

The *Shifting* Role of the Communications Executive

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The past four years

have seen significant change in the communications environment, particularly as it relates to the role and remit of the communications executive.

Following the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and the rise in prominence of social justice issues initially motivated by the death of George Floyd, communications and corporate affairs executives stepped up to counsel the C-suite on stakeholder responses – including broader guidance around pandemic-related concerns and stances taken on racial justice and other social issues. An array of issue-based pledges and commitments put new scrutiny on corporations in the public arena, putting communicators in the hot-seat when it came to steering company leadership.

The pendulum has since swung back on social issues. Political polarization in the U.S. is at an all-time high, and increased public pressure from conservative activists like Robby Starbuck has made C-suite leaders more cautious on social issues. Employee activism has increasingly been met with a firm hand from corporations, and leaders have taken a harder stance on return-to-office mandates. In our work as counselors and advisors to the functional structure of the communications organization, we had one overarching question:

Where does this environment leave the communications leader?

We spoke anonymously with thirteen large-company communications leaders with an eye toward assessing the change in scope, role, remit, function, and design for the communications organization associated with the myriad changes observed since 2020.

A natural straw man hypothesis for our research was that communications leaders might fade back into the background under a more cautious posture from their leadership. Instead, what we found was a more nuanced position, both more valuable and vulnerable

than ever before. The past several years have heralded closer alignment between corporate communications and the rest of the C-suite. As their role has become more elevated, communications leaders have nonetheless been dependent on the CEO for position and influence. This piece has not changed: Specifically, many reported a refocusing on the “nuts and bolts” of the business, with fewer calories burned on issues and pledges, but more dialogue on the long-term advantage of purpose-based initiatives.

Our interviews revealed a shifting CEO agenda dictating changes to the communications function.

Our interviewees pointed to a more complex regulatory environment, which has drawn the C-suite more deeply into the political environment under guidance from a broader corporate affairs function. They pointed to the pace of change, particularly as it relates to the rise of artificial intelligence, as a key mover on functional and structural organization. They called out the centralization and consolidation of businesses, and a broader trend toward efficiency and supply chain resilience, as driving factors both in their own organizations and in those they serve. And they spoke at length about the role of employee activism, particularly around core labor issues – pay equity, hours and working conditions, bargaining rights – which dictate new considerations and questions about the role and accountabilities of corporate leadership.

Driven by these factors, we found that...

Business acumen is now an imperative.

01

A near-universal theme among the communications leaders we spoke with was a need to be business experts first, communications leaders second. Increasingly, they told us, a deep understanding of products, financials, competition, and strategy, as well as the external global policies, issues and regulations impacting their business felt non-negotiable in their core roles. To maintain their hard-earned seat as the right-hand to the CEO, they needed to be able to speak the language of the P&L and demonstrate return on investment – both for the communications function, and for broader corporate initiatives they advise on.

These communications leaders also pointed to the reality that the traditional metrics communications teams obsess over (share of voice, reach, impressions) are increasingly meaningless to business leaders. As one interviewee bluntly told us, “I’ve yet to be at a company where anyone cared about traditional comms metrics.” Smart communicators are recognizing that the

industry must recognize and prove its value differently in order to thrive today – and that this value must align with the broader value equation for the C-suite.

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The distinguishing factor is that you play at an enterprise level. And I think it’s quite unique because the only other individuals around the table in a C-suite that play at that level are typically the CEO and maybe the COO. Everybody else has very clear focus areas and lanes. And so, what it requires is, first of all, an understanding of the business.

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Counsel to leaders

Reframe performance metrics around business outcomes

Shift from communications-centric metrics (share of voice, impressions) to business impact measures that resonate with C-suite peers – this should be applied to both internal and external communications programming. Develop frameworks that tie communications activities directly to revenue growth, cost savings, risk mitigation, innovation ROI or other P&L and performance metrics.

Expand beyond traditional communications expertise

Invest time – yours, and your team’s – in understanding your company’s financial statements, competitive and policy landscapes, and product strategy in depth. Build relationships with finance, strategy, and public affairs teams to better understand business drivers and decision-making frameworks – and expect the same of your team.

The communications leader now wields soft power in the C-suite.

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Being heard is being valued. That’s the strategic value a CCO has. The strategic value is not how to write a press release, it’s how to negotiate and ask the right questions to end up with the right press release or the right quote or the reactive statement.

The communications leaders we spoke with talked about how, increasingly, they are moving from execution to true strategic advisory roles. They pointed to the role of “soft power” and diplomacy across the C-suite. Many mentioned working to build credibility through the business understanding mentioned above, as well as bringing more data-driven insights to C-suite dialogue. And in many cases, this was an evolution in title as well as remit, with the role and function shifting from “communications” to “corporate affairs.”

Leaders understand that to effectively promote and protect corporate reputation and truly shape business direction, their place in the C-suite must be earned,

not granted. Accordingly, many mentioned the need to prove the right to challenge and influence key business decisions, balancing a thorough knowledge and understanding of the business issues being debated with a deft diplomacy delivered through truth-telling and recommendations for constructive change.

Further, for many of the leaders we spoke with, earning the right to effectively influence business strategy through soft power was a challenge of not only positioning themselves, but of positioning their teams – as strategic partners, collaborators, and net value creators for the business.

Counsel to leaders

Build influence through strategic foresight and scenario planning

Develop a practice of presenting data-backed “if/then” scenarios that demonstrate deep understanding of business implications. Proactively bring market intelligence and stakeholder insights that help leadership anticipate and navigate emerging issues, framing recommendations through the lens of business risk and opportunity, not just communications impact.

Master the art of diplomatic challenge

Cultivate relationships across the C-suite that give you permission to constructively challenge assumptions, balancing being a trusted team player with the courage to raise difficult truths when needed. Hone your team’s ability to read the room and choose the right moment and method to influence.

Hone your succession plan

In an ecosystem where diplomatic skills and business acumen are paramount, good communications leaders have become irreplaceable – but you’ll need a replacement someday. Recognize that you’ll need a plan for who succeeds you and work to hone your team’s skills to ensure you have a next-in-line.

Post-COVID, the role of employee communications is here to stay – but the shape it takes is far from clear-cut.

Many communications leaders pointed to the rise in prominence of employee communications during and in the immediate aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and the summer of social activism that followed. New partnerships with leaders, with external communications partners, and with HR were forged, and new functional models of operating have continued to emerge.

To start, as the focus on issues engagement escalated and internal and external content and channel ecosystems became more complex and overlapping, several of our interviewees called out the divide between internal and external communications as an artificial construct that may be harming organizational effectiveness. They saw modern business challenges as increasingly demanding an integrated, multistakeholder approach that forced communications teams to rethink their structures and collaborative processes.

Even as the role of employee activism has quieted somewhat – with corporations taking a firmer stance

on employee protests and drawing a hard line on return-to-office mandates – communications leaders point to a sustained and, in many cases, amplified need for a more sophisticated, proactive understanding of what employees are thinking and feeling. Communications leaders are taking a page from their external playbooks and recognizing they should be looking for new ways and means to monitor, analyze and assess ongoing internal employee sentiment, integrating it into decision-making matrices that anticipate and game out potential employee reactions to corporate actions.

Leaders cited the need for the communications function to establish its own tools and methods for capturing employee sentiment and reflecting it back on the organization – sometimes in partnership with HR, but more often independent of it. In some cases, communications leaders pointed to this dynamic creating a less-than-rosy relationship with HR partners, with competition for ownership of the employee voice and CEO trust.

Our CEO and our leadership team look very deeply to figure out how the workforce is feeling and prioritize internal communications and transparency.



Counsel to leaders

Architect an integrated stakeholder engagement model

Move beyond the traditional internal/external communications divide to build holistic strategies that recognize stakeholder interconnectivity, developing talent and capabilities that can work across audiences rather than specializing in silos. Build systems to rapidly identify when internal issues might become external challenges (and vice versa).

Modernize employee listening and engagement capabilities

Invest in real-time employee sentiment tracking tools that provide actionable insights, and build capabilities to segment and target internal communications that are as sophisticated as your external communications.

Establish strategic partnership with HR while maintaining clear roles

Define clear swim lanes and decision rights between Communications and HR on employee engagement, creating formal collaboration mechanisms that leverage each function's unique strengths (e.g., HR's people data + communications' narrative expertise) and position your partnership as complementary.

The pace of change is driving a shift in the talent needed for communications functions.

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Communications leaders pointed to a growing gap between traditional and modern communications capabilities, with many leaders feeling a need to attract talent with both business and communications expertise. They pointed to the challenge of balancing the upskilling of existing teams with the need to bring in new perspectives and capabilities. In this context, they also talked about the importance of creating learning cultures and clear development paths able to attract, retain, and grow talent that anticipates an ever-evolving, increasingly sophisticated communications environment.

In their conversations with us, it was impossible for many of these leaders to avoid the potentially disruptive role of AI and data on the profession. Many pointed to the reality that AI, even in its nascent stage, is already transforming required tools and skill sets for communications – but they also highlighted how difficult it is to anticipate the exact skill gaps AI will create. Each of the communications leaders we spoke with cited the importance of building a workforce that

embraces new technologies and their automation efficiencies, while also recognizing the ongoing – and increased – need for human critical thinking skills as the role of communicators becomes more strategic and data-driven.

With AI fundamentally altering some traditional tasks such as media monitoring and insights creation, many are starting to think through how junior staff learn and acquire the foundational skills that will remain essential to a communicator’s role – from basic writing, to the application of insights to strategy, to multimedia content development. While technical communications capabilities will always exist, they continue to be redefined, compelling many communications leaders to protect and maintain the status of communications as a high-value technical skill while recognizing technical skills alone are no longer sufficient. In the long run, as one communicator told us, business rotations and experience outside of communications may be of equal or greater value than pure technical communications expertise.

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I brought in a bunch of new leads that I think are top 5%. I put a lot of eggs in those baskets and I begged for more money because these people are expensive ... but each is worth five people that I [previously] had on my team [in terms of strategic value].

Counsel to leaders

Redesign your talent strategy for the AI era

Create hybrid roles that blend AI/data analytics capabilities with strategic communications expertise, using pilots and experimentation to ultimately establish clear frameworks for what work should be automated vs. human led. Invest in upskilling existing team members on new technologies while preserving their valuable institutional knowledge.

Future-proof your operating model

Develop clear career paths that value both communications expertise and business/strategic capabilities, building structured programs to help junior staff develop critical thinking while maintaining the technical expertise required of communicators in an insight-driven, AI-augmented environment.

Focus hiring and development on hybrid skill sets

Prioritize candidates who demonstrate both technical communications skills and business/strategic capabilities. Consider unconventional talent sources, including business rotations and industry expertise outside communications.

Communications leaders point to increased centralization of the function amid both efficiency pushes and broader trends

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Lots of companies centralize and decentralize for lots of good reasons. When I joined the company, it had just come off of a centralized model to a decentralized model. I think in a year's time there will be recentralization of the function – from a controlling the narrative perspective, and also for cost savings and clarity.

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The changing strategic role and positioning of communications has dictated emerging or desired operational shifts for many of the communications leaders we spoke with. While decentralized communications structures – with regional or business unit communications leads – were once commonplace in the Fortune 500, most communications leaders now point to centralized structures, where a single communications leader oversees all geographic and business unit communicators, as ideal.

In a multi-stakeholder environment, they said, functional consolidation across audiences (consumer, corporate, public affairs, investor, and employee) is paramount. Many pointed to the operating reality that, in a centralized or matrixed model, a single strategic communications plan could evolve into surround-sound planning across core audiences. And some pointed to the fact that a significant issue or crisis can lead the function to “follow the sun” – motivating new ways of

working and showcasing the importance of an approach that is integrated both geographically and functionally.

A handful suggested that communications leaders may need to completely rethink organizational structure, moving from annual to quarterly planning and constant reorganization to match business needs, citing the realities of modern business dynamics and challenges in a more static organizational model.

Others pointed to cost pressures, citing centralization as a means of securing increased efficiency and ensuring that new tools such as artificial intelligence could be fully deployed and integrated by the profession. For several interviewees, this was part of a broader trend in their business dynamics: The pandemic accelerated the centralization of business in general away from local market management, with comms serving as one function among many impacted by this dynamic.

Counsel to leaders

Build agility into your operating model

Develop clear governance frameworks that define decision rights across global/local and functional boundaries, considering a “hub and spoke” structure that balances central control with local market responsiveness and/or more rapid planning cycles that allow for rapid reorganization based on business needs.

Enable integrated multi-stakeholder engagement

Create unified planning processes that consider impacts across all stakeholder groups, and establish centers of excellence that can support multiple markets and stakeholder groups.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured, in-depth interviews to examine the evolving role of Chief Communications Officers (CCOs) and Chief Corporate Affairs Officers (CCAOs) within large-cap companies. The research aimed to understand how these leaders navigate strategic decision-making, crisis management, and organizational transformation in an increasingly complex business environment.

The study utilized purposive sampling to identify and recruit 13 C-suite communications leaders from Fortune 1000 companies. Participants were selected based on current employment as CCO or CCAOs, minimum of five years in senior communications leadership, direct reporting relationship to CEO or executive leadership team, representation across diverse industry sectors, and geographic distribution that included both U.S.-based and European communications leaders.

In-depth individual interviews were conducted over a three-month period between May and August 2024. Each interview lasted 60-90 minutes, was conducted via secure video conferencing platform, was recorded with participant consent, was transcribed verbatim, and followed a semi-structured interview protocol.

Our analysis followed a systemic, iterative process. Thematic categories were developed and refined, with cross-case analysis used to identify common patterns and negative cases analyzed for divergent perspectives.

Our research adhered to strict ethical guidelines. Informed consent was secured from all participants. Confidentiality was protected through data anonymization and secure data storage procedures. We provided an option for all participants to review findings prior to publication.

About United Minds

United Minds is a global management consultancy dedicated to making business more human through organizational transformation. We combine cultural intelligence, leadership strategies, change management principles and our deep roots in communications to help communicators adapt and evolve themselves and their function, and reimagine how communications is done.

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