

## PATTERNS OF EXCELLENCE

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*As the European Communication Monitor 2014 shows, excellent communication departments are characterised by specific structures, role models and worldviews.*

*By Ansgar Zerfass and Piet Verhoeven*

**S**triving for excellence is an ongoing challenge for managers and researchers today. Although many try to understand and identify drivers of success in organisational settings, there are clearly limitations for this endeavour. Each company, non-profit and other organisation has a different set of goals, stakeholders and strategies. Consequently, any search for generic factors or a golden rule is misleading. Communications, like any other social interaction, are constructed in situations which are always new. Nevertheless, insights based on previous experiences or observations can be relevant. They can not predict future behaviour, but they guide our understanding of complex structures and enable us to build frameworks for strategising.

Until now, excellence in the field of strategic communication and public relations has been mainly defined by practitioners' experiences – explaining lessons learned and what has been important for success for themselves – or by normative theories like the influential Excellence Theory by James and Larissa Grunig and colleagues. This theory has tried to explain universal characteristics

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of successful communication management by combining theories from several disciplines, which in turn have served as a touchstone for empirical research in several countries. In spite of early enthusiasm, this approach has later been widely criticised because it sets definitive standards derived from theory, whereas in practice excellence is usually a matter of being better than the competition.

Business and management scholars, on the other hand, have long since used benchmarking approaches based on self-assessments to identify excellent organisations as well as drivers of excellence within a field. Obviously this requires both large empirical samples and research instruments with questions that are based on previous insights and results.

The European Communication Monitor 2014 has employed this method to identify excellent communication functions. The results can be used as a starting point for reflections on the structure, culture, processes and people in any communication department – in light of the specific preconditions and positioning.

**THE STUDY** The European Communication Monitor (ECM) is known as the most comprehensive research into communication management worldwide. Since 2007, the Monitor has improved the understanding of the professional practice of communication in Europe and monitors trends in strategic communication to analyse the changing framework of the profession. The annual study is characterised by its depth, long-term consistency of questions and structure, and academic rigour. It is organised by a



core research team from five universities, supported by a larger group of academics across Europe within the framework of the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA), together with the European Association of Communication Directors (EACD) and Communication Director magazine. This partnership is supported by public relations agency Ketchum as sponsor.

Photo: www.thinkistock.com

The 2014 edition of the survey explored key developments in areas like job satisfaction, work routines, career development and mentoring, networking, communication leadership, mobile communication and gender issues in strategic communication. Each of the 39 questions in the online questionnaire was based on hypotheses and instruments derived from previous research and pre-tested with 44 communication professionals in 16 European countries. Amendments were made where appropriate and the final questionnaire was activated for four weeks in March 2014. 5,205 respondents started the survey and 2,881 of them completed it. Answers



Figure I Alignment of the communication function

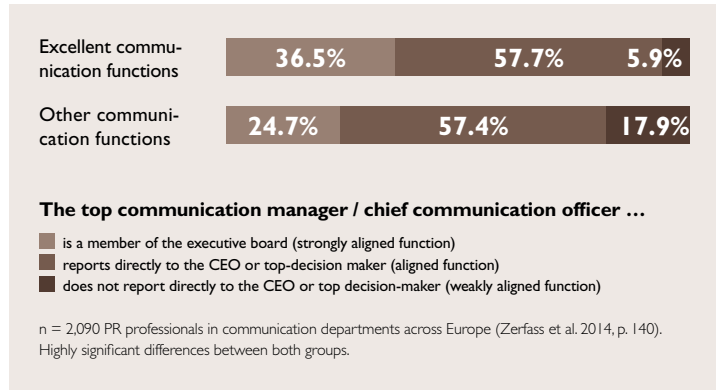
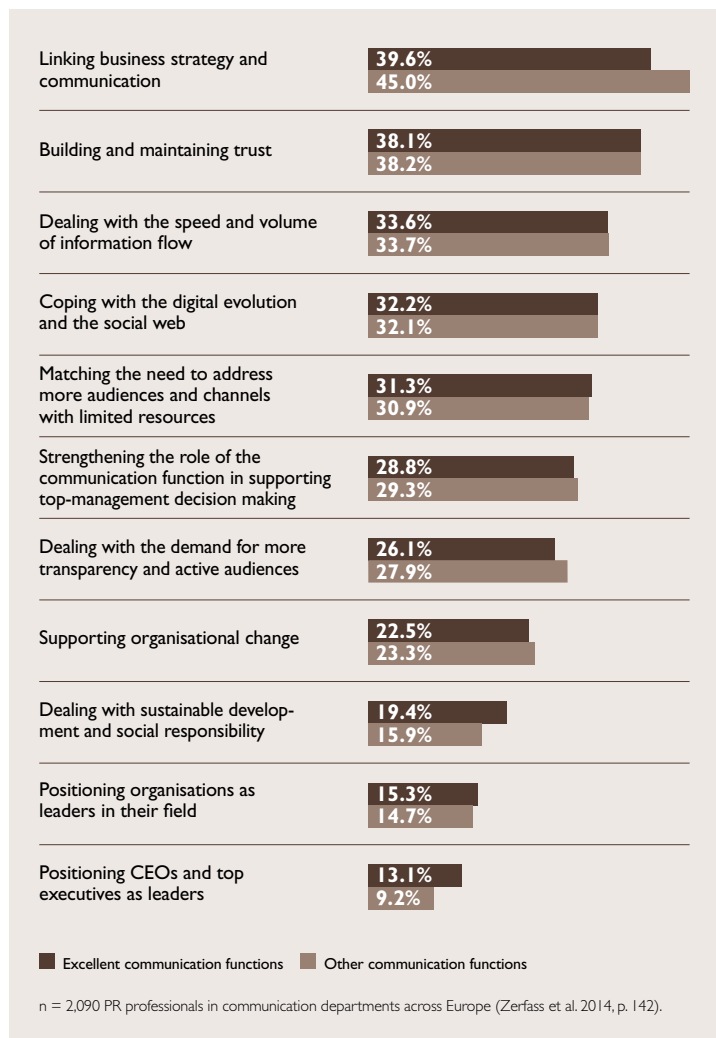


Figure II Most important issues for communication management within the next three years



from participants who could not be clearly identified as part of the population were deleted from the dataset. This strict selection of respondents is a distinct feature of the Monitor and sets it apart from other studies. The final sample consisted of 2,777 fully completed replies by communication professionals in 42 European countries.

Two thirds of the respondents are communication leaders: 40 per cent hold a top hierarchical position as head of communication or as chief executive officer of a communication consultancy; 27.6 per cent are unit leaders or in charge of a single communication discipline in an organisation. A vast majority (94.1 per cent) has an academic degree, and two thirds hold a graduate degree or even a doctorate. Most respondents (32.3 per cent) are based in western Europe, followed by northern Europe (29.0 per cent), southern Europe (25.2 per cent), and eastern Europe (13.5 per cent). The large data set provided more detailed insights for 20 countries, including all key markets in Europe. It was analysed with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), applying Pearson's chi-square tests, Spearman's rank correlation tests, Kendall's rank correlation, Cramér's V, and independent samples T-tests.

**CONCEPTUALISING EXCELLENCE** The European Communication Monitor 2014 combined conceptual considerations with self-assessments of communication professionals and statistical analyses to identify the characteristics of communication functions that make a difference. The sample was divided between organisations with excellent communication departments on the one hand and all other

organisations on the other. Excellence is based on the internal standing of the communication function within the organisation (influence) and external results of the communication function's activities as well as the function's basic qualifications (performance). Each of these two components were calculated on the basis of two dimensions, the first on advisory influence and executive influence, and the second on overall communication success and department competence. Only organisations clearly outperforming in all four dimensions (values six or seven on a seven-point-scale) were considered as excellent in the benchmark exercise.

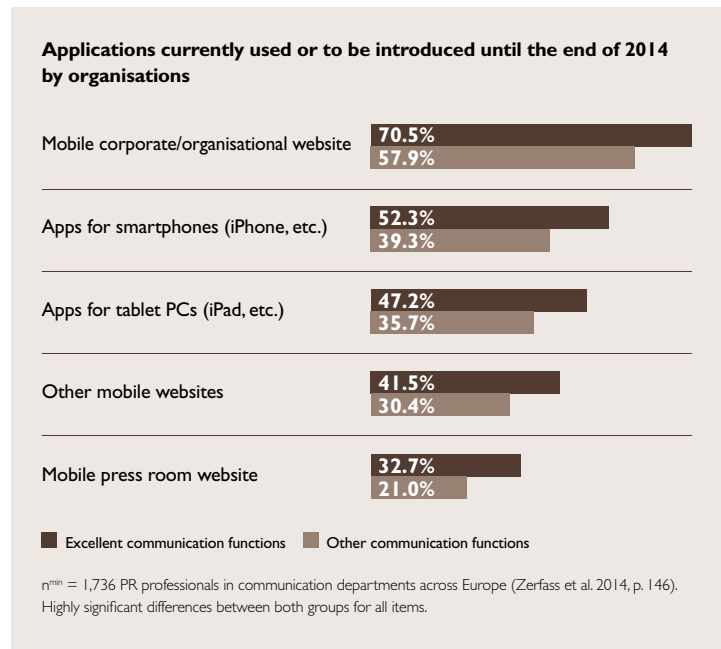
The analysis revealed that approximately one out of five communication functions in the sample can be considered excellent (21.2 per cent). The highest proportion can be found in joint stock organisations (24.9 per cent), whereas excellence is less

*“One out of five communication functions can be considered excellent.”*

prevalent in government-owned, public sector and political organisations (16 per cent). Significant differences between excellent and normal communication functions could be identified in various dimensions, ranging from the alignment with top management to issues of gender equality.

**ALIGNMENT WITH TOP MANAGEMENT** Excellent communication functions are led by a communication head who is more often part of the executive board or reporting directly to the highest representative of the organisation,

Figure III Mobile communication tools in strategic communication

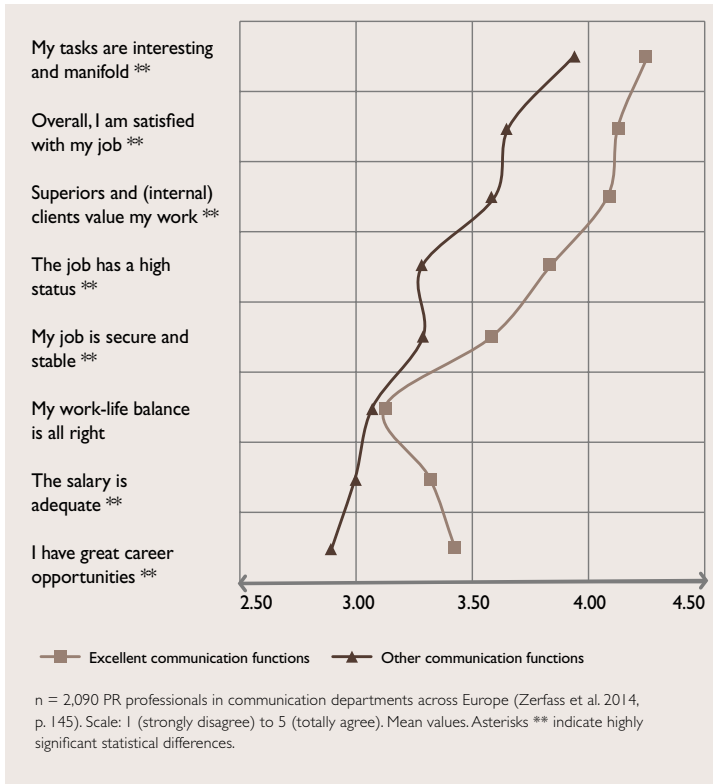


i.e. the chief executive officer (see figure 1). Only a minority of six per cent of the communication leaders is not clearly aligned to the management board, compared to 18 per cent in other departments. Apart from the leaders, the workforce in excellent departments in general is characterised by a different mindset. 81.1 per cent of the communication professionals define themselves as “strategic facilitators”. They see themselves as experts who plan and execute communications, but at the same time help to define new business strategies. Only 52.6 per cent of the respondents working in other departments report about this type of role enactment.

**TOP PRIORITIES** As part of its longitudinal approach, the study tracks the most important issues for communication management in the near future from year to year. This helps to identify the agenda of top priorities dealt with by those in charge of strategic communication across Europe. These can be understood as “unsolved issues”, which appear on the list if they are critical for success or new, and lose importance if they are evaluated as part of operational communication business. Unlike in previous surveys, one topic clearly heads the list of most important challenges until 2017. Nearly half of the 2,777 respondents in the overall study (44.9 per cent) stated that the profession has to tackle the ongoing challenge of linking communication



Figure IV Assessment of the job situation by communication professionals



and business strategies. Communicators are striving for a strategic position at the decision-making table. Only one third of the professionals interviewed (32.0 per cent) believe that coping with the digital evolution and the social web is one of the top challenges. This number has declined sharply from 41.8 per cent in the 2013 Monitor. It looks like many questions around online and social media have been answered; the novelty and hype are over.

Interestingly, excellent communication functions are less concerned with linking business strategy and communication, as many have probably established routines for alignment. But they are more involved with corporate social responsibility and chief executive officer positioning (see figure II on page 20). The latter result also points to a closer proximity between communicators and top management.

**MOBILE COMMUNICATION** The dynamics of the field are also visible in the changing importance of various communication channels and instruments. Online communication is clearly leading (rated important by 85.9 per cent of all respondents), with face-to-face communication

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Highlights of the ECM 2014

- ➔ Excellent communication departments, characterised by internal influence and strong performance, are significantly different from other functions in European organisations.
- ➔ The overall study shows that the way communicators work has been changed in the digital age. New technologies enrich daily life in the profession, but two third feel obliged to be always online and only every second knows how to handle the speed of information flow.
- ➔ Communicators enjoy a stimulating job. But only slightly more than a third agree that their personal salary is adequate, their work-life-balance is all right and that they have great career opportunities. This is no contradiction, as those aspects are empirically less important for job satisfaction than interesting and manifold tasks.
- ➔ In terms of career development, the three most important factors for obtaining a good position in communication management are networking among peers and colleagues, further education, and moving to a new employer. There are significant differences between various regions in Europe, which are discussed in the full report.
- ➔ Networking allows communicators to both progress their personal career and to reach organisational goals. Many new opportunities are offered by digital media. Currently, e-mail is the preferred form of professional networking among communicators in Europe, followed by social media and face-to-face interactions. But there are important regional differences, which should be taken into account in cross-national settings.

(81 per cent) and media relations addressing online media (79 per cent) just behind. The survey suggests a dramatic loss of importance for traditional press relations interact-

## FULL RESULTS



A web video with key results of the study is available at [www.communicationmonitor.eu](http://www.communicationmonitor.eu). The website offers visitors to download the full report with numerous charts (160 pp.) as chart version (PDF) or to order the booklet version: Zerfass, A., Tench, R., Vercic, D., Verhoeven, P., & Moreno, A. (2014). European Communication Monitor 2014. Excellence in Strategic Communication – Key Issues, Leadership, Gender and Mobile Media. Results of a Survey in 42 Countries. Brussels: EACD/EUPRERA, Helios Media. ISBN 978-3-942263-27-6

ing with print media. Only 41.8 per cent of the respondents believe such activities will be important in 2017, which is far less than today (76.3 per cent) and a strong decline since 2011 and 2008, when this was the most important of all instruments in the Monitor. Mobile communication will see the strongest rise within the near future from 51.5 per cent to 91.4 per cent perceived importance among professionals. Excellent communication departments are already ahead of the rest when it comes to implementing mobile applications for smartphones and iPads (see figure III on page 21). Seven out of five have implemented a mobile organisational website or will do so until the end of 2014. Approximately every second reports the same for smartphone or tablet apps. Statistical analyses with other organisations in the sample prove highly significant differences.

Photos: Private; 3 I pictures

**JOB SITUATION** According to the study, communicators working in excellent departments are better prepared to deal with new technologies in their daily work. But they also report more work pressure. 58.3 per cent work at least 25 per cent overtime in an average week. Nevertheless, practitioners in excellent functions experience significantly higher levels of job satisfaction (see figure IV). Corresponding with the extra time required by their employers, the only aspect which is not rated better is the personal work/life balance. Most interestingly there is also a significantly higher level of gender equality in organisations with an excellent communication function. This empirical result is related to the discussion about structural barriers and prevailing prejudices which penalise female communicators. The 2014 Monitor has explored this in detail and found embarrassing results. However the practices reported by excellent departments indicate some light at the end of the tunnel.

## TOWARDS THE FUTURE

The European Communication Monitor 2014 indicates that there are differences between excellent and other, normal communication functions in Europe not only in technical proficiency of communication, but also regarding worldviews. In that respect organisations with excellent communication functions are not simply better at communication, they are communicatively different. Further research is needed to explain this link between technical proficiency and social reflexivity. The results demonstrate that strategic communication is more than a craft and that to practice it well practitioners need a profound understanding of business, organisations and society. |



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