TIME FOR A RETHINK?

An increasing number of 'touchpoints' with their publics force many organisations to rethink their strategic communications. The European Communication Monitor 2012 identifies key challenges and reflects on future directions.

By Ansgar Zerfass and Ralph Tench

Photo:

According to this year's edition of the European Communication Monitor, the practice of professional communication is currently marked by contradictions and impositions. Shaping the same and consistent image for all stakeholders, a core idea of integrated communications, is nowadays less popular than the concept of polyphony, meaning a simultaneous and sequential stimulation of several perceptions to address different stakeholders. Mobile applications on the social web are seen as important tools, but there are large gaps between their perceived importance and real implementation in most European organisations. Ethical challenges are more prevalent than ever in the field, but current codes of ethics are seldom used and

> **"The complexity of communication is increasing."**

rated as outdated by many professionals. And there is still a large gap between the skills and knowledge which need to be developed and the training offered by employers.

What does this mean for communication executives? Based on a deep analysis of the data, we have identified five key insights that might stimulate the ongoing debate about strategies to advance communication's influence and power in organisations.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

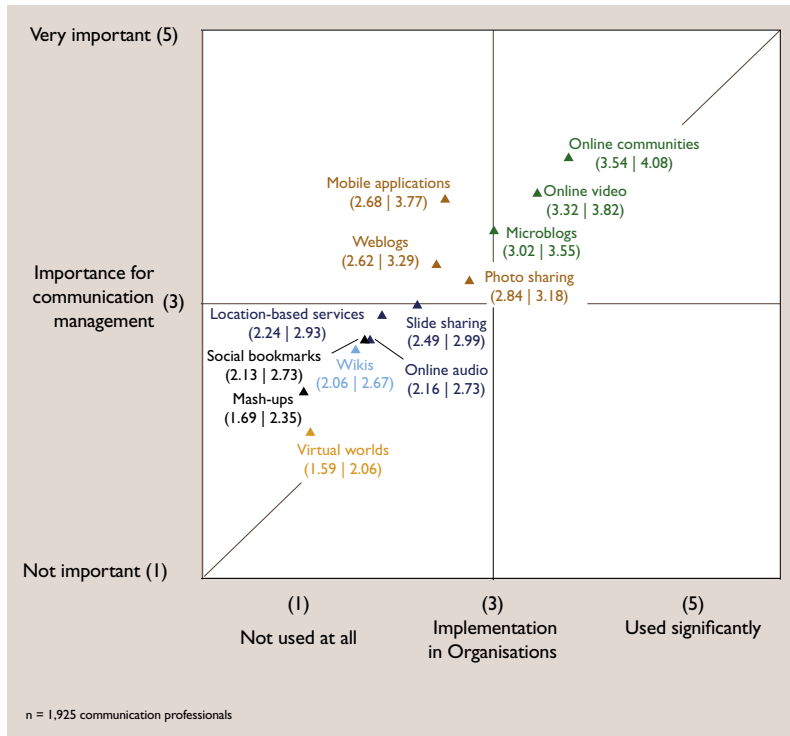The annual European Communication Monitor was held for the sixth time in a row this year. It is the most comprehensive empirical survey of communication management worldwide with 2,185 participating professionals from 42 countries in 2012. The research is conducted by a group of professors from 11 universities across Europe within the framework of the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA). Partners include the European Association of Communication Directors (EACD) and this magazine, as well as Ketchum Pleon, a leading European public relations agency who are sponsoring the project from this year onwards. The questionnaire used for the survey covered 19 sections and 30 questions, based on a research model which has been revised and expanded from the previous editions. The English language survey was online in March 2012 for four weeks. 4,107 respondents started the survey. In order to fulfil the highest empirical standards, only 2,185 fully completed replies by participants who were clearly identified as part of the profession were evaluated and analysed using SPSS and a variety of statistical tests like Pearson's chi-quare, Spearman's and Kendall's rank correlation, ANOVA/Scheffé post-hoc and T-tests.

A look at the demographics shows that 71.7 per cent of the respondents work on the first or second level of the communication hierarchy as heads of communication, unit leaders or agency CEOs. The average age is 41.5 years and nearly 68 per cent have worked in communications for more than 10 years. Based on this, it can be claimed that the results are founded on statements of those who take responsibility for the profession today and who will shape its future in Europe. The distribution of gender (57.6 per cent female, 42.4 per cent male) and the regions (29.6 per cent Northern Europe, 30.5 per cent Western Europe, 10.7 per cent Eastern Europe, 29.2 per cent Southern Europe) reflects the diversity of the profession. Once again, the survey shows that several countries and types of organisations follow different paths of development. While this article reports on the overall trends, detailed analyses for various groups can be found in the full report available at www.communicationmonitor.eu.

MULTIPLE IMAGES The complexity of communication is increasing. Organisations are interacting with more stakeholders through more media in more directions. 82 per cent of the respondents say that, compared to five years ago, their organisation has more 'touchpoints' with its publics. According to comparative data from the GAP VII study, conducted by the Annenberg School of Communication, the situation is even more extreme in the

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Figure I Importance and implementation of social media tools

Very important (5)

Online communities
(3.54 | 4.08)

Mobile applications
(2.68 | 3.77)

Online video
(3.32 | 3.82)

Weblogs
(2.62 | 3.29)

Microblogs
(3.02 | 3.55)

Importance for
communication   (3)
management

Photo sharing
(2.84 | 3.18)

Location-based services
(2.24 | 2.93)

Slide sharing
(2.49 | 2.99)

Social bookmarks
(2.13 | 2.73)

Wikis
(2.06 | 2.67)

Mash-ups
(1.69 | 2.35)

Online audio
(2.16 | 2.73)

Virtual worlds
(1.59 | 2.06)

Not important (1)

(1)
Not used at all

(3)
Implementation
in Organisations

(5)
Used significantly

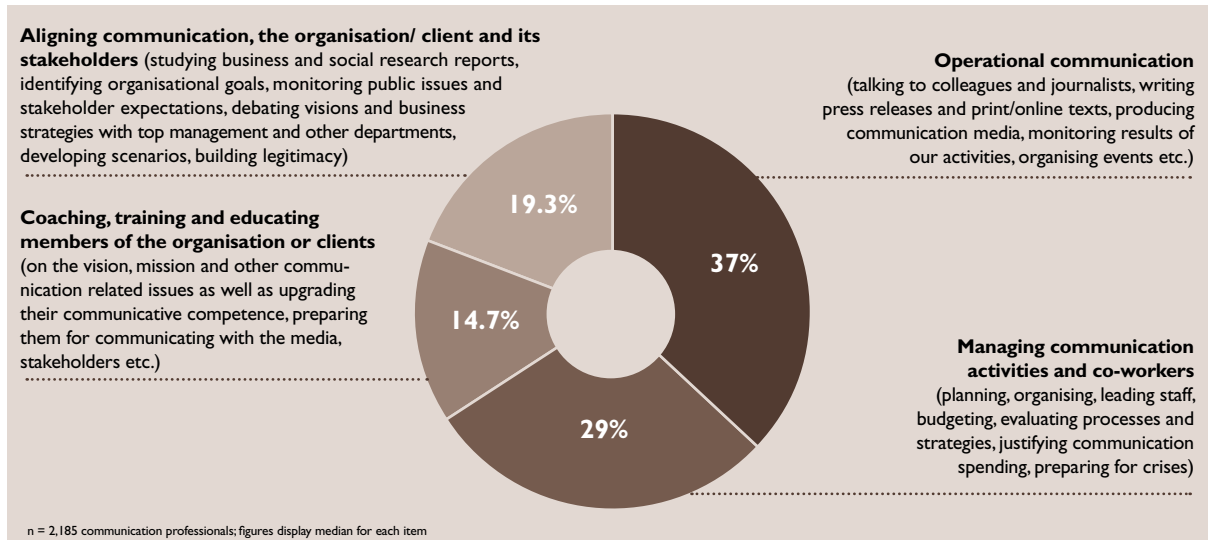n = 1,925 communication professionals

United States: the figure there is almost 93 per cent. Three out of four European communication professionals agree that the corporate or organisational voice is created by all organisational members interacting with stakeholders. So it is not surprising that the idea of shaping a consistent image for all stakeholders is supported by fewer respondents than the alternative concept of polyphony, meaning that several perceptions are stimulated simultaneously and sequentially in different stakeholder relationships. This approach challenges traditional concepts of integrated communications. It asks for new strategies to create flexible identities with a common core and overlapping, ambiguous domains. Clearly today's methods of reputation measurement, which champion solid images and can seldom deal with shades of reality construction, are not equipped to cope with this development. The tools need to be redesigned to fit the new paradigm of liquid realities.

PROVING VALUE Data from different sections of the monitor can be combined to identify the key challenges for communication professionals in Europe in these times of turbulence. It is all about understanding business needs, implementing strategic orientation and proving efficiency and effectiveness of communication activities. On the level

of organisations and their attitude towards communication, a lack of understanding of communication practice within the top management (reported by 84 per cent of respondents) and difficulties of the profession itself to prove the impact of communication activities on organisational goals (75 per cent) are the main barriers for further professionalisation. On the functional level, i.e. within the realm of communication departments, linkages between business strategy and communication as well as a better support of top-management decision making are identified as major issues that have not been resolved until now. On the individual level, practitioners report that their competencies in need of further development are mainly management skills and management knowledge (46 and 42 per cent, respectively) as well as business knowledge and business skills (39 and 33 per cent). Combining these insights, a clear picture emerges: communication professionals should strive to make communication a business partner, helping others in the organisation and top management to reach their goals. This requires more competencies in fields which are – as other results of the survey show – seldom part of the training offered by organisations nowadays. While there

"*Clearly today's methods of reputation measurement are not equipped to cope with this development.***"**

is a plethora of training in communication skills (more than actually needed, according to the respondents), a large gap between needs and offerings exists in the areas of developing management knowledge

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Figure II How communication managers spend their productive time at work

Aligning communication, the organisation/ client and its stakeholders (studying business and social research reports, identifying organisational goals, monitoring public issues and stakeholder expectations, debating visions and business strategies with top management and other departments, developing scenarios, building legitimacy)

Coaching, training and educating members of the organisation or clients (on the vision, mission and other communication related issues as well as upgrading their communicative competence, preparing them for communicating with the media, stakeholders etc.)

Operational communication (talking to colleagues and journalists, writing press releases and print/online texts, producing communication media, monitoring results of our activities, organising events etc.)

Managing communication activities and co-workers (planning, organising, leading staff, budgeting, evaluating processes and strategies, justifying communication spending, preparing for crises)

19.3%
14.7%
37%
29%

n = 2,185 communication professionals; figures display median for each item

(current affairs, societal and political trends, legal, ethical) as well as in business knowledge (markets, products, competitors) and management skills (decision making, planning, leading etc.).

GOING MOBILE The monitor reveals a large gap between the perceived importance of social media tools for communication and the actual rate of implementation in Euro-

> **❝***Only every second respondent thinks that training is useful.***❞**

pean organisations. Most obviously, mobile applications have entered the top three ranks of important social media platforms, but at the same time the backlog of implementation is higher than in any other field. Online communities or social networks are considered by far the most important social media tool available. With more than 75 per cent support by respondents, they are leading the

list of important social media tools, followed by online videos (67 per cent), mobile applications like apps and mobile webs (65 per cent), micro blogs like Twitter (56 per cent) and weblogs (45 per cent). However, less than 56 per cent of the communication departments actually use online communities in their communication. A gap of more than 20 per cent compared to the importance this tool is given by practitioners. The biggest difference between importance (65 per cent) and implementation (31 per cent) is found for mobile applications, a gap of almost 35 points. A cross-matrix analysis shows that mobile applications, weblogs and photo sharing are considered the most important opportunities in social media communication (see figure 1). All communication managers report rather moderate skills for using digital technologies for internal and external communication, regardless of their gender. Despite this, only every second respondent thinks that training is useful. Informal approaches to enhance those skills are clearly favoured. Eight out of ten European professionals think that the best way to learn about online tools is to use them as part of the regular work as well as privately. Although social media has been much discussed in the profession for many years, by now only two channels (online communities and online videos) are rated as very important or at least as important by a majority of the respondents. This shows that there is still a long way to go. Evaluating the potential of social media and investing in platforms and digital competencies stay at the top of the agenda for communication professionals.

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Figure III Ethical challenges experienced within the last 12 months

n = 2,137 PR professionals.
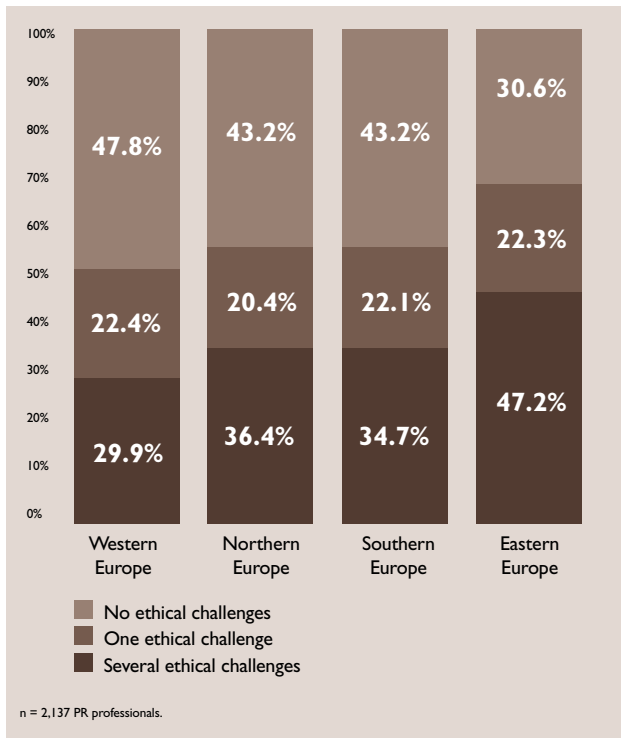
MORE REFLECTION Changes in the environment are requiring communication professionals in Europe to reconceptualise and reorganise what they do. Although the majority of productive time still goes to operational communication (talking to colleagues and media, writing texts, monitoring, organising events, etc.) this does not account for more than 37 per cent of a typical week (see figure 2). Managing activities related to planning, organising, leading staff, evaluating strategies, justifying spending and preparing for crises takes 29 per cent of the time. Reflective communication management, aligning communication, the organisation/client and its stakeholders, takes 19.3 per cent and coaching, training and educating members of the organisation or a client takes 14.7 per cent. As expected, there are significant correlations with the position of a communicator in the organisational hierarchy, with the influence of the communication function (having more influence on top management correlates with more reflection and less operations) and with sectors – all businesses (private companies, joint stock companies and consultancies) allow for more reflective management than non-profit and governmental organisations. Media relations professionals perform the largest portion of operational work, while practitioners engaged in governmental relations, public affairs and lobbying spend more time on reflective activities. Results from the European Communication Monitor 2012 prove for the first time what has been elaborated in theory before: communication managers should not only communicate on their own, but strive to enable others in the organisation to communicate and build an architecture of listening which will contribute to the alignment of an organisation's mission and the expectations of stakeholders. In a

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

➜ Traditional approaches to integrated communications are challenged by the concept of polyphony, which recognises that communication can not be controlled and every member of the organisation contributes to shaping communicative identities.

➜ Ethical challenges are more prevalent than ever in communication management. While today's codes of conduct are obviously not viable any more, most practitioners are striving for new guidelines which help to do business in an effective and acceptable way.

➜ Professional development and training needs more attention. There are large gaps between current development needs of communication professionals and training opportunities offered by organisations.

➜ A new vision for the communication function emerges. Instead of thinking of themselves as professional communicators, i.e. those who publish and explain what others have decided, communicators may try to fulfil the roles of enablers and consultants, i.e. those who are experts in public opinion, understanding media channels and content production while working in a communicative organisation where everybody is a spokesperson and shapes the image of an organisation.

nutshell, this means that communicators should increasingly look to stop communicating themselves and start enabling others to do so.

ETHICAL CHALLENGES Six out of 10 communication professionals in Europe report that they have encountered ethical challenges within the last twelve months, i.e. situations in which activities might be legally acceptable, but problematic from a moral point of view. One third of the respondents have actually experienced several of those challenges. Professionals working in governmental relations, lobbying, public affairs and in online communication and social media are more exposed than colleagues working in other areas. The survey shows that ethical issues are much more relevant than five years ago, driven by compliance and transparency rules, the increase in social media and – to a lesser extent – by the international character of communication today.

Despite these challenges, the majority of European communication practitioners have never used a professional code of ethics like the Code of Athens to solve moral problems. Only a minority of 29 per cent has ever applied such a code. While 32 per cent of the respondents think that current codes of ethics are outdated, an overwhelming majority (93 per cent) find that the communication profession needs such rules. According to the monitor, professional associations on the national or international level are most eligible to provide such a code. This can be interpreted as a call for action to provide up-to-date guidelines made to fit the digital age in Europe. Obviously, this is not only a question of moral reasoning and norms, but also of institutions and processes that have to be installed to make such codes vivid and sustainable.

PERSPECTIVES In times of economic uncertainty and ever more fragmented publics, communication professionals face hard times. Growing demands from partners within the organisation and external stakeholders have to be dealt with. However resources are limited and new options do not mean that established ones are not needed any more. In order to deal with these issues, traditional modes of benchmarking and gradual adjustment might not be sufficient any more. New rules of the game ask for new structures, strategies and tactics as well as for courage to guide change. This can be a risk, but it is also the path to a more advanced vision for the profession and those who lead it. ▮

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