



SPECIAL AWARD WINNER

Protime

-

Communicating
in Coronatimes



INTERVIEW WITH PROTIME

BEST WORKPLACE, ALSO IN CORONATIMES

Even in Covid times, Best Workplaces™ 2021 managed to be great employers! They created a culture of trust and continued to communicate with their employees. They turned the crisis into an opportunity, an opportunity to let their employees shout even louder from the rooftops how proud they are of their organisation.

We interviewed our special award winner for Communicating in Corona-times, Pro-time! Jonas Van Herck explains how Pro-time communicated with their employees this past year.



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AT PROTIME IT IS THE COMPANY'S AND MANAGEMENT'S RESPONSIBILITY TO REACH AS MANY PEOPLE AS POSSIBLE.
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WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR OVERALL STRATEGY ON THE TOPIC OF COMMUNICATION AND HOW DID IT HELP IN DEALING WITH THE COVID-19 CRISIS?

We have always had the idea: **the more knowledge we can share, the more people can think about it, the more autonomy we can give and the more innovation power we will have as a result.** That is easy to say. But it is also thanks to GPtW that we have learned that you never communicate enough.

We have a multichannel approach. That means we publish our messages, but we also we organise short information sessions, we have leaflets in our offices, we communicate via e-mail, we share things on Sharepoint, via our Facebook page, ... We use short videos and pictures to bring our messages to life.



PROTIME in a nutshell

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Protime makes time valuable

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Customer Focus, Cameraderie, Collaboration and Growth are key values

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Motivation, ambition, competence and creativity is what matters at Protime



www.protime.be

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“I don't know if this is a-typical but the Protime approach means HR and marketing work together.”

At Protime, it is the company's and management's responsibility to reach as many people as possible. We do not have the attitude 'we have e-mailed it, so they will read it'. We know, the more we communicate, the more people will know 'what is Protime doing? What is expected of me? And, very important, how can I contribute?'. Employees know that they can also think with us. This works for us.

A lot of great initiatives have come from this approach. Knowledge is power, and you can keep it all to yourself but then you have to solve everything yourself and that is not necessary at all! Share it and everyone can think along. That has always been our strategy. Whether we have 200, 300, 400 or 500 employees, that will always be the case. We want to share everything as transparently as possible.

I do not know if this is a-typical but the Protime approach means **HR and Marketing work together.** Our marketing team makes sure they reserve time for internal communication. If HR, or other departments, want to

communicate something, we know we can count on them.

Next to this, we work with platforms like Yammer and Facebook. We use these to move to collaboration and to create a community feeling. Here, it is not only management, HR or marketing that sends out information. This way there is an interaction between our employees. Again: we want to share as much knowledge as we can, we want to share our successes, that is what drives our engagement. This was all already the case pre – Corona.

During corona, we realised very quickly that there were several things we needed to focus on. For us, our strengths are collaboration and connection; collaboration and camaraderie are in our values. We knew that our communication was good but that we had to keep focusing on it. We put a very strong emphasis on ‘connection’ and focused on the message: ‘we are in this together!’.

Every day, as HR, we tried to communicate something in a playful way, because we knew that this would keep us connected. We shared things about working at home with children, exercising more, meditation, nutrition, different forms of parental leave that you could take, etc. We kept teams up to date on what was happening across the organisation.

We felt very strongly that, **in times of crisis, it is important that someone takes the lead.** That you have an unambiguous story. That you do not tell different stories but one story from one channel. This does not mean that one person has to come up with everything, but that there is a clear message brought by person. A clear difference with how we approached things, pre-Corona. Back then, it did not matter who the transmitter was. But during the crisis itself, it was a strength that we then said: **‘the lead is with HR and they determine what we communicate’.**

That also brings us to transparency. Something that was key in our approach. We share everything we know, and we also share everything we don’t know.

A communication example is the **team lead calls**. We always informed our team leaders first because they are very close with their teams. In the beginning, there were calls twice a week, to keep a finger on the pulse.

IN OUR COMMUNICATION WE PUT A STRONG EMPHASIS ON ‘CONNECTION’ AND FOCUSED ON THE MESSAGE ‘WE ARE IN THIS TOGETHER’

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How did Protime communicate during the Covid-crisis?

1. A multi-channel approach: by having one message but different channels to spread this message, Protime wanted to make sure all employees were reached
2. One ‘transmitter’ to convey the necessary information, to make sure employees received an unambiguous story
3. Focus on transparency: communicate what you know and what you do not know
4. Emphasis on the message ‘we are in this together’

Via **daily stand-ups** team leaders were in contact with their team and could pass on information one on one and could also give feedback. We also had a forum of team leaders where HR also shared all the information from the management team, where questions could also be asked... This way team leaders they knew first hand what was going on and could pass it on to our team members.

But, as I said, some messages had to come from one signal. That is why our CEO (and sometimes the CFO and CTO) did several **webcasts for all employees**, a live broadcasting where we talked about numerous themes: taking holidays, what’s going on with our figures, being courageous, a positive view, about things we see coming, ... We tried very hard to make the message as transparent as possible: ‘this is what is going on, this is what we know, and you should know it too and we are in it together’.

Transparency was already important before Corona off course, but now it was extremely important that the lines were short. We targeted the team leads so that they could do the communication within their small team very personally. Our entire organisation is structured

around small teams. We have a management team with team leads below it. We deliberately keep these very small to be able to pay enough attention to everyone. We didn’t lose anyone during the crisis, because we could count on teams of 10/12 people maximum, where the team leaders were very well informed, where they could make quick decisions. I believe this has been an incredible strength throughout the crisis.

We communicated a lot, in a transparent and in an unambiguous way. There were no different stories, there was one message and we wanted to get that out. It was up to us to do that in different ways. For example, a webcast was recorded, then emailed with a recording and then sent to a kind of newsroom where we collected all the messages, a separate Corona page on Sharepoint. You could easily go there and ask: ‘what exactly was said about that?’ and you could easily find it and follow it up. It has become a fantastic reference work full of tips and tricks.



Jonas Van Herck
People and Culture Manager

We realised very quickly the situation was serious. On Friday, the Belgian government had decided on home-work and the closure of schools. The previous Thursday we had already decided to put everyone at home. That following week on Thursday we had all team lead calls twice a week and immediately that week also a mailing every day.

We also knew: we are going to get a lot of questions and we want to serve our people as quickly as possible. Immediately we bundled the most common questions into a **FAQ page**. We put a lot of effort into that. When you see how often that page is viewed, how it has been used, it is phenomenal. There again, everything we knew and everything we did not know was explained on the page, the decisions we took were also explained there.

A part from this, we worked with a **corona status folder** per office with colours. Instead of looking at the news every time and waiting for the security council to decide, we had defined four levels for ourselves. A few times we decided before the government made a decision because we just felt that was the best solution, regardless of what the government decided. We de-

termined red, orange and green and determined which rules fell under each colour. This allowed us afterwards to say, 'it goes green/red/orange' and everyone understood. We could communicate very quickly, not only via e-mail but also on a status folder that was updated every time.

We were able to build on what we had. That strong culture, that connection. We did not just say: 'we're going to do business communication'. We wanted to show we are in it together. Be clear in your communication, one key transmitter. Be transparent in everything you do and everything you know. Be vulnerable. Take the personal approach. That was pretty much our strategy from which we have learned a lot in the meantime.

WHAT NEW FORMS OF COMMUNICATION HAVE YOU INITIATED FOLLOWING CORONA?

Yes, we initiated the **HR Flash**. In the beginning it was daily, but we still do it on a weekly basis. We give information that way. We did not do that before. We had HR communication, but this is a step further. Regularly, we talk about Corona, but also about mental well-being and what you can do about it. Using the hashtag #protimehometogheter, every Wednesday, an HR Flash is sent out. It has gotten to the point where people expect it and are up to date again after reading it and that they feel supported. That is fantastic.

The team leader calls were also new. They used to be held every two months, but that was just not enough during the crisis. . We actually have these calls at two levels: a management call twice a week and the team lead calls twice a week, which allowed you to be on the same page at management level. Neither of these calls existed as such. What did exist: walking into each other's offices. That was before, but not now. So we replaced that by having those calls on a recurring basis.

Those calls did not have to take long, half an hour. The aim was that people could come with questions and that they would be informed. And also, that they could talk about their fears, questions, remarks, ... If they then did the same for their teams, we could stay connected with the entire organisation. This way we could keep 300 people connected. It is utopian to think that you always reach those 300 people directly.

Apart from this, **webcasts** were also new. We did do such things live, in the office, and to be honest we were already experimenting with live streaming but this has sped it up incredibly. In the past, recording a digital meeting was not something anyone wanted to do. We didn't want to do that. It was just always forgotten. But now it happens so quickly: a call, we record it, we can watch it again afterwards, ... The video library that has been built up in the meantime is insane. That is something super powerful. The **FAQ online** has also been added, of course.

Then we have **podcasts**. We are now on episode 18. That originated from one person from the management team and a number of enthusiasts who put their backs into it. That was already happening, but now it's much more consistent, always! Stand-up meetings, again, already existed, but are now done in every team, to keep in touch and stay connected.

In fact, these are things we were already doing for a while, they have just been perfected and they are now on point, because we now see how important they are. You can't tie up the loose ends of weak or unclear communication by being the office or discussing it in the corridors anymore. You don't have that luxury now, so you have to make sure that those loose ends are communicated transparently, as much as possible.

We are going to keep many of those things post-corona. A webcast can still be digital but can also be given back at the office. There are certain things we want to hold on to. For example, the HR Flash will continue to be there.

"Be clear in your communication. Be transparent in everything you do and everything you know. Be vulnerable. Take the personal approach."

WE WERE ABLE TO BUILD ON WHAT WE HAD. THAT STRONG CULTURE, THAT CONNECTION.

AS A COMPANY, YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN A CRISIS. JUST THROUGH COMMUNICATION.

IN WHAT WAY HAVE YOUR COMPANY VALUES PLAYED A ROLE IN THIS APPROACH?

For us our values are hugely important! We have: collaboration, camaraderie (really a value that we adopted from GPtW because we found it so typical of our company), customer focus and growth (that is also definitely what typifies us, to go one step further every time).

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WHAT KIND OF REACTION HAVE YOU RECEIVED FROM EMPLOYEES?

The reactions have been very positive. As a company, you can make a difference in a crisis. Just through communication. You could do it less well, in which case I think you would be ‘punished’ in a certain way, or you could make yourself noticed during the crisis with your approach. I think we did the second. The bar was already high for us. We are a GPtW and we have in our mission statement that we don’t just want to be a Great Place to Work but the Best Workplace of all. Not just to get the title but really for our employees because we really believe that makes the difference.

How do we know what employees think? Because we asked them: ourselves and via GPtW. Our CEO has also done a survey himself. People give direct positive feedback. We also know that we are doing well because we often receive applicants who say they notice things are done differently at Protime. And while we sometimes have the feeling that we still need to do more, we can see that we have an incredible track record and that people are proud of the way we have handled things. That makes me very proud, of our approach and of our company. Target achieved!

HOW DO YOU MAKE SURE THAT YOUR COMMUNICATION REACHES EVERYONE? DO YOU TRACK AND EVALUATE THIS?

We don’t track everything, but we have tracked certain documents that we think are really important, so we can actually check whether they are read and downloaded. For webcasts, we also know how many viewers we have. We are working on that. Why? To be able to reach everyone effectively. Suppose you don’t do it and you reach 10% of your population with your webcasts, then you know you have to do something else.

We see that repetition works: delivering the same message several times. If you really want people to read things, you have to keep inviting them and you can do that from HR, from the CEO, from the team leader again, ... At a certain point, employees realise: this is important. We really do have the motto: **if you give it attention, it will grow on its own. Naming is strengthening. So, name what you are doing and name it regularly and it will come.**

Regarding collaboration and camaraderie, we were able to benefit from the fact that we put so much emphasis on it before the crisis. We saw that there was real cooperation within the teams and across the teams to deal with the crisis. People were also concerned about others. In my own team, for example, birthdays did not go unnoticed. We saw that happening in other teams too, that they surprise each other, pay a short visit or put something together, do yoga sessions together, team dances, ... Teams really did find each other. That was not the team leader’s job. It was really a team thing that arose: we are concerned about each other and we really want to give each other the necessary care and attention? Time after time, teams reinvented themselves to the point where we started working on team leader calls specifically around that. We wanted to share all that to get cross-fertilisation and they could reuse ideas.

But the other one: customer focus, was also central. What do you do if you no longer go to your customers but you still want them? In no time, different departments were working together to develop webinars specifically about new features or products. Because of the situation everything was accelerated. We implemented tracing around corona, so that you could really check with your own software: who was in the office when? Those things didn’t exist. We felt that we had to continue to help our customers in this way. We temporarily did not send a bill to our clients in the hospitality industry because we felt that they were hit hardest and we took some of the responsibility for that... We really thought about how we could continue to help our client.

Regarding the growth value, there was a lot of continuity. There were very few things that we stopped doing. We continued our poulain sessions with our starters, digitally. We did an all-digital team building. We did our kick-off completely digitally. We had a lot going on, but better than before. We took it one step higher and tried to reinvent ourselves. And that reinvention, in my view, has really happened several times, in rapid succession.



I think we have benefited very much from the strength of our values and of our culture, and I am very happy that we have always invested in it. I have often asked myself: what do you do when you don't have it and you have to win the trust of your people... I think that's pretty difficult. We had that basis. It was there. And I am really very proud of how Protime, as a company, every protimer, dealt with that.

Our results this year were also good, contrary to expectations. And why is that? Because everyone kept going and kept thinking and reinventing and maybe even went the extra mile. I am sure everyone went the extra mile. No one was left behind, on the contrary, because we believed in going for it together. We have to be there together for our customers, for each other. And meanwhile, we have to move on. **If we can no longer do things the way we used to, we will have to do them differently.**

WHAT HAS IT TAUGHT YOU FOR THE FUTURE? WHAT WILL YOU TAKE WITH YOU?

We have certainly learned how to reach everyone at once. I come back to those webcasts: we used to do that too, but on a small scale. Now we know you can reach everyone in one go via the digital tools, and that has its strength. We will keep on using these tools for sure.

I look forward to being an even better employer, taking with me everything we have learned this passed year. Realising the importance of coming together, paying attention to the human aspect of communication, appreciating being in the office together. We realised that people do not need to come to the office to do their jobs, but by being together we can give each other energy. That is what you want in real life and that is something we want to work on. **Our office is going to be a meeting place, not a workplace. A place to think together, to brainstorm, to inspire each other and to be energised.** We look forward to having the ideal mix: the comfort of working from home and the strengths of seeing each other at the office.

Regarding communication we want to keep being transparent, keep doing the lead calls, we will keep hosting our podcasts and webcasts to reach everyone, the HR newslash will be retained. By using these channels, the frequency is high, which means we can do it shorter, give messages faster and across countries, which was not the case before. I am glad that this acceleration has happened and when I look back, I am proud at what we have done.

Do you also want to follow in the footsteps of Protime?! Be sure to go to www.greatplacetowork.be to find out more about our way of working and the ways we can support you in your journey towards an even better workplace!



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TAKING WITH ME EVERYTHING WE HAVE LEARNED THIS PAST
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