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Internal Communication

WhatsApp for internal communication: pros, cons and the rules that make it safe

WhatsApp reaches everyone and puts company information in accounts nobody can audit. Where it fits, what regulators have punished, and seven rules for using it at work.



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The short answer: WhatsApp works for fast, non-sensitive team coordination where people have no work email, and it fails as the company's official channel. It reaches everyone, and it puts company information in personal accounts that nobody can audit or switch off. Use it with written rules, or give frontline staff a channel the company owns.

WhatsApp, an employee app or email: how do they compare?

Option	Pros	Cons	Best when
WhatsApp groups on personal phones	Already installed. No training. Read quickly. Voice notes suit people who write little. Free	Personal numbers shown to the whole group. No control over who stays in. No record the company holds. Messages at all hours	A supervisor coordinating one team on non-sensitive matters
WhatsApp broadcast or a business account	One-way messages. Members do not see each other's numbers. Reaches people with no work email	Still on personal phones. Little targeting or measurement	Urgent notices to frontline staff: a closure, a shift change, a safety alert
An employee app or intranet the company owns	Access ends when employment ends. Content by role and site. Measurable	Has to be bought, launched and fed every week	Several hundred people or more, many without a desk
Email and Microsoft Teams or similar	Company-owned, searchable, auditable. Good for documents and decisions	Reaches only people with an account and a screen	Office staff, and anything that needs a record

What are the real risks?

Company information ends up in personal accounts. The UK's data protection regulator reprimanded a health board after 26 staff used a WhatsApp group between April 2020 and April 2022 to share patient data, including names, phone numbers and addresses, on a minimum of 533 occasions. WhatsApp was not approved by the organisation for processing patient data (Information Commissioner's Office, 2023).

Regulated firms have paid heavily for it. In September 2022 the US Securities and Exchange Commission charged 16 financial firms with recordkeeping failures after employees "routinely communicated about business matters using text messaging applications on their personal devices". The combined penalties were more than $1.1 billion.

The terms were written for personal use. WhatsApp's terms of service say users must not use the service in ways that "involve any non-personal use of our Services unless otherwise authorized by us". WhatsApp has separate business products for company use.

Always available becomes always working. A study that interviewed employees in Dutch workplaces describes messaging as "being always available but always negotiating that availability", and shows people tinkering with the app's features to control when they appear available (Mols and Pridmore, 2020).

People leave, the group does not. Someone who resigns keeps the history and the contacts until an admin removes them.

Why do people use it anyway?

Because it is useful, and a ban does not remove the need. In a survey of doctors and nurses at a university hospital in Rome (191 responses), WhatsApp was widely used, and its use was driven mainly by how useful staff found it. Organisational factors had no direct effect: they acted only through individual ones (De Benedictis and colleagues, 2019). A ban with nothing as easy in its place will be ignored.

The pull is strong on the frontline. In Microsoft's survey of 9,600 frontline employees and managers, over 60% said their company could do more to prioritise culture and communication from the top. Where official channels do not reach the shop floor, a supervisor's WhatsApp group fills the gap.

When should you allow WhatsApp, and on what rules?

Allow it when the team has no other shared channel, the content is operational, and a named person owns each group. Then write the rules on one page.

1. **Name the groups.** One official group for each team or shift, created by the supervisor, with the company name in the title. Social groups are separate and voluntary.
2. **Say what never goes in:** personal data of employees or customers, salaries, medical information, disciplinary matters, passwords, commercial figures, photos of documents.
3. **Set hours.** No messages outside the shift except real emergencies, and say what counts as one.
4. **Two admins,** both current employees. Leavers are removed on their last day, and that step sits on the exit checklist.
5. **Nothing official lives only there.** A decision, a policy or a schedule is posted in a company channel first. The group points to it.
6. **Joining is not a condition of the job.** Some people will not share a personal number, and they must still get the information.
7. **Agree it with legal and IT.** Data protection rules differ by country, and the company answers for employee and customer data wherever it travels.

When should you move to a channel the company owns?

- You have several hundred frontline employees, and announcements depend on supervisors forwarding them.

- You cannot say who is in which group.
- Sensitive content has already appeared in a group.
- You are in a regulated sector: finance, health, anything with records to keep.
- You need to know whether a safety message was seen.

An owned channel can be an employee app, an intranet that works on a phone, or SMS for alerts. Our guide to internal communication platforms compares the types, and internal communication channels shows how to match a channel to a message.

What does each option cost in effort?

We do not publish prices.

- **WhatsApp with rules** costs a one-page policy, a briefing for supervisors, and a check every quarter of who is in each group.
- **A broadcast list** adds someone to keep the numbers current, and consent from employees to be contacted that way.
- **An owned app or intranet** is a project: choosing it, launching it, and feeding it every week. The feeding decides whether people open it.

Our view

We build internal apps and intranet content for clients, so weigh this page with that in mind.

We do not tell clients to ban WhatsApp. We ask what it is used for. If supervisors use it to swap shifts, leave it and add rules. If the chief executive's message reaches the frontline only as a forwarded screenshot, the company has no channel of its own, and that is worth fixing. Our internal apps and intranet content page describes what we build.

Before choosing any tool, find out why messages are missed. The free check why employees ignore messages uses sixteen statements to show which of four barriers is in the way: people do not know, do not like, do not want, or cannot act.

Frequently asked questions

Can WhatsApp be used as an official internal communication channel?

It can carry official notices, but it should not be the only place they live. Post decisions and policies in a channel the company owns, and use WhatsApp to point people there. Set rules on content, hours and who administers each group.

Is it legal to require employees to join a work WhatsApp group?

That depends on your country's labour and data protection law, so ask your legal counsel. As practice, do not make a personal number a condition of the job, and give people who decline another way to get the same information.

Is WhatsApp secure enough for work?

The main risk is not someone intercepting a message. It is what stays behind: copies on personal phones, backups, people who have left, and screenshots. In the UK health board case, the group ran for two years before anyone counted what was in it.

What is the difference between WhatsApp and an employee app?

An employee app belongs to the company: access ends with the contract, content can be targeted by role and site, and you can see whether a message was opened. WhatsApp belongs to each person. It wins on reach and habit, and loses on control.

Sources

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