

# GLOBAL INSIGHTS: WORKPLACE WELL-BEING IN COMMUNICATIONS

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Public relations professionals are expected to build trust and help organizations navigate complexity. Yet many PR professionals, educators, and academics experience or consider PR work to be undervalued, ethically strained, or disconnected from leadership. This article presents findings from a global Delphi study with nearly 300 participants from 24 countries, suggesting that workplace well-being in public relations depends less on perks and more on alignment with professional PR approaches. The findings show that practitioners thrive when they feel successful, able to act in an ethical way, and connected to leadership. However, they struggle when cut off from management and purpose-relevant decision-making, as well as when professional values clash with commercial priorities.

## WHY WORKPLACE WELL-BEING MATTERS IN PR

Workplace well-being is of strategic importance. It shapes performance, retention, and the quality of organizational relationships. It particularly matters in communication functions because public relations (PR) work depends on judgment, trust, and relational capacity (Ihlen & van Ruler, 2007).

PR professionals work under dynamic conditions that can easily undermine well-being. They are expected to respond quickly, manage ambiguity, absorb competing

expectations, and often reconcile organizational goals with broader social responsibilities. Recent PR scholarship has started to address these pressures more directly, including organizational support, loneliness, and generational differences in how work is experienced (Anton, 2025; Candello & Mohammadpour, 2024; Chmiel, 2025; Răceanu & Deliu-Pasol, 2023).

Yet workplace well-being in PR is still often discussed mainly in terms of stress, resilience, or work-life balance.

*PR professionals thrive when practice matches professional purpose.*

Our study suggests that this is too narrow. In PR, well-being is also shaped by whether professionals feel recognized, whether they can exercise ethical judgment, and whether they can practice in ways that align with their professional values (Garsten et al., 2025).

## WHAT THE STUDY REVEALS

This article draws on a secondary analysis of the first round of a global Delphi study on the future, value, and social impact of PR (Adi & Stoeckle, 2023). The original Delphi project was not designed as a well-being study. This makes its data so revealing. Across nearly 1,500 qualitative responses from 293 practitioners, educators, and academics in 24 countries, participants repeatedly raised concerns about recognition, ethical tension, purpose, and professional identity without being asked about well-being directly (Garsten et al., 2025). Rather than asking whether respondents felt stressed, satisfied, or burned out, the study examined how they described PR work in their own terms. This made it possible to identify expressed sentiments, their likely triggers, and deeper indicators of workplace well-being, especially meaning, connection, ethical autonomy, and value alignment (De Neve & Ward, 2023; Garsten et al., 2025).

The clearest empirical pattern was that positive sentiment was associated with a sense of success at work and ethical autonomy. Negative sentiment was closely linked to disconnection from management and to misalignment between personal values and professional roles (Garsten et al., 2025). From this, the study proposes profession-practice alignment as a central condition for sustainable well-being in PR: Professionals do better when the kind of communication they believe in matches the kind of communication they are allowed to practice. For corporate communication, the implications are clear. Well-being shapes more than morale; it also affects retention, judgment, ethical voice, leadership credibility, and the quality of stakeholder relationships. A communication function cannot be strong if its own professionals feel unheard, ethically constrained, or cut off from decision-making.

### The study at a glance

- Global Delphi study on the future, value, and social impact of PR
- Nearly 300 participants from 24 countries across six continents
- Around 1,500 qualitative responses analyzed
- Participants included practitioners, educators, and academics
- Well-being emerged indirectly and unprompted
- Analysis examined sentiment, triggers, and workplace conditions
- Positive sentiment was linked especially to success at work and ethical autonomy
- Negative sentiment was linked especially to disconnection from management and value-role misalignment
- The study proposes profession-practice alignment as a core condition for sustainable well-being in PR

### When PR work feels meaningful

One of the clearest lessons from the research is that communicators are energized when they experience their work as meaningful and recognized. Meaning here is practical, not abstract. It comes from seeing that communication contributes to strategy, helps a range of stakeholders, and improves decisions.

That insight should resonate with senior leaders. Communication professionals often have a strong service orientation. They want to solve problems, strengthen relationships, and help organizations act responsibly. When leaders bring them in early, listen to their counsel, and acknowledge the strategic importance of their work, the result is not only better communication but also, we suggest, better well-being.

The study also highlights ethical autonomy as a positive driver. This does not mean communicators want to operate outside organizational structures. It means they want room for professional judgment. They want to advise honestly, question weak decisions, and work in ways that reflect the ethical and dialogic aspirations commonly associated with the field.

Where that is possible, practitioners are more likely to feel pride, energy, and commitment. Where it is blocked, they may still perform, but often with less conviction and less trust in the institution around them.

Well-being in PR is not only about whether people feel less stressed. It is also about whether their work feels purposeful, whether they have room for judgment, and whether

***Well-being in PR is built through trust, meaning, and ethical room to act.***

they can act in ways that align with professional PR approaches. For communication leaders, this means wellness perks or stress-management workshops may help, but they do not solve the deeper problem if the work itself feels ethically compromised or professionally diminished.

### Where well-being breaks down

If positive well-being grows from meaningful contribution and ethical agency, negative well-being grows from disconnection and misalignment. The research identifies disconnection from management as one of the strongest predictors of negative sentiment. That is a major warning sign for organizations.

Managerial distance can take many forms. Communication leaders may be invited in too late. Teams may be expected to execute messages without shaping them or to focus only on commercially important stakeholders.

Senior executives may undervalue communication expertise or treat it as cosmetic support. In these conditions, practitioners can feel excluded from the very decisions they are supposed to explain and defend. Over time, this risks weakening both performance and morale.

The study also points to misalignment between professional judgment and roles. This is especially important in today's environment, where communicators are often asked to address ESG issues, social expectations, crises, and internal culture at the same time. If practitioners believe an organization is privileging profit over people, or saying one thing while doing another, the resulting tension can cause cognitive dissonance. It affects identity, not just workload.

This is why some forms of dissatisfaction in PR are hard to fix with surface-level initiatives. A team lunch, a resilience seminar, or a flexible-work policy may improve the atmosphere. However, none of those measures will fully address the problem if communicators lack influence, feel ethically compromised, or cannot see the value of what they are being asked to do.

## Drivers of well-being in PR

### Drivers of positive well-being

Sense of success at work

Ethical autonomy

Perceived importance of PR work

Connection with colleagues

### Drivers of negative well-being

Disconnection from management

Misalignment between desired professional PR approach and actual role

Lack of recognition for strategic communication

Weak professional voice and limited influence

## The missing condition: profession-practice alignment

The core contribution of the study is the idea of profession-practice alignment. It gives communication leaders a practical lens for understanding why some teams remain motivated under pressure while others become cynical or disengaged.

Profession-practice alignment describes the degree to which PR professionals can carry out their day-to-day roles in ways that fit their sense of professional identity. That identity may include dialogue, ethics, public value, relationship building, and strategic counsel. Daily practice, however, can be narrower, more instrumental, and often more constrained. The bigger the gap between the two, the greater the risk to well-being. The smaller the gap, the more likely professionals are to feel coherent, useful, and committed.

This concept matters because it connects individual experience and observation with organizational design. Well-being is not only about the person. It is also about corporate culture. Do leaders ask for counsel or just output? Are ethical concerns welcomed or avoided? Is communication positioned as a strategic function or a production service? Are practitioners encouraged to exercise judgment or simply manage reactions?

For chief communication officers, profession-practice alignment can become a management test. If teams are demotivated or emotionally flat, the issue may not be stress alone. It may be that the organization is asking communication professionals to perform a version of PR that conflicts with their professional purpose.

## A CLEAR MESSAGE FOR COMMUNICATION LEADERS

For communication leaders, the message is direct: Workplace well-being should not be treated as a narrow HR matter or as an individual coping issue. In communication teams, well-being is closely tied to how the function is positioned, how leadership behaves, and whether ethical judgment is possible in practice (Garsten et al., 2025; Anton, 2025). There are several pathways to achieving this.

First, communication leaders should work to reduce disconnection from management by creating regular strategic access, not just reactive delivery. When PR is involved only after strategic choices are made, communicators are left to defend decisions they did not help shape. The study shows that this weakens both professional meaning and well-being. Disconnection from management emerged as a key driver of negative sentiment. Leaders should therefore review whether communicators feel listened to and included and address this by establishing structured dialogue with senior management, building formal feedback loops, and making sure the communication function is represented earlier in decision-making processes. Visible respect for communication counsel and structured dialogue matter (Garsten et al., 2025).

Second, communication leaders should create team conditions where ethical concerns can be raised without

### *Recognition, ethical autonomy, and managerial connection are leadership responsibilities.*

penalty, where tensions can be discussed, and where communicators are not forced to choose between professional integrity and organizational belonging. The study suggests that well-being is stronger when professionals feel able to exercise ethical autonomy and weaker when they feel forced to act against their values. Therefore, while communication leaders cannot solve every organizational tension, they can make ethical reflection part of everyday practice, strengthening profession-practice alignment rather than leaving ethics to be addressed only in moments of crisis.

Third, communication leaders should support professional identity, not only performance. Mentorship, reflective discussion, peer exchange, and stronger links with professional communities can help practitioners sustain a sense of shared purpose. Recent PR well-being research also points to the value of leadership support and mentoring, especially for younger and more vulnerable groups in the profession (Candelino & Mohammadpour, 2025; Chmiel, 2025). Well-being is therefore also shaped by occupational culture in addition to a sense of alignment with professional practice (Garsten et al., 2025). In this context, professional associations also have a role to play by strengthening belonging and reflective professional development across the field.

## OUTLOOK

PR has long been described as a relationship profession. This study suggests the profession needs to apply that insight more consistently inward. Communication teams cannot be expected to build trust internally and externally while operating in environments that erode their own trust.

The global findings suggest that workplace well-being in PR is not just about emotional strain. It is about whether communicators can work in ways that feel effective, ethical, and meaningful. That is why profession-practice alignment matters. It offers communication leaders a practical way to understand why capable teams may still feel exhausted,

disengaged, or emotionally distant from their work. In many cases, the issue is not a lack of resilience. It is a mismatch between what the profession claims to value and what practitioners are actually enabled or allowed to do.

For practice, this means that healthier communication teams will not be built through wellness rhetoric alone. They will be built through stronger managerial relationships, earlier strategic inclusion, better recognition of communication expertise, and greater support for ethical judgment. These are structural conditions of good corporate communication, not optional extras.

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## MORE INFORMATION

A more detailed discussion of these results can be found in the Garsten et al. (2025) article, as listed above.