

WHAT ARE THE CORE COMPONENTS OF COMMUNICATION EXCELLENCE?

The European Communication Monitor 2018 finds that excellent organisations both collect and use more information than ever before. Crucially, they also have effective leaders – although gaps in leadership skills and support exist across Europe. Insights from the largest transnational study on strategic communication worldwide.

Parallels between sport and organisational performance are a frequently over-played cliché. But there is a reason. Sometimes the empirical evidence just points that way – as we found with the 2018 European Communication Monitor results.

A perennial question is: why does one sports(wo)man or team do better than another? Reading the reflections of successful coaches, we find similar and familiar themes: preparation – based on insights gained from research, competitor analysis, general fact-finding and knowledge sharing; as well as distinctive, clear leadership – that is both during competition by individuals and members of the team as well as by the support and coaching staff themselves. These are often the critical differentiators of success in or on the field, and both lead to the highest level of performance.

And so, it appears, the same is true for communicators in public relations and strategic communication. Findings from this year's European Communication Monitor clearly point to two factors as key influencers on high or excellent performance in communication: first, providing information insights to organisational decision makers; and second, the leadership capability of managers and leaders within the organisation.

Looking at these two areas, let us first consider what communicators across Europe are doing: their strengths and performance weaknesses and where there are opportunities for improvement.

“A detailed analysis of the European Communication Monitor data reveals several characteristics of high-performing communication departments.”



Professor Dr. Dejan Verčič, Dr. Angeles Moreno and Professor Dr. Piet Verhoeven discuss the European Communication Monitor onstage at the European Communication Summit 2018 / Photos: Jana Legler

The majority of professionals agree that providing information helps to gain recognition and position communications – it will thus become more important

Providing information for decision-makers...

...offers great opportunities to gain recognition from top management and (internal) clients

...offers great opportunities to position ourselves against other departments/agencies

...is gaining in relevance for our department/agency

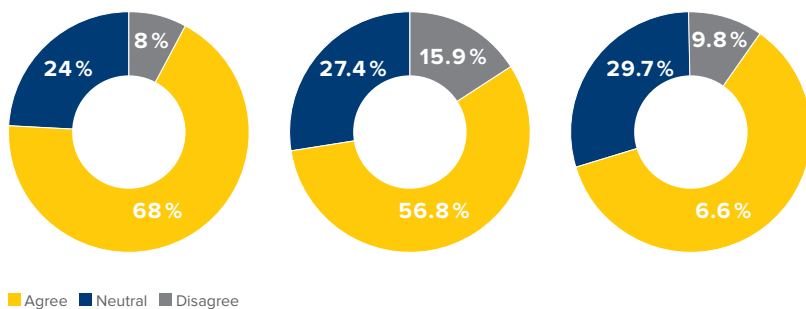


Figure 1: Providing information for decision-makers

Potential leadership gap: many decision-makers misunderstand communications and its value; many communicators leaders lack leadership skills

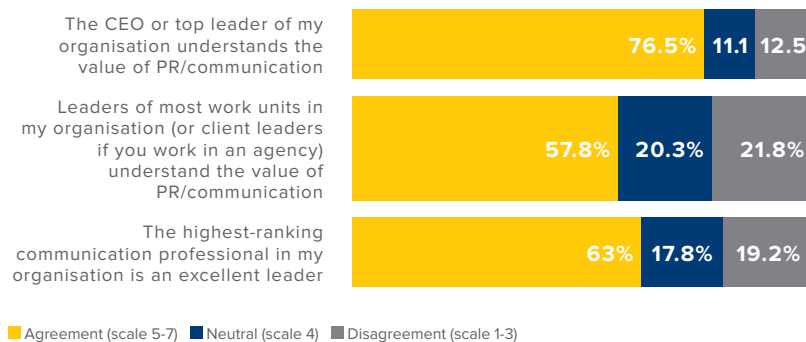


Figure 2: Potential leadership gap in communications

Information provision: delivering value for decision-makers

Adding value and standing out as a communication adviser is important and recent studies suggest this is increasingly happening in the stronger communication departments across Europe. For example, curating and disseminating information to key deci-

sion makers and managers is considered an important part of good leadership, as it is in communication. In addition, ensuring managers inside our organisations are aware of and up to date with relevant information helps to improve the position of the communication function in the organisation. For example, a daily executive news briefing is an example of providing insight to managers about what is happening outside the organisation and especially in the media (print, television, social media). From this year's results we find that providing information to decision-makers through, for instance, news briefings, media monitoring, survey results and other reports

is a common practice for most communication units across Europe (89.1 per cent). These resources offer great opportunities to gain recognition from top management and (internal) clients (agreed by 68 per cent of the respondents; figure 1) and will gain more importance

SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS

- Every second communication professional reports that misleading news in mass or social media – that is verifiably false – influences the public sphere in his or her country.
- Providing information to decision-makers through executive news briefings, media monitoring, survey results, and other reports is a common practice for most communication units.
- Building and maintaining trust has been voted as the most important issue for communication management over the next three years for the first time.
- Appreciation by top management is a key prerequisite when strategic communication wants to utilise its full potential.
- The majority of communication professionals in Europe feel engaged in their job (56.1%).
- Four out of 10 communication professionals (39%) in Europe feel tense or stressed out during their working day.
- 28.9% of the surveyed practitioners would like to change their current employer within the next twelve months.
- A supportive work environment enables practitioners to exploit their competencies and accomplish organisational goals.
- Excellent communication departments are better prepared to deal with fake news, they offer all kinds of management reports more frequently and they evidence better leadership performance.

ABOUT THE EUROPEAN COMMUNICATION MONITOR 2018

In July 2018, the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA) and the European Association of Communication Directors (EACD) published the results of their 12th annual study on the state-of-the-art of communication management and trends within the profession across Europe. The European Communication Monitor 2018 is based on responses from 3,096 communication professionals in 48 European countries. The monitor is the largest annual empirical survey in the field worldwide; it provides country-specific analyses for 22 key markets across the continent. The European Communication Monitor is supported by partners PRIME Research, a global leader in strategic communication research and member of the Cision Group, Fink und Fuchs, and Communication Director magazine. Authors of the study are five university professors representing leading academic institutions in the field, led by Professor Ansgar Zerfass from the University of Leipzig. A wider board of professors and national research collaborators ensure that the survey reflects the diversity of the field across Europe.



Full results are available in a free PDF report (148 pp.) at www.communicationmonitor.eu, and as a booklet: Zerfass, A., Tench, R., Verhoeven, P., Verčič, D., & Moreno, A. (2018). European Communication Monitor 2018. Strategic communication and the challenges of fake news, trust, leadership, work stress and job satisfaction. Results of a survey in 48 countries. Brussels. ISBN 978-3-942263-50-4.

in the future, as the majority states. By far the most important and most frequently provided information by communication specialists is about news in ‘gate kept’ media (mass media with professional journalists) and social media. Only 28.4 per cent of the communication departments and agencies in Europe prepare advanced types of reporting with edited

Excellent communication departments offer all kinds of management reports more frequently

Information frequently provided to top management and/or internal clients

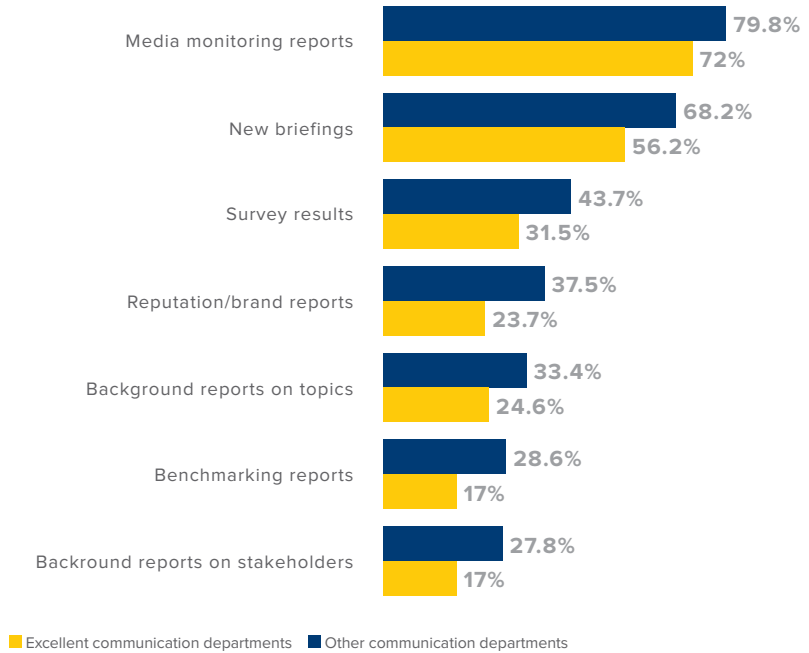


Figure 3: Excellent communication departments offer all kinds of management reports more frequently

“Appreciation by top management is a key prerequisite when strategic communication wants to utilise its full potential.”

or curated content that delivers deep insights for decision-makers on a daily basis. Clearly, opportunities to deliver value by conveying strategic insights are being missed.

Leadership for communication: capability gaps at all levels

Undoubtedly, appreciation by top management is a key prerequisite when strategic communication wants to utilise its full potential. However, a CEO or top leader who understands the value of public relations and communication was found in only 76.5 per cent of the organisations (Figure 2). The proportion is even lower (57.8 per cent) when communication professionals report about leaders on other levels of their organisation, for example those heading a business unit or subsidiary. Generally, appreciation by executives is significantly higher in non-profits compared to companies, and lowest in government-owned, public and political organisations. On the flip



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A lower proportion of communication professionals working in excellent departments have serious stress problems

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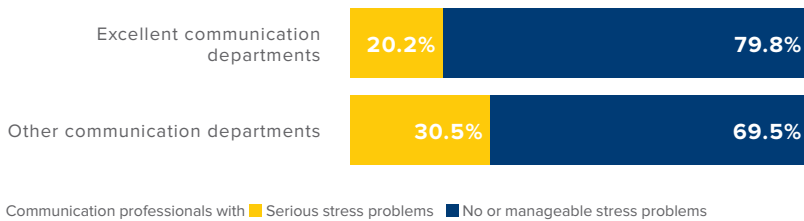


Figure 4: A lower proportion of communication professionals working in excellent departments face serious stress problems

side, the study reveals that every fifth communication leader (19.2 per cent) also lacks leadership skills. A lack of performance at higher levels is clearly visible – especially when noting that subordinates rate the strategic involvement, ethical orientation and knowledge of the highest-ranking communicators clearly worse than the leaders themselves.

Implications for high performance in communication

A detailed analysis of the European Communication Monitor data reveals several characteristics of high-performing communication departments. This adds to previous insights made by the research team and published by Palgrave Macmillan in the 2017 book *Communication Excellence*. Excellent communication departments are better prepared to deal with issues of the day (for example, fake news) and they evidence better leadership performance. But more importantly, we see that they are more likely to deliver value internally by providing information to the organisation's top management. They are also more likely to offer a broad range of management reports including media monitoring, news briefings, survey results, reputation and brand reports more frequently. Additionally, they are better

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at providing daily executive news briefings and social media monitoring to decision-makers inside the organisation (figure 3). On a structural and cultural level, work stress is lower

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or easier to manage (figure 4) and nearly all professionals working in such departments are satisfied (93.5 per cent compared to 66.8 per cent in other organisations) and loyal.

So, as we have previously debated, achieving high performance is a complex mixture. But we are also increasingly able to provide guidance on the elements that will help organisations to improve their performance. And, perhaps unsurprisingly, leadership capabilities inside the team and department, combined with information provision to key players in the organisation, are clearly two that stand out. ●

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