Towers Watson is a leading global professional services company that helps organizations improve performance in the areas of benefits, talent management, rewards, and risk and capital management. The firm employs over 15,000 associates worldwide.

Eli Fernández is based in the U.K. and is the IT Service Management Lead for the Europe, Middle East and Africa (EMEA) region, which has more than 5,000 employees spread across 16 countries. His team manages the resolution and internal communication of all service-impacting incidents and delivers IT service management for the areas of operational support and systems architecture as well as outsourcing first-line service desk, on-site support and network services.

Towers Watson has been using SnapComms Desktop Alerts since August 2012, as a mechanism for updating staff about high-priority (priority 1) IT outages and notifications. Fernández explains that his team has a duty of care and a requirement to inform associates about service interruptions and he says that they "needed something that was flexible, easy to use, that could target the whole organization, parts of it or individuals."

The severity of an IT outage at Towers Watson is classified into four levels of escalating priority, determined by the number of applications and sites affected as well as the potential impacts on revenue and reputation. The priority level attributed to an issue drives the process around resolving and communicating that situation.

The IT team has developed a set of branded IT outage notification templates for their desktop alerts, based on a simple traffic light system. Three of the templates are used for incident management — a new notification has a red theme, an update is gold and the closure of that issue is green. The fourth template is plum and is used to communicate upcoming work which might result in service interruption.

While Fernández says that "what we do is common sense," there is a culture within the team of setting high standards. They ensure there are no spelling mistakes or grammatical errors in their messages and use simple, jargon-free communications in English rather than trying to translate more technical information into local languages. This focus on simplicity, quality and consistency has made these visual tools highly effective in conveying the status of system outages to Towers Watson staff and third-party IT service providers in multiple locations and different time zones.

Fernández says that the use of clearly-defined templates has provided a "reasonable level of protocol." But he also explains that Towers Watson is just scratching the surface in the way it is utilising SnapComms, given the capabilities of the software. He acknowledges that they use it judiciously and it is "not for frivolous purposes." While they could use it for other internal communications, they choose not to, and have restricted management of the tool to 12-15 administrators globally.

Associates have been educated about what to expect and do when receiving outage notifications and the options for users to dismiss, read now or read later are always enabled. The snooze facility is particularly important for the firm as associates conduct online training with clients so this must not be interrupted.

The benefits of using the alerts for effective IT communication at Towers Watson are largely intangible, around keeping people informed. They do use the reporting tools in SnapComms to get an indication of how many employees have seen the messages, but there is no formal measuring procedure in place. But Fernández confirms that using the desktop alerts is likely to have helped reduce the levels of traffic calls to the service desk and that he can safely assume that "people that want to know will know".

Good design, quality and consistency in messaging and offering flexibility to users have resulted in a lot of positive feedback about the desktop alerts. By and large associates like receiving them and Fernández concludes that "If they see an alert they know it is worth reading."