The Senior Communicator of the Future – Competencies and Training Needs

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Introduction

Paul Sanchez has proposed the future leading communicator as: "the true professional [who] will be an adroit strategist, a creative technician and a skilled facilitator – a friend of technology and an exponent of life-long learning. The future is a global voyage into the art and science of communication, where the successful communicator will be like the men and women of the Renaissance, pulling it all together, but in the high tech environment of the 21st century" (2005, pp.10-11).

Since the 1980s, starting from Broom and Dozier's seminal studies on the nature of public relations employment and professionalism, there has been discussion of the career paths, competencies and training needs of public relations and corporate communication professionals. More recently, the Arthur W. Page Society (2007) has scoped the role of the Chief Communication Officer's role in the Authentic Enterprise which placed the communicator at C-Level (Executive Board) or close to it (the so-called 'marzipan layer') of the corporation.

The research reported in this paper analyses the responses of leading European and international senior-level communicators as to the knowledge, skills, relationships, 360-degree vision, and managerial abilities that senior communications professionals will need in five years' time, and what it takes to prepare the next generation of leaders in globally integrated organizations. It also reflects on recent academic and practice literature about the nature of these competencies and discusses the potential methods and routes of their delivery. The outcomes include recommendations for consideration by educators and employers, especially those operating in cross-cultural environments.

So why are there so few truly international, senior level communication advisers who operate with some confidence across cultures? How can they be developed? These are questions that have been researched for the IPR. The aim of the research is to guide the public relations industry on what it takes to prepare the next generation of leaders in globally integrated organizations. The reputation of organizations is increasingly challenged in this age of rapid response. Communicators need to be educated and trained on higher skills than ever before and this research will help identify the most important skills and knowledge areas.

The situation is that communicators are now operating in Thomas Friedman's 'flat world' (Friedman 2005) of working without borders for corporations that are global entities with new engagement rules. It is also an information age that is ever more intricate and more complex. The review of recent academic and professional literature (Bronn 2001, Clausen 2007, Dozier & Broom 1995, Gregory 2008), Hogg & Doolan 1999, Mintzberg 2009, Moss & DeSanto 2005, Murray & White 2005, Page Society 2007) has given these headlines on the challenges and the future needs of corporate communicators:

- PR and corporate communicators are "behind the curve" on social media. They have been slower to adopt more technologically complicated tools. (Eyrich, Padman & Sweetser 2008)
- There is urgent need to change PR and corporate communications from being a broadcast machine to building stronger relations with stakeholders.
- Greater importance will be given to ethics, corporate social responsibility and sustainability (Pollach 2003)
- More and complex demands for communication are arising from 'internal audiences'.
- Culturally-sensitive communication needs to be operationalised in a changing world. (Clausen 2007, McDermott & O'Dell 2001)
- Corporate communicators increasingly seek C-Level roles.
- Proof of PR and corporate communication's contributions to strategic decision-making, strategy development and realisation, value creation and organisational functioning is increasingly sought.

Future communicators need to:
- Be flexible communicators, capable of adapting quickly; "one key role of our profession in the decades ahead will be to master the skills and dynamics of these new media", as the Arthur W. Page Society says.
- Able to interpret changes and trends in communication practices and technology; guide implementation, but not necessarily be a communication technologist.
- Have broader analytical and critical skills in order that they become respected at C-Level
- Become closer to trends and policy-making, especially on CSR/sustainability; often actively participating in the discourse
- Possess a wider inter-disciplinary set of competencies so they can act as advisors with equal standing to other senior operational colleagues
- Have negotiation and relationship-building and management skills
- Coach and mentor senior management to communicate, manage relationships and deal with new demands

The study to test these propositions was undertaken amongst senior communicators in Europe and North America and other markets. They were emailed a set of 12 propositions and asked to rank them in order of importance from 1 (most important) to 12 (least important). There was an option to add other priorities, if they did not agree with those offered. Respondents were also offered the opportunity to make a narrative comment on the propositions before ranking them. Most used the ranking scale but some ranked propositions as equally important or as being 'core' and 'non-core'.

Response to the survey came from the UK, France, Germany and the Netherlands and from senior communicators in North American corporates and consultancies with international operations. Despite considerable efforts through a wide range of communication channels, 18 responses were received. The typical role of the respondents was that of a board or near-board director.

Table 1: Propositions in ranked order

Rank	Proposition	Average
1	Communication strategy will be ever-more tightly linked to overall business strategy and less on organisational publicity. Competencies in strategic management will be part of the senior communicators' portfolios.	2.4
2	Senior communicators need to have broader analytical and critiquing skills in order to become trusted senior advisors.	3.4
3	A more inter-disciplinary set of skills, knowledge and competencies is needed for senior communicators in order that they act as advisors of equal standing with other senior operational colleagues.	3.7
4=	Senior communicators will become the cross-discipline Chief Reputation Officer in their organisations. This will involve higher level internal networking and communication skills and organisational knowledge in order to be effective.	4.3
4=	Senior communicators should focus more on engagement with stakeholders and less on media relations. Skills of negotiation and relationship management will need development.	4.3
6	Proof of Performance (the demonstration of the value of communication strategy to the organisation) will require higher skills of analysis, planning and measurement of outcomes.	5
7	Future senior communicators need to be able to interpret changes and trends in communication technologies and practices. They will be able to measure and evaluate the real value of evolving media forms, including social media, not just the traffic.	5.3
8	The creation of social capital and the maintenance of the organisation's 'operating license' will be an increasingly important role for senior communicators.	6
9	The increasing internationalisation of corporations will require greater competency amongst senior communicators in culturally-sensitive communication, its management and coordination.	7.2
10	Senior communicators will need to be closer to public policy-making, particularly on sustainability and corporate social responsibility issues. This may need additional education in public affairs.	7.5

| 11 | Succession planning should involve mentoring for mid-level staff in on current and future organisational demands by senior communicators in order to develop them as trusted counsellors, not just superior communications technicians. | 8.6 |
| 12 | There should be greater emphasis on senior communicators developing coaching and mentoring skills so they can aid senior management in problem-solving and presentation. | 8.8 |

The top ranked proposition identified training and education in strategizing as being very important, as communication is linked more closely to business strategy. The next two highly ranked competencies aligned with that thought, too.

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2) Senior communicators need to have broader analytical and critiquing skills in order to become trusted senior advisors. (3.4)

3) A more inter-disciplinary set of skills, knowledge and competencies is needed for senior communicators in order that they act as advisors of equal standing with other senior operational colleagues. (3.7)

Comments on these propositions from respondents included "senior comms people should not be a mentor of the senior management, they should be part of it" and "It's no longer sufficient to have a communications background only. Senior communicators need to understand business environment and management styles to be seen as trusted advisors." There was general agreement amongst the respondents that senior communicators must have a multi-disciplinary background and that reliance on media relations or public relations skills alone would be a *de facto* barrier to progression.

After the initial three priorities, there was a small gap to two competencies which share an equal ranking. They have similarities in that they focus on the building and the creation of mutually beneficial relationships.

4=) Senior communicators will become the cross-discipline Chief Reputation Officer in their organisations. This will involve higher level internal networking and communication skills and organisational knowledge in order to be effective. (4.3)

4=) Senior communicators should focus more on engagement with stakeholders and less on media relations. Skills of negotiation and relationship management will need development. (4.3).

Although the study had some debate about the extent to which media relations is important, there was a general trend that the senior level communicator had to take a much broader view of landscape of his or her organisation's operations. This was encapsulated by this comment: "Senior communicators should drop out of the media world; that's just one aspect next to many, many others." Although "drop out" may be an over-statement, the

sentiment is that this is a task best operationalised by middle level communication managers.

Perhaps the most surprising outcome of the study is that the perennial favourite priority of measuring communication and expressing its value (Watson 2008) only ranked sixth. This finding had been foreshadowed by Murray and White (2005) who found that CEOs were less interested in measuring PR effectiveness than in getting messages to key stakeholders and integrating communication objectives with those of industry. One notable comment from a European corporate communicator was "no management function escapes evaluation. We should forget 'measurement' and focus on value and how to grasp and express it." This, and other comments, indicates that evaluation could be moving on to a higher, more strategic plane by 2015.

It was also notable that the emphasis on the impact of digital technology upon communication, which was highlighted in the 'Authentic Enterprise' report (Arthur W. Page Society 2007) as fundamental to a reconsideration of the operation of future public relations and corporate communication ranks seventh only. Respondents considered that the competency (in part) of "future senior communicators need to be able to interpret changes and trends in communication technologies and practices" was much less important than the abilities of strategising and being part of the senior management team with cross-disciplinary skills and knowledge. This indicates that management and exploitation of social media and other technology are competencies that by 2015 will be undertaken by middle level communication managers.

The eight to tenth ranked competencies could perhaps have been expressed as sub-sets of the more strongly supported first to equal fourth competencies, rather than as stand-alone factors. They included (eighth) "the creation of social capital and the maintenance of the organisation's 'operating license'"; (ninth) the increasing internationalisation of corporations will require greater competency amongst senior communicators in culturally-sensitive communication, its management and coordination; (tenth) senior communicators will need to be closer to public policy-making, particularly on sustainability and corporate social responsibility issues. This may need additional education in public affairs. The eighth and tenth priorities align with the fourth priorities of responsibility for reputation management and engagement with stakeholders.

The final two priorities, which focused on succession planning and mentoring skills, were consistently given low support as befits their ranking and, whilst they appear in literature, are peripheral or minor skills compared with those ranked first to sixth.

Outcomes

In summary, the outcomes from the study were:

1. The primary focus for future senior communicators is for training and knowledge of competencies in strategic management, organisation knowledge and cross-disciplinary skills. This links with many previous studies.
2. There was strong support for senior corporate communicators to undertake the role of cross-discipline Chief Reputation Officer; also to lead on stakeholder relationship development and management.

3. The sixth ranking for Proof of Performance is lower than previous studies where it is normally ranked as 2nd or 3rd. The emphasis was away from clip counts and social media traffic and towards the impact of communication upon business objectives and of value creation.
4. Social media is seen as important development but senior communicators will be the interpreter of trends, not the implementer.
5. Media relations is perceived to be a mid-level communication manager task, other than in times of crisis or major change when the C-Level voice must be evidenced.
6. The low rank (9th) for culturally-sensitive communication was counter-intuitive, especially as many of the respondents operate already across many countries and continents.

Preparing for 2015

After considering the outcomes of the study, three areas of development are indicated. These are in practice, training and development, and proof of performance. These developments are vital for senior corporate communicators to achieve personal progression to C-Level and for higher levels of business effectiveness.

Practice: Communication strategy must be linked to or part of business strategy. The days of communication or public relations activity as a publicity-only activity are both past and constantly threatened with budget cuts. Communicators should understand the whole business environment, not just media and communication. Operational experience across the whole of a business, not just the communication areas, is needed in order that senior communicators can represent the organisation externally with authority. They must "speak language of the business" with fellow senior managers.

Training and Education – The key investment subjects for senior communicators are business strategy, financial literacy, economics, public affairs and public diplomacy, and relationship management. These can be delivered through training programmes or via executive programmes in universities. There also needs to be a "stronger focus on research skills" and more training on market and business analysis methods such as PEST and qualitative data interpretation.

Proof of Performance: The ability to interpret and apply the most appropriate research methods is more important than technical measurement skills, which can be undertaken by middle or junior communicators or external suppliers. Evaluation frameworks, said the respondents, need to be developed for judgement on organisational impact, not clip measurement. With these more powerful, interpretive methods, communication planning skills will improve and offer more effective implementation of communication that is fully integrated with business strategy.

Conclusion

This report opened with Sanchez's recipe for the future corporate communicator as "an adroit strategist, a creative technician and a skilled facilitator – a friend of technology and an exponent of life-long learning". This study agrees with most of these characteristics, with the exception of the senior communicator as a "creative technician" which is a role that others will undertake by 2015 as the future communicator will have more focus on relationship development, reputation management and the integration of

communication strategy within the broader business strategy. It is an exciting and challenging future and one that corporate communicators have to drive forward themselves.

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