

WHY COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENTS NEED TO ENHANCE THEIR POSITIONING

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Corporate communication is an increasingly important success factor for businesses during times of economic challenges and political disruption. But the recognition and resources for the professionals in charge are rarely rising and, in many cases, shrinking. What are the reasons for this? A survey of 1,147 top executives, middle managers, and co-workers without leadership responsibility in large companies provides eye-opening but also disillusioning insights. It highlights a clear need for communication leaders to better position their teams and sharpen their profile.

A TIME TO THRIVE OR TO LOSE

Communication leaders and their teams face a paradoxical situation. While the importance of listening to key stakeholders and engaging in public debates is clearly growing in today's society, reports from practice show that this rarely results in stronger organizational units for corporate communication. Communication departments are seldom granted significantly higher budgets, more staff, or more internal influence.

On the contrary, the economic downturn in many countries is putting them under increasing pressure, forcing them to prove more than ever whether and how they create added value.

How can this be explained? Previous academic studies have shown that every second member of an organization is not fully aware of what their colleagues in communications do (Falkheimer et al., 2017) and that only two out of three top executives view the work of communication departments as critical to business success (Zerfass & Sherzada, 2015). Research has also found that perceptions about the relevance and success of communication activities and the work of those in charge differ between internal stakeholders (e.g., top management versus other members of the organization) and from the self-perception of communicators themselves (Johansson et al., 2019).

The power of communication for business success can only be leveraged if communication departments and professionals are valued by other members of the organization, if their products and services are demanded and used, and if they receive the necessary funding (Zerfass & Link, 2024). Communication departments compete for human and financial resources with other organizational units that may have a better standing. This is why clear and favorable perceptions among internal decision-makers, as well as those who influence them, are a critical prerequisite for communication excellence (Tench et al., 2017).

INVESTIGATING THE STATUS QUO

In view of this challenge from practice, we have developed a scientifically based approach to assess the internal perception and appreciation of communication departments and their work (Zerfass et al., 2024). The method was applied in a large-scale study in Germany, the world's third largest economy. The results provide a baseline for reflection and similar explorations in individual companies. Additionally, they contribute to debates on the future of the profession by incorporating the perspective of those who ultimately decide on the mandate and influence of communicators.

STUDY DESIGN

Our research applied a multi-level perspective across three hierarchical levels to address the research question: What do top executives, middle managers and co-workers think of their company's communication department and its work?

1,147 respondents were interviewed with a pre-tested online questionnaire based on an extensive literature review and established scales. The population included managers and co-workers in large for-profit companies in Germany with at least 1,000 employees and a communication department. The final sample comprised 30 top executives (C-level, board members), 113 middle managers (heads of business units, functional departments, etc.), and 1,004 co-workers without leadership responsibility. The data was collected in

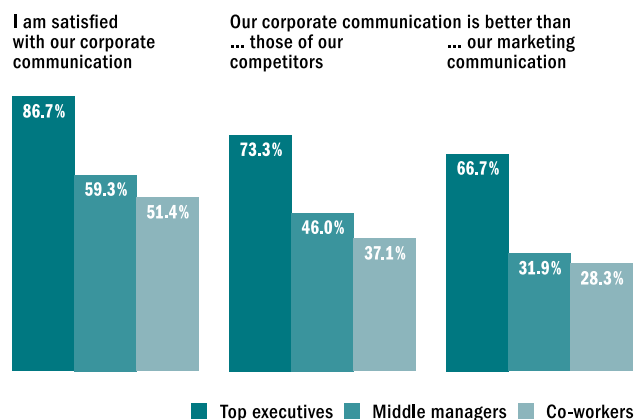
November 2023 using established panels from the market research company YouGov and analyzed using SPSS software and various statistical methods.

The study was conducted with a graduate student team at Leipzig University and supported by the Academic Society for Management & Communication.

SATISFACTION WITH CORPORATE COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES

The study shows that the satisfaction with corporate communication activities among top executives in large companies is generally high (87% agreement). However, when asked to compare these activities with competing organizations or with the company's own marketing communications, perceptions are less favorable. Despite this, two thirds of the top executives are happy with the work and output of their communication departments in all dimensions. The picture changes when the perspectives of middle managers and other employees are taken into account. Support for all dimensions was lower in both groups. Interestingly, less than half of all middle managers and only one third co-workers believe that their company's external and internal communication is better than that of its competitors.

Assessment of corporate communication activities



Source: Zerfass et al., 2024 (modified)

According to the data, most internal stakeholders support what is currently accomplished in corporate communication. But why does this not result in a stronger support and funding for their communication departments? A possible reason identified in earlier research is that many voices speak for an organization in the age of digitalization – managers at all levels, employees who act as ambassadors and corporate influencers, and, increasingly, software agents based on artificial intelligence (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2016). This shift challenges the standing of specialized practitioners and departments.

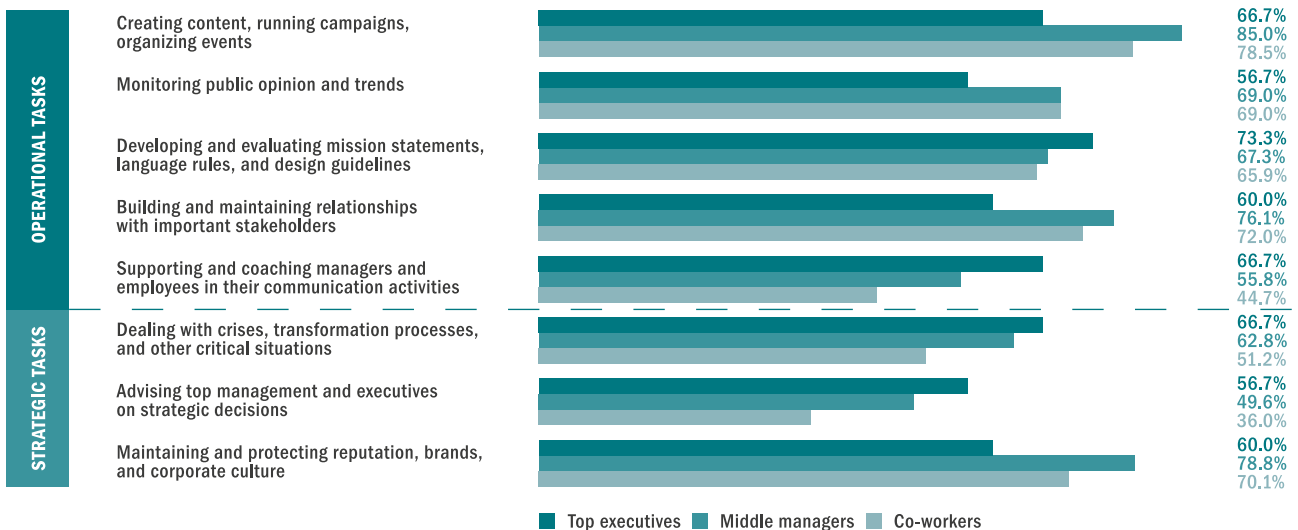
RECOGNITION OF COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENTS

At first sight, data from this study shows that communication units are held in high esteem. Almost all top executives interviewed (97%) believe that the standing of the communication department in their company is high compared to other departments and that they know what the department does. 80% feel confident in their awareness of the department’s goals. However, the percentages decrease for middle managers: Only 55% attribute a high standing to the communication department, while 20% clearly disagree,

and only 58% are aware of its goals. Co-workers are even more skeptical and less knowledgeable about the department’s tasks. When focusing on the internal influence of the communication department, the data demonstrates another gap between top executives and middle managers. 80% of top executives, but only half of middle managers (51%), state that recommendations from the communication department are taken very seriously by senior and middle management.

A more nuanced look at the tasks attributed to communication departments shows that all hierarchical levels weight operational activities higher than strategic tasks. Communicators are mainly seen as content producers, opinion observers, experts for language and design rules, and relationship managers – roles that are all threatened by the rise of artificial intelligence. Top executives are more aware of strategic tasks like mitigating crises, supporting transformation, and advising for business decisions. But they are less convinced than others in the company that reputation, brands, and corporate culture are cultivated and protected by communication experts – they are probably aware that these immaterial assets are influenced by various functions in many ways. Interestingly, almost one in three co-workers interviewed chose “don’t know” as an answer rather than rating the different items. This indicates that most employees in large companies have only very vague ideas about the tasks of communicators.

Perceived tasks of communication departments



Source: Zerfass et al., 2024

ASSESSMENT OF COMPETENCE AND VALUE CONTRIBUTION

The predominantly operational view of communication departments goes hand in hand with a low evaluation of their competence. This is the only part of the study where respondents across all hierarchical levels are in agreement: Only 57% of the top executives, 54% of middle managers, and 52% of co-workers rate the department's competence as high.

A particularly disturbing finding is that only one in two top executives (50%) and one in three middle managers (36%) agree that the work of their communication department makes it easier for them to fulfill their own tasks. Clearly, many internal decision-makers are not only skeptical about the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of communicators, but they also do not see how they benefit from their activities.

This leads to another disillusioning insight: Only 53% of top executives and 59% of middle managers believe that the current allocation of personnel and financial resources to their company's communication department is justified. A large number of those responsible for overall budgets or projects that may require communicative expertise are not fully convinced that resources allocated to these internal units are appropriate. It's not surprising that in such circumstances, budget cuts are easily made.

“The work of the communication department makes it easier for me to fulfill my tasks.”

50.0% Top executives
36.3% Middle managers
30.0% Co-workers



EXPECTATIONS OF INTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS

The ambivalent perception of communication departments and their work among internal stakeholders is mirrored by clear expectations. The majority of all study respondents (67% of top executives and 57% of middle managers and co-workers) state that communication units should clarify their tasks and their contribution to the overall success of the organization. Top executives are particularly demanding here, which can be explained by the discrepancy between their general appreciation of corporate communication and the experts in charge on the one hand and their doubts about competences and value contribution on the other.

WHAT INFLUENCES INTERNAL PERCEPTIONS?

The research used statistical analyses (ANOVA and chi-square tests) to identify the factors that influence the internal perceptions of communication departments in large companies. This knowledge can help to develop positioning strategies.

- **Frequency of contact:** The more often members of an organization are in contact with the communication department, the greater their knowledge of the department's responsibilities, tasks, and goals, and the higher their assessment of the department's standing, influence, and competence.
- **Perceived relevance of communications in general:** The more important communications is seen as key to business success, the greater the expectation that the communication department clarifies its role, and the more likely it is that the resources allocated to it are seen as justified.
- **Assessment of corporate communication activities:** Internal stakeholders that rate their company's corporate communication positively conclude that their communication department is competent and resources allocated to it are spent well. There's also a very strong correlation the other way around: Those who believe that the communication department is competent and/or worth the money are more likely to conclude that their company's corporate communication is good.

TOWARDS A BETTER POSITIONING

The study reveals concerning discrepancies between the generally positive perception of corporate communication among internal stakeholders and critical assessments of aspects such as the key tasks and competences attributed to communication departments, as well as the justifiability of the resources allocated to them. It clearly shows that a lack of knowledge about the work of communication units negatively affects their evaluation. Conversely, this means that the perception of communication departments can be positively influenced by attempts to improve their positioning among internal stakeholders.

The framework outlined below provides some ideas for practice. It has been inspired by existing research in strategic

communication and a second part of this study, where a sample of 32 communication leaders representing the 180 largest listed and private companies in Germany were interviewed about positioning practices. We suggest the following steps:

- Start by analyzing the current perceptions of the communication department in your company among all hierarchical levels. The questionnaire used in this study might be helpful. Keep an eye on middle managers' perceptions and try to understand them as they may influence decisions by board members and may become future top executives. It would also make sense to research what others expect from your team and how other functional departments that compete for influence and resources (e.g., human resources, strategy, marketing) position themselves within the organization.

Four steps to optimize the positioning of communication departments

STRATEGY

Analyze current perceptions

How is our communication department internally perceived by top management, middle management, and other employees?

Analyze the context

What do others in the company expect from us and what are their goals? How are other departments perceived and how do they position themselves?

PLANNING

Develop or adapt the department's internal positioning

How do we want to present our goals, tasks, services/products, and value contribution? (Basis: Communication Business Model)

Define positioning strategies

Which approaches and activities will help optimize our positioning and the perceptions by internal stakeholders?

Improve the perception of the department

- Expectation management
- Impression management
- Internal word of mouth

Optimize the capabilities of the department

- Communication alignment & value creation
- Competence management

Enhance the network of the department

- Relationship management
- Internal ambassadors
- Leveraging power sources

IMPLEMENTATION

Foundations

- Create awareness in your own team
- Create a convincing and brief description of the communication department
- Present best practices and impact in a concise way
- Define business partners or key accounts for internal clients and decision-makers

Processes

- Showcase your range of services and discuss individual goals of internal clients at the start of each project
- Provide insights on corporate communication and your department when onboarding managers and employees
- Use leadership development programs for positioning
- Measure satisfaction & perception change after projects

Target groups

- Top management: Clarify the range of tasks, potential support & competences
- Middle management: Raise untapped potential for demand and support
- Co-workers: Ensure a core level of knowledge about corporate communication

EVALUATION & REFLECTION

- Develop a future-oriented profile for the communication department using a business model approach (Zerfass & Link, 2024). Choose positioning strategies that help to reach this profile. This study shows that such approaches can focus either on enhancing the department's perception among internal stakeholders or on improving its competences and performance, i.e., through proven value creation and better alignment of corporate communication activities with overall goals of the organization. Both approaches should be complemented by strengthening the personal ties to internal decision-makers (relationship management), nurturing internal ambassadors across the organization, and leveraging sources of power like official mandates, expertise, and information.
- Implement these positioning strategies by laying the foundations in your team, setting up suitable processes,

and addressing different internal stakeholders with customized approaches. This requires leadership skills and operational excellence in your team. Changing the perceptions and winning the support of current and future decision-makers in the company is as difficult as convincing external stakeholders.

- Evaluate your achievements and reflect on what can be further optimized. Developing and establishing a convincing profile takes time and effort. But it's a prerequisite for the sustainable success of every communication department. Positioning your department is an ongoing challenge.

The demands for communication leaders are specifically high as their playing field is constantly changing and the internal perception is often blurred. However, this also creates a lot of opportunities for those who move ahead by regularly evaluating and reflecting on internal perceptions and positioning.

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MORE INFORMATION

This article is based on the peer-reviewed paper *Between cluelessness and (dis)satisfaction* presented by the authors at the EUPRERA Annual Congress 2024 in Bucharest and the study report Zerfass et al. (2024), which is available at <https://bit.ly/ppcd-study>.

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