

A person is shown from the chest up, holding a tablet. The background is a deep blue with a network of white lines and dots. Overlaid on this are several circular icons: a shopping cart, a share symbol, an envelope, a laptop, a smartphone, a gear, a plus sign, and a document with a checkmark. The text is in white, bold, sans-serif font.

THE FUTURE OF CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS

TOP INSIGHTS:

A summary of key findings from our research



From a lingering pandemic to growing geopolitical tensions, never-ending technological disruption and an accelerating climate crisis--**at no time in history have business leaders been forced to confront such complexity.** Today's executives must navigate these challenges while creating resilient companies that can thrive in any economic, social, political, or technological environment.

Accordingly, **there is no established playbook** for the myriad of issues that corporate communications teams are now grappling with as they seek to navigate changing stakeholder expectations while advancing the business interests of their companies.

To address this void, we set out to understand from senior communicators themselves what they are experiencing on the front lines. Our research reveals that the role of the corporate communicator has forever changed, with new expectations and rules of engagement. The message from nearly 250 of the world's most senior communicators is clear: to meet the challenge of this moment, **the corporate communication function must advance** from operating as a transactional cost center delivering on a communications agenda to being an indispensable partner generating measurable business value.

Some notable insights:

1. The role of communications has become more materially important to CEOs, Boards, and the C-Suite.
2. The modern corporate communications function is agile, multidisciplinary, and insights-driven.
3. CommsTech is already ushering in a new era and communicators can use it to deliver quantifiable value to the business.
4. An increased focus on the workplace, workforce, and well-being of employees isn't a pandemic fad.
5. Expectations around social issues have shifted the agenda — and there is no turning back.
6. A modern organizational structure only gets you so far.
7. Communicators are increasingly acting as change agents, enabling ongoing transformation.
8. The lines between communications and marketing continue to blur, creating new challenges and opportunities.
9. In an increasingly complex and activist multi-stakeholder world, the corporate brand matters now more than ever.
10. While the importance of the communications function is increasing, resources to deliver are lagging.

These insights form the basis of our *Future of Corporate Communications* study. Through direct conversations with senior communications leaders, along with a quantitative survey, we examined how the corporate communications function is evolving its role, strategies, structures, capabilities, and operations. Our study's core objectives were to:

- *Understand the trends driving the evolution of the modern communications function.*
- *Understand the current and future priorities of today's senior communications leaders.*
- *Benchmark baseline corporate communications function design and organization.*

What you'll find in the following pages is a summary of the top insights derived from our comprehensive research and our ongoing work with leaders in this field.

We are deeply appreciative of all the CCOs and communications leaders who took the time to speak with us and respond to our survey. This report reflects the changing nature of your work, your priorities, and the critical role many of you play within your companies.

There has never been a more inspiring time to be a part of our profession. We are excited to share this glimpse into the future with you.

With gratitude,


Jim O'Leary

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01

The role of communications has become more materially important to CEOs, boards, and the C-suite.

CCOs report having increased strategic importance to the business. More are reporting to and actively partnering with CEOs than in previous years.

34%

of CCOs reported to the CEO in 2014, whereas ...

46%

report to the CEO today.

77%

say perceptions of the role of communications as a strategic business driver changed within their organization during 2020.

However, **significant variability** exists in the perception of communications as a business driver depending on industry and organizational maturity. A **continuing uphill battle** exists for many CCOs.

THE PLAYBOOK

- **Recognize that you're operating in an era of increased accountability for corporations, creating more demands but also the opportunity for communications to play a material role.** Similar to the HR function a decade ago, the communications function has the opportunity to shift to a true business partner. Those that succeed will seize this opportunity.
- **Ground your goals in a singular objective: driving a shift from cost center to value creator.** The ball has rolled in your direction thanks to changing factors in the external environment, navigating COVID-19, social justice, geopolitical challenges, and stakeholder activism, among others. To solidify your role as value creator, you'll need tangible proof of your business impact. Design your team, investments, and communications strategy accordingly.
- **No communications leader can succeed solely by their own doing.** Create a business-facing organizational design that delivers the greatest collective contribution by building a bench of multi-talented, multidisciplinary team members whose skills go beyond the traditional to meet the new demands of communications.

“

My communications team used to be my PR team. Now my communications team is in the room when we are debating what to do on social issues, human capital challenges, risk prevention, and how we position the company in an increasingly complicated stakeholder ecosystem.”



02

The modern Corporate Communications function is agile, multidisciplinary, and insights-driven.

CCOs are seeing their organizations shift from singularly focused expertise to a multidisciplinary function of complementary capabilities. Leading teams are now balancing traditional skills like writing, storytelling, and media engagement with expertise in new areas like social purpose, risk management, creative, and content marketing underpinned by a CommsTech stack providing data science, actionable insights and measurable outcomes.

89%

of CCOs said “functional organization” is a top-five area of internal investment for the coming year.

CREATIVE & DIGITAL

were noted repeatedly as having increased importance as core communications function responsibilities.

Communicators also frequently spoke about the hurdles posed by creating, leading, and managing

MULTIDISCIPLINARY TEAMS.

THE PLAYBOOK

- **Hire for expertise, but also for business acumen.** Today’s communications function demands “T-shaped” people — professionals with deep expertise in a particular domain but enough breadth of skill to think strategically and plug seamlessly into a variety of contexts while moving at the speed of today’s news cycle.
- **Manage your team as an integrated unit.** Ensure that all team members have a shared commitment to and understanding of common goals and the technology enabling the outcomes. Build processes that enable different functional specialists to work together effectively.
- **Cultivate a culture of collaboration.** Create opportunities for team members to build strong relationships and develop an appreciation for the diversity of their colleagues’ skill sets.
- **Invest in professional development.** As the demands and technology tools of the profession change, your talent mix will need to evolve. Offer and reward continuous learning and development that keep your team at the forefront of industry evolution.

“A senior communicator used to be the best writer or had the best media contacts. But now the role of the top communicator is to pull together the right skill sets to drive a strategy aligned with the business and know how to maximize the value of the specialist on his or her team.”



03

CommsTech is already ushering in a new era, and communicators can use it to deliver quantifiable value to the business.

Technology changed the game for the marketing world. Now communications leaders are leveraging its value in better understanding and predicting stakeholder behaviors. But the road to a sophisticated CommsTech-enabled function is fraught with uncertainty about how to proceed.

70%

of CCOs report CommsTech as a top area of investment for the coming year.

56%

report increased use of communications technology.

But adoption is scattershot, for example,

44%

report baseline measurement of media impressions, but only 30% are mapping revenue growth back to their core activities.

58%

report it's hard for them to justify large technology investments, and 39% say this is not a strategic priority for their CEO or C-suite.

THE PLAYBOOK

- **Recognize and embrace the role of CommsTech in driving and proving your ROI.** Digital tools, data, analytic capabilities, and technology can not only help you sharpen your message and better reach your audience, but can help you prove the value and impact of communications with stakeholders. Invest with a clear eye toward tying activity back to business strategy and results.
- **Start small and learn, then expand.** Pick one or two low-risk areas where more effective use of data, analytics, and technology could measurably improve your impact. Use these as opportunities to develop confidence. Let them serve as a beachhead from which to expand and develop a more robust CommsTech-enabled function.
- **Build the right processes to ensure results from technology adoption.** CommsTech adoption doesn't — and shouldn't — stop at the purchase of a new tool or platform. Ensure you've designed the right processes, structures, and governance around the technology to manage and derive compelling insights and outcomes.
- **Evolve your leadership style to manage a multidisciplinary team.** Leading a modern Corporate Communications function built on data and insights requires new leadership skills. Embracing technology also means engaging new types of talent, collaboration, information-sharing, and strategic outcomes.



“We just have to continue to challenge ourselves. How do we get in front of our target audience in new and different ways? [In terms of] proving business value, how can you make that simpler and make better connections to the business results?”



04

An increased focus on the workplace, workforce, and well-being of employees isn't a pandemic fad.

As employee engagement and the war for talent continue to be recognized as imperative to business performance, CCOs report an increased investment in employee communications and engagement systems and programming, specialty areas of expertise in need of ongoing development and attention.

62%

of CCOs report an increased focus on employee communications.

54%

rank employee communications in their top five areas of talent investment for the coming year.

38%

report talent considerations have shifted their communications agenda.

THE PLAYBOOK

- **Put effective employee communications at the center of business strategy.** License to operate and sustained competitive advantage are increasingly driven by a more purpose-driven, engaged workforce. Evangelize the role of effective communications in driving high performance.
- **Build permanence into the employee communications function.** Encourage stakeholders to recognize that employee communications is not simply “a pandemic issue” but a tipping point in a long and ongoing increase in strategic importance.
- **Recognize employee communications as a distinct and specific skill set.** Hire functional experts with the experience, tools, and resources to create a robust employee engagement competency that demonstrates measurable business impact.
- **Borrow from consumer marketing tactics.** Great employee communications include experiences, as well as paid, earned, and owned media. Develop the ability to segment and target the right message to the right employee at the right time through the right medium.
- **Create a powerful employee engagement-specific tech stack.** Build the digital and human platforms to engage, inform, and track employee sentiment and engagement. Embed two-way communications and leader visibility into your employee communications tool kit so you — and they — know what's driving or hindering performance, trust, and engagement.



"I always say that I love crisis because it's the opportunity to demonstrate the real value of communications. Last year was an exceptional opportunity to show the value of employee communications and our team; they really relied on us regarding internal communications. We had a big challenge too, to create internal campaigns, to keep our employees safe."



05

Expectations around social issues have shifted the agenda — and there is no turning back.

A pandemic, public reckonings on racial injustice, hyper-partisanship, climate change, and the 24/7 news cycle have put businesses in the hot seat. Belief-driven employees, customers, and shareholders are demanding action, and increasingly, communicators find themselves navigating uncharted waters, often in direct partnership with the CEO, that are unlikely to recede.

73%

of CCOs report that social issues have shifted their communications agenda.

51%

report an elevated or altered importance of communications in today's environment.

THE PLAYBOOK

- **Ensure that all stakeholders are aligned on your organization's social purpose.** Explicitly defining your enterprise purpose and ESG road map is now table stakes and an opportunity for the communications function to exert leadership.
- **Develop a consistent framework for engaging and responding to social issues.** Establish a process that determines when you will and won't speak out. Gain stakeholder buy-in and conduct regular table-top exercises to ensure that your process results in outcomes consistent with your values and business goals.
- **Understand where the risk is for your organization.** Identify and align on top internal and external risks for your organization related to social issues and environmental issues and develop an early warning system. Create and implement an action plan for proactively mitigating risks.

“

"There is a shifting recognition that we [Corporate Communications] have to be involved in many of the strategic decisions that are made. I've seen our function grow in size, but also expand in influence and recognition that we are critical voices when it comes to protecting, shaping, and advancing reputation."



06

A modern organizational structure only gets you so far.

Corporate Communications structures continuously transform, often more as a product of incremental change than intentional design — each evolving to fulfill the unique strategies, needs, and operating environment of the business it supports. Structures typically start with one of three basic frameworks: centralized, decentralized, and matrixed, none of which is objectively preferable to the others, and all of which should support business strategy.

43%

of communicators report operating in a centralized structure that provides them greater awareness and access to business strategy and increased relevance across channels.

26%

of communicators leading matrixed functions and 31% leading decentralized functions report closer relationships with business leaders and more evidence of their work producing results.

THE PLAYBOOK

- **Organization design is almost always a pendulum shift.** The current trend is toward centralization, but communications functions are constantly being arranged and re-arranged. Rather than putting your focus on “is my organization correctly designed?”, realize there are legitimate pros and cons for different models.
- **Start with a clear vision and direction.** When evaluating your function’s structure and operating model, start by aligning on the business strategies you’ll drive, the vision and guiding principles around how you operate, and the outcomes you’re responsible for.
- **In any model, focus on governance, process, and accountability.** The biggest steps you can take to improve functional effectiveness often have limited connection to the model or organizational chart you’re operating in, but in overlooked or underdeveloped areas like governance, process, and accountability — which have been long shortcomings for most communications function.

“In a centralized team, you have a better chance of having a great understanding of the business climate, and they know what events and programs are happening.”

“Alignment to [specific business units] means the communications team has a deep understanding of who our partner is within the company. We understand our client’s audience and can have thoughtful discussions about the objectives of the messages and channels to use.”



07

Communicators are increasingly acting as change agents, enabling ongoing transformation.

Nine out of ten organizations are in some form of transformation, but more than three quarters fail. Corporate communications functions are increasingly called upon to play a leading role in organizational transformation. This role is no longer limited to employee communications and reputation management, but now includes strategy on how to engage and drive a shift in mindset and behavior across internal and external stakeholder groups — from workplace to marketplace — to achieve transformation objectives.*

77%

of CCOs report that business transformation has impacted their communications agenda.

51%

report an increased focus on business transformation efforts.

THE PLAYBOOK

- **Recognize change as an opportunity for value creation.** Establishing a capability within the Corporate Communications function to support transformation is a great way to demonstrate the impact your team can have on business outcomes.
- **Build greater business acumen and an understanding of business strategy across your communications team.** It's increasingly important that communicators have an understanding of competitive dynamics, business models, and strategic priorities in general, but especially as critical underpinnings to a transformation agenda.
- **Train communicators in the fundamentals of change management.** A good transformation communications strategy starts with a basic understanding of the principles of organizational transformation and change. Invest in change certification courses for your team and develop internal mentor programs to grow their skills.
- **Address organization transformation needs through the right processes and structures.** For businesses experiencing significant or ongoing transformation, a matrixed communications structure can help communications teams ensure both business access and sufficient central resources to drive an effective communications strategy. Relationships across the organization will make your change agents more effective.



“Change communications has become so much of an integral part of our function across the entire company. And so we’ve gotten very good at change management communications because we’ve had to.”



08

The lines between communications and marketing continue to blur, creating new challenges and opportunities.

Rapid proliferation of available channels and the ongoing blurring of the lines between paid, earned, owned, and social media have driven communications to play a bigger role in upper-funnel and lower-funnel marketing, often driving more marketing responsibilities into the office of the CCO.

65%

of CCOs rank marketing communications in their top five areas of increased agency partner investment for the coming year.

45%

are engaging in advertising of some sort.

12%

of budget, on average, is going to digital capabilities such as SEO, advertising, and paid amplification, resulting in continued ownership tensions between marketing and communications.

42%

report challenges in collaborating with marketing and sales functions when asked about challenges to technology adoption.

THE PLAYBOOK

- **Demonstrate ROI.** Many communicators express frustration at not having the budget of their counterparts in marketing. To grow your budget, focus less on competing with marketing and more on helping your team to recognize and embrace the new permission being granted to the communications function. Use that permission to execute CommsTech-enabled programs demonstrate business impact and ROI.
- **Partner with marketing.** Teams that have successfully bridged the communications-marketing divide report collaborative, integrated planning that acknowledges the fluidity of both disciplines. By embracing CommsTech, CCOs can co-create systems and processes that clarify roles and drive collaboration. Use budgets to build distinctive capabilities in each function, but that are shared across both functions where appropriate.



“The worlds [of marketing and communications] are blended, and it’s a fight for relevance. It’s a fight for talent. It’s often a fight for ownership of the audience groups that we want to own and the CEO we are both trying to demonstrate value for.”



09

In an increasingly complex and activist multistakeholder universe, the corporate brand matters now more than ever.

As the dividing lines between product brands and corporations blur in the eyes of stakeholders, corporate leaders find themselves under pressure to take a stand on various social issues on behalf of the broader enterprise. Defining a platform that not only articulates what you stand for but, more importantly, drives engagement across a multistakeholder world is paramount.

63%

of CCOs say “brand and corporate identity” is something their team is responsible for today.

51%

rank “corporate positioning” in their top five areas of most strategic importance.

44%

rank “corporate positioning” in their top five areas of anticipated agency support — second only to marketing communications.

THE PLAYBOOK

- Trust should sit at the center of your corporate brand. Trust is the currency that creates lasting stakeholder relationships, gives organizations permission to innovate, and ultimately drives growth for the organization.
- Define a clear and compelling corporate brand platform and narrative grounded in trust insights that enable your team to deliver an understanding of your brand responsibility as a leader in business and in broader society.
- The corporate brand must be brought to life through consistent storytelling activation and creative newsroom that help your stakeholders see human faces, voices, and the impact you deliver as an enterprise.
- Communications leaders should own their corporate brand experience across stakeholders. The Corporate Communications lens is crucial in understanding and interpreting risk and delivering an integrated corporate brand experience that maximizes trust and delivers engagement returns.



“I think that thread [corporate-level narrative] is needed now more than ever given the complexity of organizations, the pace of change, the complexity of the external environments. Everything requires a communications lens and a consciousness around that narrative ...”



10

While the importance of the communications function is increasing, resources to deliver are lagging.

Despite a broader scope of responsibility and higher expectations, less than one in ten CCOs anticipate a budget increase of more than 15% this year. In fact, nearly half of CCOs expect their budgets to remain the same or decline in the coming year. The evolved CCO remits, and the expanded set of capabilities to deliver measurable value against them, are often underfunded.

30%

more functional responsibility has been given to CCOs who are seen as strategic business partners. Yet only...

6%

of CCOs anticipate a budget increase of 15% or more, and...

45%

anticipate a budget decrease or no change.

THE PLAYBOOK

- **Create opportunities to demonstrate measurable impact.** Focus communication efforts where return on investment can be measured and used as evidence to support increased funding asks.
- **Link budget requests to strategic goals/priorities.** Define budget categories in terms of business priorities and illustrate how investment will enable progress against stated goals.
- **Partner with business leaders.** Understand influential leaders' priorities and KPIs and design initiatives that will benefit them and can be funded from sources outside of the annual communications budget.
- **Do more with less.** Make the budget you have go further by investing in people with agile, flexible skill sets and new technology that drives efficiency and enables the measurement of quantifiable results.

“

I agree wholeheartedly that corporate communicators need to be seen as strategic business partners and not just a cost center or an afterthought. The more we can share the importance and value of Corporate Communications with business leadership, the better for everybody.



Our research focused on two tracks:

1. A quantitative survey fielded to 200 participants in December 2020 and January 2021.
2. In-depth interviews with 35+ senior communications leaders from participating U.S.-based organizations.

Our survey was a combination of trend identification and baseline functional benchmarking (e.g., head count, scope of responsibilities, operational models, budgets, and investments).

Interviews focused on the operations and strategic positioning of the Corporate Communications function and forward-looking insights around future growth and investment.

The survey was conducted by Edelman Data & Intelligence, an independent research firm and part of the DJE family of companies.

Data analysis was performed by an integrated team of Edelman organizational design subject matter experts and Edelman leaders and subject matter experts.

For more information, contact FOCC@Edelman.com.

The Future of Corporate Communications Study in Numbers



3 months of research



200+
Survey participants



35+
Interviews and conversations

Representative Geographies

North America (85%)
EMEA (7%)
APAC (4%)
Latin America (4%)



Representative Sectors

Public: 49%
Private: 49%
Nonprofit: 2%



Global Reach

Multinational: 61%
National (U.S.): 39%

Participants



Senior Corporate Communications leaders, Minimum 10-24 years professional experience