HARNESSING AI VOICE ASSISTANTS FOR DIGITAL CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

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Voice-based assistants (VAs) are transforming digital corporate communication by fundamentally reshaping how organizations interact with stakeholders. Recent innovations in generative artificial intelligence, powered by large language models (LLMs), have led to the widespread adoption of VAs capable of perceiving their environment, making decisions, and automating processes in real-time. Their ability to simulate human-like empathy, combined with increased agency, enhances the naturalness and relatability of their interactions. Consequently, these assistants function as multimodal, customizable tools that can adapt to the varied ways organizations choose to integrate them into their workflows. In this article, we illustrate the current applications of VAs through real-world examples.

A NEW GENERATION OF ASSISTANTS

Digital voice communication (DVC) is the strategic management of voice-based communication channels to improve communication in organizations, society, and with organizational stakeholders. Voice-based digital corporate communication rose over the last decade in parallel with the advancement of AI techniques such as natural language processing and automatic speech recognition. Prominent VAs like Amazon Alexa, Google Assistant, and Apple Siri exemplify this innovation. These assistants function as artificially enabled agents capable of using human language to engage in contextual dialogues, process complex requests, and expand their knowledge base. Their ability to monitor behaviors, analyze patterns, and understand needs empowers organizations to automate tasks, predict behaviors, and foster interactive engagements. However, these earlier generations of VAs were constrained by technological limitations; they relied on scripted responses, had limited capacity for nuanced natural language understanding, and produced voices that lacked human-like quality and expressiveness. The generalized absence of genuine affective resonance and contextualized responsiveness generated some aversion toward AI as these VAs often appeared cold and impersonal.

The launch of ChatGPT (OpenAI) at the end of 2022 marked the beginning of a new generation of assistants. This rapid expansion, followed by the emergence of competitive platforms like Claude (Anthropic) and Gemini (Google), has created fertile ground for innovation in corporate communication. By 2024, 70 % of UK and 65% of US companies were using these advanced assistants (SAS, 2024). This new wave of VAs is becoming increasingly accessible and seamlessly integrated across company levels and functional areas. They can now be used by anyone, anywhere, and are often embedded into mobile devices, messaging apps like WhatsApp, corporate platforms such as Salesforce, and various digital ecosystems. While their level of specialization depends on how companies deploy them – whether for broad or targeted use – they benefit from two key advancements expected to drive even greater adoption: empathy and agency.

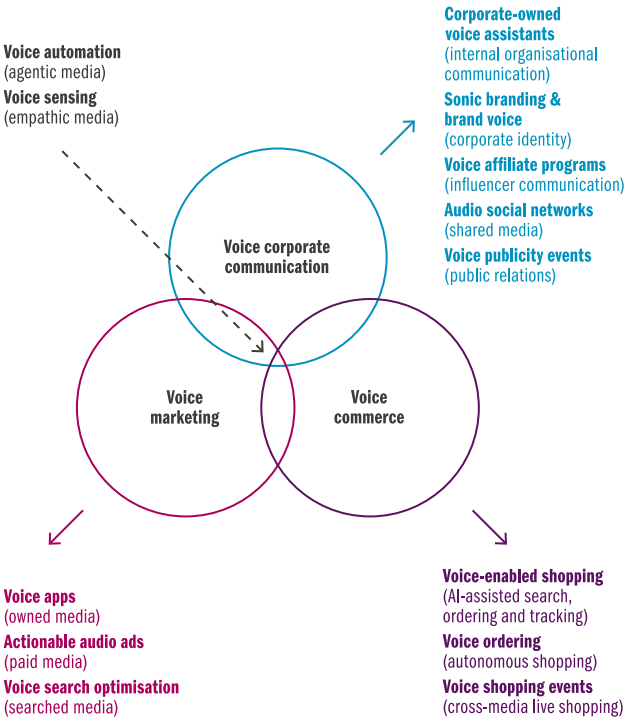
- **Empathy** is a fundamental aspect of human social behavior, essential for building meaningful connections. VAs that can simulate all key dimensions of empathy – cognitive, affective, and compassionate – enhance interpersonal interactions and can be perceived as genuine by users (Mari et al., 2024). Empathic VAs, such as Hume AI's EVI, can detect and interpret user emotions in real-time by analyzing speech patterns, including tone, vocal bursts, and emotional language. This capability allows them to engage in adaptive and emotionally attuned interactions, creating adaptive and affectively attuned exchanges.
- **Agentic AI** refers to systems that perceive their environment, make autonomous decisions, and act toward specific goals without constant human input. These systems simulate human-like agency, enabling problem-solving, learning, and adaptive decision-making. ChatGPT's "scheduled tasks" feature showcases agentic AI's potential by automating actions like reminders, reports, and workflows. VAs with these capabilities transform corporate communication by ensuring personalization, on-brand messaging, and scalable interactions, among other things. Their 24/7 availability enhances engagement, crisis management, and internal communication, setting a new standard for organizational efficiency.

The impact of agentic and empathic generative AI-based VAs is far-reaching and positions digital voice communication (DVC) as a disruptive and widely accessible innovation in digital corporate communication.

DIGITAL VOICE COMMUNICATION FRAMEWORK

VAs have enabled corporate communication professionals to design diverse push and pull initiatives tailored to the bi-directional nature of voice as a communication touchpoint. Understanding the organizational environment in which DVC operates requires examining the dual role of VAs as spaces for interaction (arenas) and channels for communication (media). The DVC framework, inspired by the PESO model (Paid, Earned, Shared, and Owned media) and emerging forms of communication presented in the digital media-arenas (DMA) framework, such as Searched media, addresses the strategic use of VAs for effective corporate communication (Macnamara et al., 2016; Badham et al., 2022). This framework emphasizes the importance of engaging stakeholders such as employees, influencers, and customers, demonstrating the universal role of DCC across organizational and societal contexts (Badham & Luoma-aho, 2023).

Digital Voice Communication (DVC) framework



Source: Mari et al., 2023

The DVC framework categorizes voice-based communication into 11 main activities based on the inductive analysis of nearly 100 interviews with industry executives. These activities relate to using voice for corporate communication, marketing, and commerce and highlight organizational innovation opportunities.

Voice corporate communication

Voice corporate communication refers to the strategic implementation and management of voice-based assistants to enhance internal corporate communication and stakeholder engagement. This evolving field is characterized by five key practices:

- **Corporate-owned voice assistants (OVAs)** play an increasingly significant role in internal corporate communication, providing managers and employees with efficient access to business information. For instance, a VA might respond to a query during meetings such as, "What was our market share in the small appliances segment in the UK during Q1 2025?" Additionally, OVAs support frontline workers by streamlining operational tasks. Walmart's "Ask Sam", a mobile-based VA, assists over 5,000 employees in the US by answering queries related to product pricing and placement while also providing policy updates during crisis management, as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Sonic branding and brand voice** are the auditory representations of corporate identity and have become a critical component of brand differentiation. Traditionally, organizations have used auditory elements such as the "Intel Inside" chime or McDonald's "I'm Lovin' It" audio signature to reinforce brand identity. However, the future of corporate sound extends beyond jingles to encompass distinctive brand voices. KFC has developed a brand voice modeled after its founder, Colonel Sanders, ensuring consistency across various media touchpoints, including television ads and VAs.
- **Voice affiliate programs** enable influencers to promote third-party products through audio content and earn commissions. The Amazon Associates Program and the Amazon Influencer Program illustrate the potential of voice-driven marketing. Influencers curate product recommendations via live streams, shoppable photos, and videos, connecting brands with targeted audiences. Communication managers can utilize Alexa-enabled affiliate programs to collaborate with influencers and media partners, thereby amplifying their brand messaging to Amazon's extensive customer base.
- **Audio social networks** are voice-only platforms organizations consider for their social engagement potential. The emergence of X Spaces and LinkedIn Audio Events has highlighted the potential for company participation in voice-driven discussions. Initially dominated by influencers, these platforms now attract strategic stakeholders interested in diverse topics such as sustainability, gender equality, and cryptocurrency investment. Corporate communicators need to determine whether to actively host discussions or adopt a passive listening approach. Options include sponsoring chat rooms, featuring guest speakers, or directly moderating discussions.
- **Voice publicity events** are voice-driven initiatives that organizations use to generate media coverage and public engagement. A notable example is Nike's campaign during an NBA halftime show, where millions of viewers were invited to use Google Assistant to "Ask Nike" to purchase the pre-release Nike shoes worn by two top players. All pairs were sold within six minutes, with over 15,000 purchase requests for the $350 shoes. The event generated extensive media coverage, producing millions of dollars in exposure and demonstrating the power of voice technology in brand activations.

Voice marketing

Voice marketing employs a combination of push and pull communication strategies to create immersive, convenient, and relevant brand experiences, thereby strengthening consumer relationships. The rapid adoption of voice marketing is closely linked to:

- **Voice applications** are branded voice applications, known as "skills" on Amazon Alexa and "custom GPT" on ChatGPT, that serve four primary functions: utility, entertainment, information, and education. These third-party apps offer companies limitless opportunities to enhance

strategic relationships with consumers. For instance, the scotch brand Talisker pioneered an Alexa skill to replicate a guided tasting, similar to those conducted at its distillery, providing a step-by-step audio guide to enhance whisky appreciation. Additionally, Custom GPTs allow brands to create personalized conversational agents that align with their tone and service goals.

- **Actionable audio advertisements** encourage listeners to engage with a brand or purchase products on VAs. Amazon introduced a service enabling advertisers to insert periodic audio ads between songs on Amazon Music. Brands such as Berocca by Bayer Consumer Health have innovated with actionable audio ads. Digital radio listeners can use voice commands to request additional product details or place orders "hands-free" directly through Alexa.
- **Voice search optimization** requires companies like Procter & Gamble to refine product descriptions to align with verbal search behavior to improve the visibility of search results. Unlike text-based searches, voice queries often incorporate long-tail keywords and conversational phrases with filler words such as "the" or "for" (e.g., "benefits of AI" versus "what are the benefits of AI"). Effective voice search strategies can significantly impact an organization's digital performance, emphasizing managers' need to stay informed on best practices in this evolving domain.

Voice commerce

Voice commerce encompasses transactions initiated via voice commands directly through brand-owned platforms or third-party marketplaces. This domain integrates technical capabilities and communication strategies that facilitate product searches, customer reviews, order placement, and tracking. Key voice commerce practices include voice-enabled shopping, voice ordering, and voice shopping events.

- **Voice-enabled shopping** allows repeat customers to purchase physical products or services using voice commands without inputting additional details such as addresses or payment credentials. Transactions can occur via third-party voice apps (e.g., Spotify) or through native voice shopping services like Google Shopping. Domino's Pizza pioneered one of the earliest voice-driven commercial transactions through its custom Alexa skill. By saying, "Alexa, ask Domino's to feed me!" users can create new orders, reorder their previous selections, or track their deliveries.
- **Voice ordering automation** marks a significant step toward autonomous shopping, minimizing or even eliminating human decision-making in purchases. Brands can capitalize on this shift by adopting subscription-based revenue models and offering exclusive content or advanced features. A notable example is Jeopardy!, produced by Sony Pictures Television, which became the first Alexa skill to introduce a paid subscription. Users could access additional episodes for $1.99 per month, demonstrating how voice technology can drive new monetization strategies in digital commerce.
- **Voice shopping events** combine live product discovery with time-sensitive purchasing incentives, creating urgency through exclusive, limited-time offers. By integrating multiple media channels, these events encourage immediate action. For example, a TV ad might prompt viewers to ask Alexa to buy a limited-edition cereal available only during a live sports event. This strategy merges entertainment with commerce, enhancing engagement, and driving instant conversions.

POTENTIAL OF VOICE SENSING AND AUTOMATION

To fully tap into the potential of AI-driven VAs in digital corporate communication, corporate communicators should systematically explore relevant use cases across various media and arenas. At the same time, rapid advancements in voice technologies further amplify synergies among corporate communication, marketing, and commerce. It's crucial to consider how VAs, acting as agentic and empathic media, can enhance communication within organizations, society at large, and with key stakeholders.

Voice automation

Transforming into agentic media, VAs autonomously generate, distribute, and analyze communication to bolster organizational engagement. For corporate communication managers, these systems streamline internal workflows, enable personalized stakeholder interactions, and ensure consistent, real-time messaging across multiple channels. Organizations adopting agentic VAs can improve efficiency, facilitate better decision-making, and advance their communication strategies in an increasingly digital environment.

A key feature of agentic media is its ability to operate across various organizational functions, fostering collaboration and eliminating silos. For instance, Unilever's Unabot supports internal training and employee engagement by providing instant access to corporate updates and policy changes via voice commands. Similarly, IBM employees use voice automation to troubleshoot common IT issues and access real-time business insights, easing IT workloads. At PwC, Amazon Alexa offers personalized internal updates, allowing employees to check project statuses and announcements hands-free.

Voice sensing

Evolving into empathic media, VAs detect and interpret emotional cues in real time and adapt their communication style accordingly. By analyzing tone, pitch, and cadence, these assistants can identify stress or excitement and respond with reassurance or encouragement. Such emotional intelligence promotes healthier workplace interactions by averting misunderstandings and fostering employee well-being. Deloitte, for example, is piloting VAs that gauge employee sentiment during standups, giving managers early insights into team morale. Meanwhile, SAP leverages empathic media solutions that assess tone and sentiment in conference calls, dynamically adjusting agendas to diffuse tension and ensure balanced participation. As voice sensing grows more advanced, it streamlines communication and cultivates a supportive corporate culture that values emotional well-being and higher engagement across teams.

Despite the vast innovative potential of voice sensing and automation in corporate communication and beyond, transparency, control, and privacy issues must be carefully evaluated, as failures in these areas could damage reputation. Monitoring the evolution of voice technologies helps organizations avoid premature adoption without understanding associated risks while also enabling timely implementation with clearly defined safeguards.

CONCLUSION

Voice-based digital corporate communication marks a fundamental transformation in stakeholder engagement, and the DVC framework shows current opportunities. Organizations can cultivate stronger relationships and enrich user experiences by automating tasks through empathy-centered approaches. However, integrating AI-driven VAs in corporate communication presents several challenges. Organizations may struggle to ensure these systems operate ethically while maintaining trust and compliance. Thus, managers are encouraged to assess how VAs will affect stakeholder perceptions and guide decision-making in the long run. Additionally, balancing automation with meaningful human-like interactions remains a key hurdle when full control of the message is not necessarily possible. As AI and voice technology continue to advance, they will further influence corporate communication practices. Enterprises that strategically align VAs with their overarching goals will be poised to excel in the evolving digital environment.

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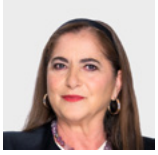

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MORE INFORMATION

The voice communication framework and AI voice assistants are discussed in more detail in Mari & Algesheimer, 2022, and in Mari et al., 2023, 2024.

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