

Direkt zu René Obermann

Challenging a Volatile Climate with Committed Dialogue

Emerging from one of the world’s largest state-owned telecommunication monopolies, Deutsche Telekom has faced non-stop commercial and structural change and intense media scrutiny during its brief history as a private business. Such intensity of activity – and the employee unease that has accompanied it – has presented Deutsche Telekom with a formidable challenge to maintain its leadership position in Germany as it pursues commercial opportunities elsewhere.

Two years after taking the reins of Deutsche Telekom, CEO René Obermann recognised that there was a need for him to establish a direct communication channel with Telekom employees – both to frame the future in clear and positive terms, and to authoritatively address negative press coverage targeting the company.

Christof Hafkemeyer was responsible for this vein of internal communication. According to Hafkemeyer, “As part of his drive to create ‘The New Telekom,’ Obermann realised that a lot of the information moving around the company was actually rumor and mis-information, and given our size (140,000 in Germany), we needed to address this simply and authoritatively. So we instituted a video blog from Obermann, addressing what we thought were the most pressing issues. It was a success on a certain level. We were getting between 60,000 and 90,000 views per video post. But at another level, it was missing interactivity. We got a few comments and questions, which we answered directly, but we became concerned about whether we were hitting the mark with what we were saying – and whether we could find a way to elicit the real concerns on the minds of staff.”

“We had noticed that a number of political leaders in Germany had been working with **direktzu**® as a vehicle for collecting, aggregating, and making it possible to efficiently respond to citizen feedback,” Hafkemeyer explains. “We figured that it had worked well in the political sector, and it was well suited to the kind of open culture and dialogue we were seeking to institute at Telekom.” In February 2009, Deutsche Telekom launched “Direkt zu René Obermann” – the first corporate installation of the **direktzu**® platform – to provide Telekom’s 140,000 German employees with a vehicle for direct two-way communication between staff and the CEO. „I have found it remarkable,” says Andrea Vey, Deutsche Telekom’s head of internal communication. “Many executives talk about having their fingers on the pulses of their organisations, but this is real. It gives us clear feedback - sometimes surprising, but always honest and always broadly reflective of our population.”



Screenshot of **Direkt zu René Obermann**

February 2009 to May 2010:

- 795 feedbacks submitted
- 459,295 votes cast
- 2,818,307 views of feedback
- 99 answers delivered by the CEO

The breadth of issue representation reflects both the universal accessibility of **direktzu**® throughout the German parts of the company and the way the system generates feedback from active advocates and votes from interested but more passive employees. By offering opportunities to review, rate, and comment, **direktzu**® has engaged a much broader and more credible baseline of feedback.

Such thoughts are borne out by the numbers generated through the use of Deutsche Telekom’s **direktzu**® platform. From February through September of 2009, 492 feedbacks were submitted by users, yielding 1,366 comments and 232,329 votes. At the same time, because the platform is designed for Obermann to react only to three feedbacks every three weeks, senior management only had to focus on answering less than fifty such feedbacks during that time period.

Unlike the video blog where senior management answered each question without generating much visibility for the answers, the **direktzu**® approach reduces feedback answered while dramatically increasing visibility of the reactions. The inclusion of a comment section has also had a major impact in shifting focus for a good number of feedbacks onto employees themselves. According to Hafkemeyer, “the comment section has had two major impacts – it’s allowed people across the company who are interested in specific issues to find each other, and it’s allowed issues that are in the process of being dealt with to raise their own profile before becoming the focus of senior leadership attention – further increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of this approach.”

Since its installation at Deutsche Telekom, **direktzu**® has had considerable impact across the board. The **Direkt zu René Obermann** brand has an 85 percent recognition score among Germany-based employees, and the platform was rated the “easiest to use“ of Telekom’s entire suite of internal communication tools and channels.

“But this couldn’t be done by technology alone”, notes Hafkemeyer. “Yes, **direktzu**® is a platform – one that’s designed to run seamlessly within a corporate enterprise environment. But much more importantly, it enables a well-controlled, labour-efficient approach to regenerating dialogue within a massive business that’s faced with controversy and change – an ongoing cycle where we are pushing out messages, collecting feedback, and evaluating its relevance and resonance. It doesn’t take a massive amount of labour, but what it does require is commitment and discipline, and that commitment and discipline is greatly enabled by the efficiency and scalability offered by **direktzu**®.”

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