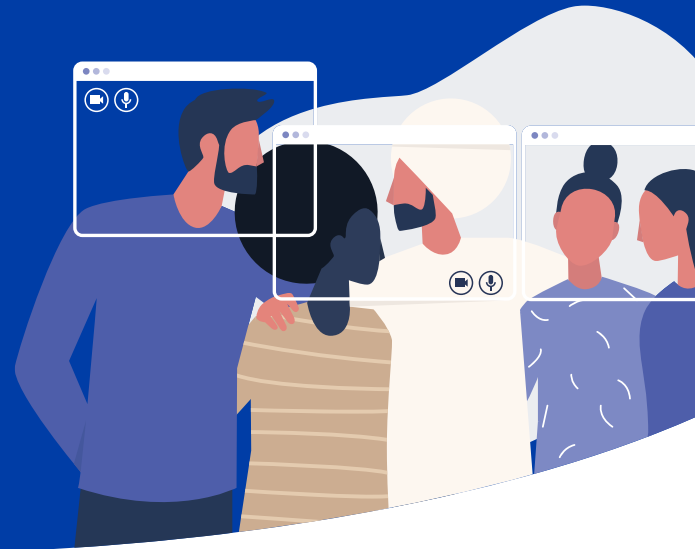


# Employee communications in the time of COVID-19

Managers and employees have landed in a new world—one dominated by concerns about health, livelihoods, and the future. Effective employee communication can help your workforce navigate this world, but what does that look like? Like other employers, our team at Accolade is learning as we go. We wanted to share some of our lessons learned.



We all know the grim statistics about the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths in our country. What has received less attention is the mental toll of the virus. In April, for instance, mental-health hotlines that deal with issues such as substance abuse reported an 891 percent increase in call volumes.<sup>1</sup> That speaks to the intense pressure people are feeling.

It also underscores a possible silver lining: We're all in this together, learning how to cope as we go. Our hope here at Accolade is that we will find a way to make the workplace better as a result of this experience.

We have thought hard about how to help our employees manage their new reality. We've come to believe that five principles are essential when shaping a response to employee needs and concerns:

## 1. Find your "True North"

During this crisis, we're focused on what makes us the company that we are. This is our True North, and it has guided our response based on three pillars:

- Refocus on our vision, our mission, and core values. We are taking this time to re-focus on our aspirations and values. Our CEO and other leaders consistently remind people about how important they are to our company and customers. It's not so much cheerleading, as a way to make people feel inspired and focused.
- Have a clear leadership voice. In March, we moved to give three of our senior leaders the role in communicating about our response and steps forward. They are our CEO, Rajeev Singh; our Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Shantanu Nundy; and Britt Provost, our Executive Vice President of People and Culture. That way we have a consistent set of voices that employees can look to for guidance. When they speak about our COVID-19 response, people listen.
- Have a single source of truth. At the same time, we made Slack our primary communications medium—again, so that everyone knows where to turn for the latest information. Rather than blast people with emails, we created a COVID-19 channel and added everyone in the company to it.



**BRITT PROVOST**

Executive Vice President  
People and Culture

As Executive Vice President of People and Culture, Britt Provost plays a key role in shaping our employee experience across Accolade and ensuring we attract, develop, retain and engage our talent.



**JESSICA COFFMAN**

Director, Internal  
Communication  
Corporate Marketing

Based on her experience, Jessica shares some tips on bridging internal audiences to deliver employee crisis communications during the COVID crisis.

Watch the webinar to hear more from Britt and Jessica

[Watch the Webinar](#) →

## 2. Beware of communications chaos

People are overwhelmed by all the news arising from COVID-19. There are new government mandates, employee benefits updates, work from home guidance, and more. To help navigate the confusing landscape, we're working to organize our messages so people can understand and digest them. We're trying not to swamp them with information—there is only so much people can absorb.

One thing we've discovered is that our employees typically split into one of two camps:

- **Slack fanatics.** A lot of our employees want their information in distilled, quick-to-consume pieces so they can get back to their work. Slack is perfect for that, so our leaders use the dedicated COVID-19 channel to deliver tightly focused content for navigating these difficult months.
- **Story-lovers.** We have another group of people who are a little more social. They like hearing people's stories. So, we've also commissioned a series of short videos featuring different employees talking about their COVID-19 life. Some have shared what they're doing to improve their emotional health during this time.

## 3. Watch for the waves

It's clear that the world is not going to revert to the way it was in 2019 any time soon—if ever. Even if COVID-19 subsides, the economic and emotional toll it leaves behind will stay with us for years. It's as if everyone is in their own little boat, coping with waves of anxiety, grief, and anger.

That makes this a time to lean into each other. Especially within HR and communications, people are expecting you to show up and perform at a high level—it's what they need. So, we have focused on ensuring that people in those key roles have the support and tools they need to help everyone else. It's sort of the principle you learn on an airplane: Put on your own oxygen mask, then help others around you.

Most of all, acknowledge what a difficult time it is for everyone. People need compassion and positive support as they work to manage the emotions Covid-19 has triggered.

## 4. Keep employees engaged (virtually!)

COVID-19 has moved our lives online. On the one hand, it's fantastic that we can do that relatively seamlessly. But it's difficult to replace the in-person dynamic with video meetings and online

calls. It can also be more difficult to keep people tuned-in when there are household distractions.

We've tried some things that are a bit goofy but that try to replicate some of the in-office experience. Fridays, for instance, are "Hatitude" days. People make and wear funny hats that they post online or wear during video conferences. Winners of the most creative, most stacked or biggest hats receive company swag and bragging rights. We also ask them to write a few words about what they're thankful for that day.

By now we've come to understand that pets are ALWAYS welcome in the virtual workplace. We made that official, with a [pets@accolade](#) Slack channel. It's a way for people to connect, and it's priceless. We'll be adding other special-interest channels based on employee input.

## 5. Make a map for the future

With the stress that waves of COVID patients have placed on hospitals, many people are being forced to delay elective surgeries or doctor visits. That's going to lead to a jump in demand once this first wave of COVID-19 subsides. It may also mean that some people will suffer ill effects of missing appointments or procedures. We also may see provider networks shrinking, sicker employees, and significant changes to benefits programs.

This is a time when your benefits team can really show its value by helping employees navigate:

- **Support for telemedicine.** Video and telephone calls are becoming a new way to see the doctor. We expect this trend to continue, along with other new trends in care.
- **Support for mental health.** This should not need to be said, but we need to de-stigmatize the need for mental-health support.
- **New legislation and unknown obstacles.** As we've seen, news about COVID-19 changes every day. States and the federal government are developing their own response guidelines. There's a lot to digest.

Will there ever be an "it's over" moment? We hope so. But we don't expect it to be soon, and it may not look like we want it to.

So now is a time to meet your people where they are, every single day. Empower your leaders. Lean on your mission and core values. And work to keep employees engaged. We're all in this together, and we'll have to work together to meet this challenge.