

NEW WAYS OF COMMUNICATING DURING
A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

NEORSD Finds Virtual Success in Connecting With Employees

BY JEAN SMITH AND JOHN GONZALEZ |
CLEVELAND, OH

'Employees who have the ability to telework can do so immediately.'

'All employees must remain 6ft. apart.'

'Face coverings are required.'

Virtual, virtual, virtual...



At the beginning of 2020, it is certain no communications professional would have bet virtual interfacing and topics like a global pandemic, social distancing, and face coverings would dominate internal messaging. However, as cases of COVID-19 continued to increase, including in Ohio, the seriousness of the virus and its impact to our communities was clear.

Early on, the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District (Sewer District) assembled COVID-19 work teams to ensure our 24/7 operation continued to protect public health and the environment in the Greater Cleveland community. This included the development of policies designed to protect employees, like the COVID-19 Employee Face Covering Policy, COVID-19 Leave Policy and Teleworking Policy. Internal communication distribution channels have included e-mail, electronic monitor postings in the plants, intranet and reverse 911 text messages, just to name a few.

‘With support of various Sewer District departments, the Communications team was able to pivot quickly and push timely and important information to employees,’ said John Gonzalez, Sewer District Manager of Communications. ‘This was very important particularly at the front of the pandemic as Governor Mike DeWine was providing new and updated guidance so frequently.’

Still, it was clear that, while there was an abundance of communications tools utilized to disseminate information, the messenger was just as important.

‘The pandemic has been difficult for many people. Work lives and home lives changed quickly. Employees who were used to coming into the office started working from home, and those working in the plants, in the field or in various office spaces were required to remain socially distant from colleagues with whom they had long worked side-by-side,’ said Gonzalez. ‘That’s why we felt it was so important for employees to hear from Sewer District leadership on a regular basis: Important updates, resources, and to know that leaders were listening to their concerns, responding to their questions, appreciating employees’ hard work. As a result, the Sewer District

launched the bi-weekly CEO Update Video.’

The first 4-minute video launched in early April 2020 and included policy information as well as a message about the financial health of the Sewer District.

‘There were so many unknowns last April, including potential financial impacts to our operations as well as changes at home, including childcare challenges,’ said Kyle Dreyfuss-Wells, Sewer District CEO. ‘It was very important to me to communicate to employees that I was listening, and we were on this journey together. The CEO Update Videos have given me that opportunity.’

At the conclusion of each video, employees are encouraged to submit questions via a community e-mail managed by the Communications team, which are answered within 24 hours. In some cases, questions are also addressed in the upcoming CEO Update Video.

‘We’ve added information to the videos based on questions and feedback we’ve received from employees, so this communication tool has been a huge opportunity to both share information that is important but also give employees the ability to add to the content,’ said Gonzalez.

A recent addition to the CEO Update Video includes an employee focus feature. To date, three employees from Operations, Analytical Services, and Engineering & Construction have had the opportunity to speak about their work. Additional features are scheduled for future videos.

‘Employees have really enjoyed learning from their colleagues about their work,’ said Gonzalez. ‘While it is no substitute for in-person communication, it certainly gives an opportunity for employees to stay connected to each other.’

Given the positive response to the CEO Update Videos, the Sewer District’s Communications team plans to continue to use them as a standard communication tool to update employees about a variety of topics.

Jean Smith is the Senior Manager of Communications and Community Relations, and **John Gonzalez** is the Manager of Communications at the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District.