the same workspace – some companies are adopting them to create a sense of community in a widely dispersed workforce. When the transport company Covenant Transportation Group decided to replace its 10-year-old company intranet system, the chief goal was to close the distance between the 950 employees spread in different locations across the country.

"We looked at our employee satisfaction surveys and saw we were scoring lower on communication," says Rob Hatchett, Covenant's vice president of communications. "We were in an era where we had email, we had intranet, we had text messages – but we were missing something."

Around that time, Facebook developed Workplace, another app designed for company communication. It seemed like a good idea for Covenant: most employees were already on Facebook, and it was mobile.

Several months into its adoption, Hatchett says the app has been a hit. It allows for live updates, like the CEO making an announcement, but it also has subgroups such as a group for the company's discount program and groups for sports teams. "It may be little stuff – but that's community," says Hatchett. "We have so many different people in different departments and different locations who never see each other, but we see each other there."

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