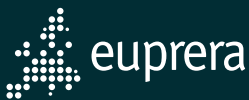


EUROPEAN COMMUNICATION MONITOR 2024/25

MANAGING TENSIONS IN CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS
IN THE CONTEXT OF GEOPOLITICAL CRISES, ARTIFICIAL
INTELLIGENCE, AND MANAGERIAL LEARNING

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Zerfass, A., Buhmann, A., Laborde, A., Moreno, A., Romenti, S., & Tench, R. (2024). *European Communication Monitor 2024. Managing tensions in corporate communications in the context of geopolitical crises, artificial intelligence, and managerial learning.*

Published by the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA), Bd. Du Jubilé 71 bte 3, 1080 Brussels, Belgium. www.euprera.org.

Report layout and graphics design by Nico Modler-Kreß,
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Preface

We are experiencing challenging times for businesses and societies around the world. The threats of political instability and economic stagnation in many countries are accompanied by groundbreaking digital technologies and encouraging initiatives that pave the way for sustainable and successful economies. Strategic communication plays a major role in this development – for good or bad. More knowledge about managing communication in today's volatile environment is needed to future-proof organizations and inspire leaders and practitioners in the field to reflect and refocus.

The European Communication Monitor supports these goals. This edition marks a major juncture in the history of the largest and longest running international study on corporate communications: For the first time in its 18-year legacy, the study provides data from an elite sample of chief communication officers (CCOs), representing the Top 300 companies in Europe. Never before was our discipline able to gain such robust and deep insight into leading practice with this level of sample seniority and with such scientific rigor – including validity, reliability, independence, and transparency.

Several pressing topics are covered in this year's report, including the intricacies of dealing with geopolitical crises, the emergence of AI technologies in communication departments, and handling individual learning and growth for CCOs as the highest-ranking communication leaders. All topics are addressed and analyzed through the lens of tensions, a key concept that has shaped our current understanding of modern organizations and management. Based on a sophisticated empirical design, the ECM 2024/25 provides an innovative view into the current state of practice in Europe's leading businesses, identifying emerging tensions at the organizational, functional, and individual level, and showing pathways to manage these tensions to ensure excellence.

The research team would like to cordially thank the 30 global heads of communication who volunteered their valuable time to participate in this study. We greatly appreciate the great work done by our project manager Caroline Siegel. Further, we are indebted to our partners who enable us to conduct neutral and independent research: the Academic Society for Management & Communication, Centro per la Comunicazione Strategica (CECOMS), #NORA – The Nordic Alliance for Communication & Management and Entreprises et Médias. Last but not least, we would like to thank Fink & Fuchs for designing this report and our website.

Enjoy reading this report – we are sure you'll find some striking and inspiring insights!



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Contents

- [05 Everything at a glance](#)
- [07 Research design and topics covered by this study](#)
- [08 Methodological approach](#)
- [11 Chief communication officers interviewed in this study](#)
- [12 Dealing with tensions in corporate communications](#)
- [15 Managing communications in times of geopolitical crises and risks](#)
- [23 Artificial Intelligence: a double-edged sword for communication departments](#)
- [31 Managerial learning as a success formula for communication leaders](#)
- [39 References and additional food for thought](#)
- [43 Authors and partners of the study](#)

Everything at a glance

The **European Communication Monitor 2024/25** produces unique insights by analyzing the experiences and projections of an elite sample of **chief communication officers (CCOs) representing the 300 largest companies** in Europe. These top executives oversee external and internal communications globally and have different titles, depending on the region and company, such as Chief Corporate Affairs Officers, Head of Group Communications or Head of Corporate Relations. Qualitative and quantitative methods are used to investigate three current topics that produce considerable **tensions in managing contemporary corporate communications**: (1) the need for companies to deal with geopolitical risks; (2) the adoption of artificial intelligence in communication departments; and (3) the managerial learning practices of CCOs that ensure innovation and excellence. The **independent academic study** delivers new and original insights in all three areas.

In an increasingly polarized world, **geopolitical risks** put corporate communications under pressure to balance business perspectives with stakeholder expectations. Tensions emerge, for instance, when needing to respond to stakeholder demands for taking a stance while, at the same time, being forced to mitigate reputational and economic risks. Due to such tensions, strategies and activities need to be reconfigured to meet the new challenges. This includes, e.g., the application of sophisticated infrastructures for listening and scenario planning or nurturing networks of communication experts that can contribute much-needed sensitivity for complex value-based risks.

While **artificial intelligence** promises vast opportunities for communication departments, the pace and uncertainty with which these technologies develop produce considerable tensions. It is necessary to carefully balance the conflicting goals between aims of raising efficiency and effectiveness on the one hand with the need to minimize risks on the other. This requires nuanced responses. Short-term efficiency gains, for instance, have to be weighed against potential long-term negative consequences. Situational awareness for the complex process of digitalization in communication departments is needed, together with robust foresight for the task, structure, people, and technology dimensions of implementing artificial intelligence.

Acquiring new knowledge through various modes of **managerial learning** is crucial for CCOs to enhance their performance and future-proof their teams. Various tensions arise when learning objectives clash with other priorities like maintaining current performance or focusing on efficiency. Oftentimes, CCOs struggle to allocate sufficient time for personal development. Most learning occurs through experimentation or peer exchange, while professional discourse in the field is underdeveloped and academic research is often unknown. There are few dedicated learning opportunities for communication leaders: much of the structured learning focuses on general management skills rather than offering insights for excellence in managing communications.



Research design and topics covered by the study



The empirical approach of the ECM study combines qualitative and quantitative methods. Its academic standards and independence, ensured by renowned research universities, set the study apart from all other surveys in the field. An elite sample of chief communication officers, representing the Top 300 companies across Europe shared their experiences and thoughts. This provides insights into how persisting tensions are managed by companies dealing with geopolitical crises, by communication departments integrating artificial intelligence, and by communication leaders using managerial learning to ensure excellence.

Methodological approach

The refined study design of the European Communication Monitor reflects the increasing complexity of the field.

A unique study design provides profound insights

The ECM 2024/25 uses a new research approach to explore current and future challenges of strategic communication beyond the surface of popular surveys. Such studies, which are frequently conducted by trade media, professional associations, agencies, or service providers, are often instructive and inspiring. But they are seldom based on established theories and previous research. Many samples are undefined and include respondents that may or may not have experience, knowledge, and power to understand and shape the future of the field.

This study paves the way for generating new, unique, and robust insights for communication research and practice by focusing on the real leaders in the field. The insights presented in the ECM reports going forward are based on interviewing a changing elite sample of 30 chief communication officers (CCOs) representing the Top 300 listed and private companies in Europe. Those businesses are not only a major driver of the economy but key actors impacting all other spheres of life, affecting, e.g., cultural, political, and technological change. And their highest-ranking communicators influence the development of the profession in all types of organizations including agencies on a global level. Business leaders, communicators, scholars, and students alike can learn from their experience and insights. The assessments from those shaping the future of the field can be used to reflect on one's own situation in a profound way without the fear of following hype pushed in the interest of various players in industry.

Thought-provoking topics on three levels

The topics investigated in each annual edition of the ECM are rooted in interdisciplinary debates, previous research, and the results of pretests. A key concept from strategic management (this year: tensions; see pp. 12-13) is explored by discussing three topics that impact corporate communications on different levels of analysis: the level of companies (organizational challenges), communication departments (functional challenges) and the most senior communicators (personal challenges). This reflects the holistic perspective of social science research and helps to generate nuanced and critical insights.

Qualitative interviews supported by a pre-questionnaire

Revealing in-depth knowledge and perceptions requires a sophisticated empirical design. Qualitative methods are particularly suitable for this purpose. Expert interviews are useful to examine the interviewees' understanding individually and in detail (Maxwell, 2013).

Organizational challenges (Macro level)

Current business trends and their impact on communication strategies and activities, e.g. driven by developments in society, politics, technology, economics, or the media landscape.

Functional challenges (Meso level)

Established and upcoming practices for managing and executing communications in specialized units, e.g. regarding processes, products, services, resources, and value creation.

Personal challenges (Micro level)

How chief communication officers deal with new and pertaining expectations and practices in their roles as top-level managers, team leaders, and experts for all aspects of corporate communications.

Holistic approach of the study

This allows researchers to “tailor the questions they ask to the respondent in order to get rich, full stories and the information they need” (Palmer, 2019, p. 61) and participate in a broader narrative and exploration of the topic (Sandelowski, 2010). The interviews are supported by a quantitative online pre-questionnaire that helps to catch unbiased and standardized assessment of the interviewees prior to the personal interviews. The mixed method approach helps to structure the data collected and supports a holistic interpretation (Morgan, 2014).

Generating the Top 300 company panel and the CCO sample

The sampling is based on a rigorously compiled and annually updated database, which includes the largest companies from all 50 European countries. These companies are selected in a three-step procedure and ranked according to their sales/revenue in Euros based on current conversion rates: First, the highest-ranking European companies according to the Forbes 2000 list are identified (public companies only). Second, companies from the Family Capital ranking (family businesses only) which do not appear in Forbes 2000 are added. Third, country-specific company rankings are analyzed to ensure that any large company which neither appears in Forbes 2000 nor in Family Capital is included. This results in the full ECM company panel with the Top 300 companies in Europe. Those businesses are mainly headquartered in the strongest economies in which the main languages spoken are English, French, German, Italian, or Spanish. The respective CCOs (also known as Chief Corporate Affairs Officers, Head of Communications etc.) and their contact data are identified with the help of partners. This generates a final database, the Top 300 CCO panel.

A random sample of 30 from the Top 300 CCO panel is interviewed for each edition of the ECM. The researchers recruited interviewees based on a preliminary list and a back-up list reflecting similar sectors or countries, which was used when invited CCOs were not available. This ensures consistency and diversity and follows a purposeful random sampling strategy (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019; Miles et al., 2020). The final sample for the ECM 2024/25 listed on page 11 includes 30 chief communication officers (12 identified as female, 17 as male and one as other gender). The CCOs are on average 52 years old, have more than 22 years of relevant professional experience in corporate communications and almost 17 years of leadership experience in the field. Their companies are based in 10 different countries with an average annual revenue of 54.36 billion Euros and an average of 138,832 employees. Industries spanned a diverse range, including energy, consumer goods, and financial services.

Gathering data across countries and language zones

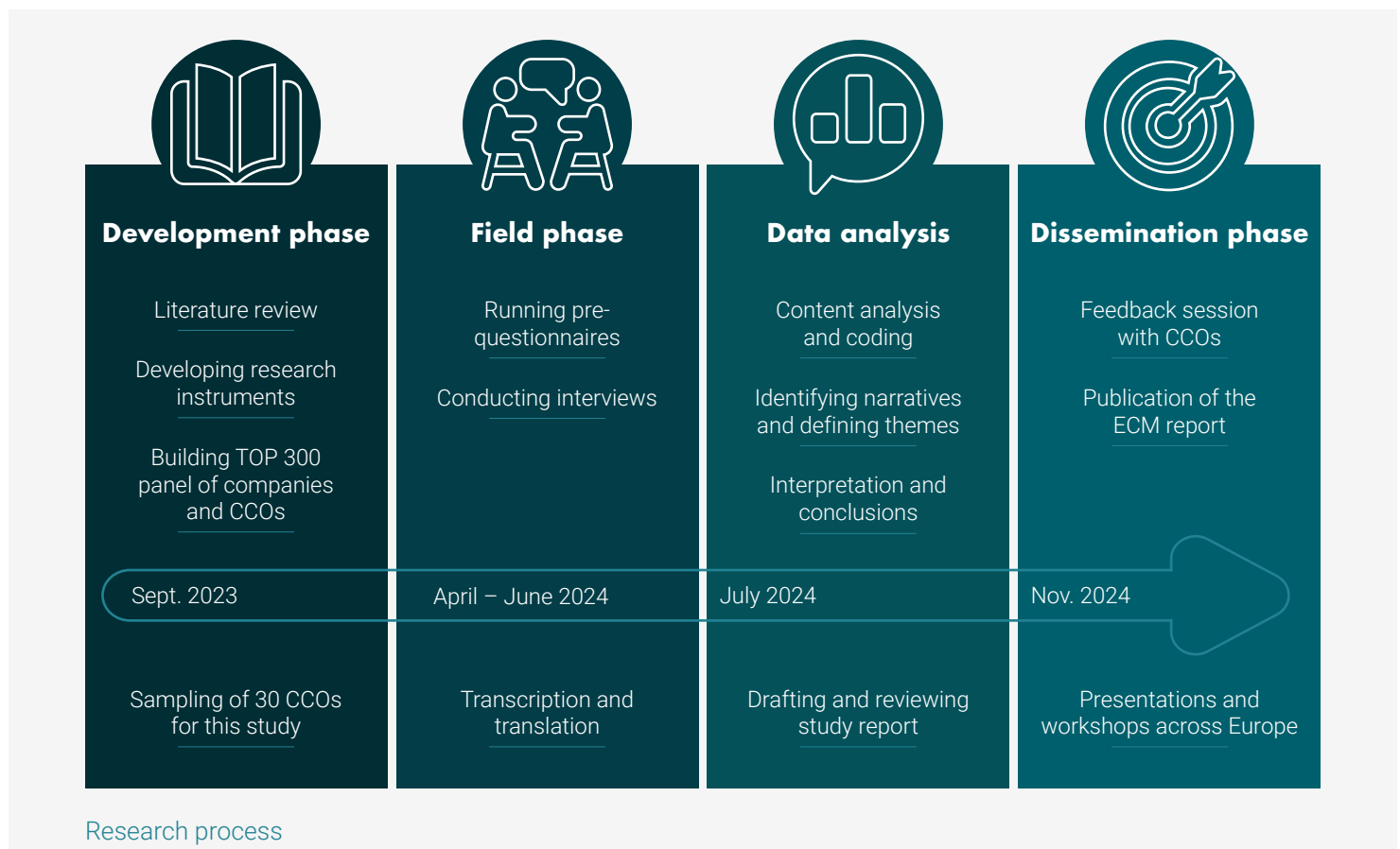
The researchers conducted a comprehensive interdisciplinary literature review to identify the existing body of knowledge about the main concept and the three topics focused on in the study to develop research questions (see pp. 12–13). These were operationalized in two major research instruments. A quantitative pre-questionnaire with 11 sub-instruments used 5-point Likert scales to measure agreement to different statements (Strongly disagree – Strongly agree), impact of external developments (No / Minor / Neutral / Moderate / Major), and frequency of use (Never / Rarely / Sometimes / Often / Always). It also covered demographics, data usage, and privacy. A qualitative semi-structured interview guideline included 15 open questions. The questionnaire and guideline were pre-tested, approved by the ethics committee of Leeds Beckett University, and translated where necessary.

The CCOs were asked to fill in the online pre-questionnaire prior to the interview. Results were treated anonymously and are used in this report to indicate initial assessments of the topics. The 30 interviews were conducted personally by the six professors of the ECM research team between April and June 2024 with a

videoconferencing tool (Paulus & Lester, 2022) and in a language chosen by the interviewees. Interviews lasted 44 minutes on average and were audio-recorded. Participants agreed that their names are listed but all quotes are anonymized.

Analyzing and interpreting the data

The quantitative survey was statistically evaluated. Percentages shown in this report indicate how many respondents supported a statement (agreed, strongly agreed), reported frequent use (often, always), or mentioned a major impact. Figures refer to the sample and are indicative (not representative) of the population of all Top 300 CCOs. The qualitative interviews were transcribed, translated to English (where necessary), and reviewed multiple times before starting the data analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The study involved two rounds of coding, including open, in-vivo, and axial coding by two coders and supported by MaxQDA software. This included breaking down the data into meaningful segments and analyzing them based on clear meaning, direct language, phrases, or quotes from the participants, as well as understanding deeper characteristics and attributes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019; Miles et al., 2020). The codes were condensed to facilitate the search for themes, which were then reviewed in relation to the extracted codes. In a final step, these themes were defined and labeled to convey the participants' overall narrative, with quotes selected to illustrate each theme (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). The data were interpreted by the researchers and the research assistant in the light of the previously identified body of knowledge, which formed the basis for preparing this report.



Interviewees

Chief communication officers participating in the study

01	Adidas	Jan Runau	Chief Corporate Communication Officer
02	AXA	Ulrike Decoene	Chief Communications, Brand and Sustainability Officer
03	BASF	Nina Schwab-Hautzinger	Senior Vice President Corporate Communications & Government Relations
04	Bosch	Christof Ehrhart	Executive Vice President Corporate Communications & Government Relations
05	Diageo	Dan Mobley	Global Corporate Relations Director
06	EDF	Benjamin Perret	Senior Vice President Communications
07	Eni	Erika Mandraffino	Director External Communication
08	Equinor	Jannik Lindbaek	Executive Vice President Communication, Political and Public Affairs
09	Ferrero	Raoul Romoli Venturi	Corporate Communication Director
10	IKEA	Belén Frau Uriarte	Global Communication and Positioning Manager
11	ING	Kim Larsen	Global Head of Brand, MarCom, and Communications
12	Intesa Sanpaolo	Fabrizio Paschina	Executive Director Communication and Corporate Image
13	Lufthansa	Andreas Bartels	Senior Vice President Corporate Communications
14	Møller-Maersk	Mette Refshauge	Vice President Corporate Communication & Sustainability
15	Naturgy	Jordi García Taberner	Global Head of Communications, Reputation and Public Affairs
16	Nestlé	Lisa Gibby	Chief Communications Officer
17	Nokia	Melissa Schoeb	Chief Corporate Affairs Officer
18	Novartis	Michelle Weese	Head of Corporate Affairs / Chief Corporate Affairs Officer
19	PwC	Michael Stewart	Global Leader, Corporate Affairs, Communications and Policy
20	Randstad	Sarah Campbell Donia	Chief Corporate Affairs Officer
21	Renault	Stéphanie Cau	Chief Communications Officer
22	Repsol	Marcos Fraga García	Director of Communication and Brand & Director of the Chairman's Office
23	Saint-Gobain	Laurence Pernot	Vice President of Communications
24	Sanofi	Bruno Tourne	Head of Corporate Communications
25	Santander	Juan Manuel Cendoya	Group Head of Communications, Corporate Marketing and Research
26	SAP	Monika Schaller	Chief Communications Officer
27	Siemens	Lynette Jackson	Chief Communications Officer
28	SSE	Sam Peacock	Managing Director, Corporate Affairs, Regulation and Strategy
29	Swiss Re	Jan Dietrich Müller	Managing Director, Head of Group Communication
30	Unilever	Paul Matthews	Global Head of Communications & Corporate Affairs

Sample of the ECM 2024/25

Dealing with tensions in corporate communications

Why the topics explored in this study are timely and relevant.

Tensions characterize the reality of the business world

Managers across all functions are regularly faced with seemingly contradicting yet equally important alternatives, such as innovation versus consolidation, flexibility versus efficiency, or continuity versus change (Karhu & Ritala, 2018; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Such contradicting alternatives are an inherent and essential ingredient of any organization. Top leaders – including chief communication officers (CCOs) – are especially affected by contradictions, as they have to take high-stakes decisions in situations shaped by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) (Minciu et al., 2020; Smith & Lewis, 2022). Opposing pairs of decisions, often referred to as dualities (Birkinshaw et al., 2016; Putnam et al., 2016), present managers with cognitive challenges as they have to deal with conflicting demands for themselves and their organizations. If both decision alternatives have to be realized, the duality represents a paradox in which a multitude of contradictory but interconnected elements (such as perspectives, feelings, and identities) have to be considered (Lewis, 2000).

Contradictions, dualities and paradoxes in goal alternatives create tensions in decision-making, i.e., situations in which managers and organizations are faced with a particular “tightness in making choices” (Putnam et al. 2016, p. 69). In fact, in the ‘VUCA world’, dealing with tensions is the ‘the new normal’. In order to succeed in fast-paced, globalized, and competitive business environments, leaders need to identify, consider, and strategically manage tensions constantly (Knight & Cuganesan, 2020). The complexity of managing tensions is exacerbated as most tensions do not exist in isolation but interact with each other (Raja et al., 2022). Furthermore, tensions are dynamic in nature (Berti & Cunha, 2023; Smith, 2014) and thus have to be managed in an integrated manner (Raisch et al., 2018). Hence, tensions often result in stress (Putnam et al., 2016) and are therefore widely seen as a negative side of business practice – such as conflict, strain, or crisis (Tidström, 2014). Nevertheless, tensions can also generate creativity, innovation, and even joy (Gaim & Wählin, 2016; Lewis, 2000). And recognizing tensions helps demonstrate that there is not only one ‘right way’ thus counteracting oversimplifications in management (Huxham & Beech 2003).

Tensions force leaders and organizations to make tough decisions.

Different approaches for dealing with tensions

Beyond the identification and evaluation of tensions (Hoelscher, 2019; Knight & Paroutis, 2016; Munten et al. 2021; Vangen & Winchester, 2014), research has focused on the approaches and practices to address and manage tensions (e.g., Best et al., 2021; Fredriksson & Edwards, 2019; van Fenema & Loebbecke, 2014), including investigations into how tensions may be morphed, shifted, or changed (Benson, 1977; Bloodgood & Chae, 2010). These studies identify responses such as the shifting or renegotiation of goals, the invitation of diverse actors into the interpretation and handling of tensions, or a focus on managing the emotions and affects that may be raised among employees or external stakeholders when navigating through tensions.

Challenges for corporate communications

Despite their wide recognition as a subject of study in organization and management studies, tensions have not yet been adequately explored in the field of corporate communications (Veil & Waymer, 2021). As CCOs are constantly forced to adapt their practices and strategies to changes in the technological, sociopolitical, and economic spheres (Stieglitz et al., 2024), they are confronted with contradictions that affect their organizations and industries (macro level), their communication department (meso level), or themselves as professionals (micro level). Three seminal examples from current practice are:

- Tensions driven by geopolitical crises: when corporate communications are faced with geopolitical developments that force businesses to pursue contradictory goals; e.g. engaging in open communication whilst ensuring that discourses are not spoiled by radical voices, or responding to stakeholder demands for taking a stance and at the same time mitigating reputational and economic risks (macro level → pp. 15–22).
- Tensions driven by the rise of artificial intelligence: when communication departments are aiming to get better AI-driven insights through big data but at the same time triggers information overload which slows down decisions, or when the goal of raising efficiency and effectiveness through AI collides with the need to minimize risks, e.g. through AI failures or bias (meso level → pp. 23–30).
- Tensions driven by the need for managerial learning: when a CCO's decision to engage in learning contradicts with equally relevant activities such as ensuring performance and success in the present, seeking focus and efficiency, or retaining a sense of purpose and belonging (micro level → pp. 29–38).

Because organizations, communication departments, as well as CCOs are increasingly exposed to tensions, it is important to examine what characterizes these tensions in particular and how these crucial 'tight spots' in decision-making can be transformed into opportunities in corporate communications. The ECM 2024/25 addresses this research need by exploring the three topics in multiple dimensions: How do businesses (macro level), communication departments (meso level), and CCOs (micro level) deal with the three challenges? Which tensions are experienced in each context? And how are those tensions evaluated and managed? Answering these research questions provides a crucial overview on current practices as well as insights into solutions developed by those who shape the profession at a global level. A short introduction into each topic as well as results of the empirical investigations and conclusions are presented in the next chapters.



Managing communications in times of geopolitical crises and risks



Ongoing geopolitical crises have a considerable impact on global corporate communications. In a fragmented and polarized world, companies are compelled to reconcile their business rationalities with the growing demands of stakeholders to take a stand and express a commitment. This results in multiple tensions. Various strategies to navigate these challenges are identified.

Introduction

From crisis communication to geopolitical risk management

Acceleration and evolution of geopolitical risks

Arguably, geopolitical risks have reached their most severe state since the Cold War era (Gamso et al., 2023). Recent examples stem from the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, diplomatic tensions between the United States and China, and military conflicts in the Middle East. In addition to 'predictable' risks, the rise of 'unpredictable black swans' such as pandemics highlights the difficulty of managing unforeseen crises.

These events disrupt the established political and economic order and impact global business operations, which often depend on resources, production and trade across regions with political positions and narratives that are sometimes irreconcilable. Politics and markets are reorganized in a new world order (Andonova & d'Almeida, 2022) with a revival of the state both as a strong partner and as an antagonist of businesses (Zerfass et al., 2023). Some researchers request that companies should "dust off old playbooks on political risk" and develop a "new toolkit to deal with political uncertainty and volatility." (Ciravegna et al., 2023, p. 1). This also applies to the way businesses deal with their external and internal communication activities (Hirsch, 2023).

Global companies need to rethink communications

The acceleration and increasing complexity of geopolitical risks call for new approaches to corporate communications based on complexity management and critical perspectives. Such concepts consider the dynamic and interconnected nature of crises and the active role of stakeholders in them (Johansen, 2024). Recognizing the multiplicity of voices (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016) and the complexity of sub-arenas of confrontation, these approaches were originally developed to respond to changes brought on by social media (Eriksson, 2018; Johansen et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2019; Veil et al., 2011). However, there is little research that accounts for the intensifying interrelation between geopolitical risks and corporate communications. While professional associations and industry magazines have discussed the topic since the start of the Ukraine war, it has not yet become a focal point of academic research.

Resource extraction industries, such as oil and gas, have historically included geopolitical issues in their communication strategies through stakeholder engagement, lobbying, and community relations (Gamso et al., 2023). These industries have developed tools to assess geopolitical risks and prepare for various scenarios. However, emerging geopolitical risks now threaten corporate reputations of companies across all industries. Origins and drivers are difficult to identify – reputational risks "needs to be viewed as an ecosystem of threats with different levels of severity around the world." (Hirsch, 2019, p. 11).

Challenges and opportunities for corporate communications

Current research predominantly frames geopolitical risks as communicative challenges for companies, especially related to the realignment of priorities in response to shifting political agendas. Taking a public stand in emotionally charged and highly controversial conflicts such as the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East is just as difficult as maintaining a neutral position.

Other researchers see these challenges as opportunities. The current period, marked by geopolitical volatility, globalization, and heightened awareness, has opened pathways for new forms of corporate responsibility. Some researchers advocate for models of corporate geopolitical responsibility (CGR), building on traditional CSR frameworks. An early example proposed by Jamali and Mirshak (2010) is a matrix for classifying corporate strategies in conflict zones, focusing on peace building and CSR. The overall idea is that large and globally operating businesses may use their influence to contribute to geopolitical stability (Belhoste & Nivet, 2018).

This goes along with rising expectations of both consumers and employees for companies to take a stand in politically contested debates (Appels, 2024) – which may have positive and negative effects. Many companies that suspended operations in Russia after the war in Ukraine started saw a marked improvement in employee loyalty and recruitment. On the other hand, practices like boycotts and buycotts have evolved into new forms of political and civic engagement that challenge such communication strategies (Belhoste, 2023).

Looking forward, some researchers suggest that communication departments will play a strategic role in managing geopolitical risks. Given their historical commitment to social and environmental issues, communication departments may play an important role in managing such geopolitical responsibilities. To this end, companies “need to refashion their corporate communications functions to provide consistent and expert counsel on a wide range of geopolitical risks” (Hirsch, 2019, p. 11), probably by reallocating resources currently allocated to CSR and corporate citizenship efforts.

Given the increasing sophistication of digital tools for monitoring public opinion, communication departments are ideally positioned to anticipate geopolitical developments and advise on the development of corporate and functional strategies in this area. Assuming these responsibilities requires a clear vision, strong leadership and communication staff with competencies to handle difficult situations characterized by multiple and often conflicting objectives.

Geopolitical risks are the threat, occurrence or escalation of adverse events related to war, terrorism, and any conflicts between states and political actors that affect economic activity, political decisions and social dynamics on a global scale.

Results

How do geopolitical risks affect corporate communications?

Global companies are largely accustomed to handling crises, including geopolitical ones, with operational crisis management models in place. However, the acceleration and interdependence of crises, the evolution of stakeholder expectations, and the increasing politicization and polarization of public discourse require companies to rethink or adapt their communication practices. The interviewed chief communication officers (CCOs) unanimously agree that the geopolitical context significantly impacts corporate communications strategies and activities. Geopolitical risks and crises affect companies differently depending on their business activities and global presence, but most observe new and tangible changes in communications. The issue most frequently regarded as relevant by the companies surveyed is the war in the Ukraine. Other current conflicts and the rise of nationalism are also frequently mentioned.

Several CCOs perceive the pace of crises to be intensifying. One interviewee argues: "They're coming at us at a higher pace, and there are no signs that this will stabilize or that this will not just keep accelerating." (C80) Beyond crisis management, this acceleration calls for risk management approaches that deeply affect communication strategies. In this shifting landscape, sometimes referred to as polycrisis or permacrisis, "the communication and public relations areas have suffered and will suffer many changes ... in their configuration, activities, and strategies ... [T]here is a certain Darwinism in the communication areas. It's not the one with the most resources or the strongest or the biggest who survives, but the one who best adapts to this new volatile context." (O45).

The evolution of stakeholder expectations represents a central issue, and most interviewees report an increased demand for companies to take a stand: "[We] face consumers asking us to be responsible or co-responsible and to act accordingly in the face of these crises or geopolitical movements ... We have to address these demands, from consumers, employees, and society, which demands a more proactive stance from us than before and more direct contact with them." (O45) When "polarization and politicization that happens outside of the organization also seeps into the organization" (D31) and affects internal stakeholders, some even speak about this as employee activism.



The geopolitical context has a very concrete impact to the business and ... we need to relate to this.

(CCO C80)

Geopolitical crisis with a major impact on corporate communications

58.6 %



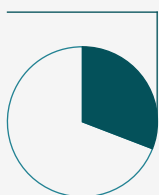
War in the Ukraine

48.3 %



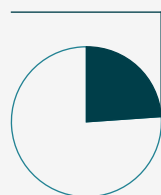
Aftermath of the pandemic

31.0 %



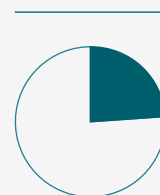
Conflict between China and Western countries

24.1 %



Conflicts in the Middle East

24.1 %



Conflict between China and Taiwan

24.1 %



Rising nationalism and protectionism

For many communicators, these changes present major challenges: “To navigate and find a way to communicate is super challenging and emotional for everyone involved, including the communicators. A really difficult time.” (N58) Several CCOs find themselves at the forefront of managing geopolitical issues, which for some feels “like a massive responsibility, ... rewarding but terrifying.” (B25).

Difficulties experienced by companies due to geopolitical risks

Actively positioning the company and its top leaders with regard to geopolitical topics	48.3 %
Responding to stakeholders and media who ask about disputed geopolitical topics	48.3 %
Anticipating the reputational risks and opportunities of geopolitical developments	48.3 %
Managing controversial debates on geopolitical topics within the company	41.4 %
Respecting different perspectives when communicating with external stakeholders	27.6 %

Tensions experienced in corporate communications when dealing with geopolitical crises

The interviews revealed several tensions for corporate communications that relate to geopolitical issues. Among the most frequently mentioned is the tension between taking a position or remaining neutral. This is further complicated by the fact that companies are speaking out in a world that is both global and fragmented. A further tension concerns the difficulty of bringing together perspectives that are difficult to reconcile “between the rationalities of running a business and then an increasingly emotional, polarized, politicized world.” (D31) Closely related to this are tensions that emerge from the need to respond to stakeholder demands while maintaining a coherent strategy. The interviewed CCOs report growing pressure from stakeholders for companies to take positions on issues unrelated to their core business. The key question for CCOs is how to be “sensitive to our context, but remain kind of consistent with how we think business should be operated” (R42), which includes values like inclusivity and freedom of speech.

Most CCOs agree that the most significant changes in this area concern internal audiences and stakeholders. For global companies, geopolitical issues often infiltrate internal discussions. As one CCO said, “you import conflicts that the company cannot do anything about. You import these conflicts into your own population, and that is not beneficial for the company.” (A12) Employees’ pressure to take a stance has “considerably increased in recent years. Employees try and push the company into places that will become very difficult, and so there’s always a complicated balancing act.” (U05) Such internal pressures are described as more challenging than external stakeholder pressure.

One CCO reports in relation to the conflicts in the Middle East: “I have never, ever experienced, in 25 years, emotions running this high within the company.” (X35).

The expectations of younger generations, but also the speed and transparency of social media have exacerbated these challenges: “With LinkedIn, you can quickly access another boss’s position. So, every employee is going to say, ‘What’s the company’s position?’ Should the CEO post something: internally, externally, and with real internal pressure on the subject?” (V07).

Another tension concerns the difficulty of reconciling local expectations with the global strategy. In a fragmented, globalized world, delivering a message that satisfies everyone is extremely difficult – and often simply impossible. Issues like diversity and inclusion may be promoted by corporate communications in Europe, but they are “forbidden by law in other countries. In an area such as internal communication, we must be very clear about what messages we can convey at a global level and what messages must be segmented by country.” (M10) CCOs face an increasingly complex landscape where globalization and multilateralism are no longer universal guiding principles. The question that then arises for global corporate communications is how to be as relevant as possible in one country and at the same time on a global scale, and how to meet the more demanding requirements of taking a stand while at the same time wanting to be inclusive and speak to everyone. Some stakeholders’ lack of tolerance and understanding of global complexity further complicates this: “There’s a whole generation who grew up after the Berlin Wall fell and forgot the world consists of all these different systems and there’s always a geopolitical tension going on.” (D31).

Another tension emerges from the need to deal with corporate social responsibility and reputational risk. Stakeholders expect companies to engage beyond business-related issues. For many, “the really big shift of the last few years is the politicization of social issues.” (U05) Business leaders also face increasing pressure to express views on contested political topics, making it harder to navigate interconnected business contexts: “The problem with geopolitical situations is that on one hand, I do feel the responsibility of a leader to go out to the market with a view, on the other hand, it’s getting more and more tricky given the interconnections in the business.” (X35) For companies, the challenge is balancing engagement, which fosters trust, with the associated reputational risks. Some CCOs fundamentally question the legitimacy of companies taking political stances: “CEOs are not elected. Companies are not democratic institutions. No one is asking whether this is undemocratic.” (C80).



Everyone who works in an organization feels entitled to comment on how the organization is responding.”

(CCO R42)

Evaluating and managing communicative tensions related to geopolitical risks and crises

While overall the tensions emerging from increasing geopolitical risks are perceived as neither positive nor negative, the new role of organizations as ‘democratic actors’ is mostly perceived as a threat. However, the interviewed CCOs are positive about the changing role of the communication department if it engages in geopolitical risk management. Acting as an advisor to top management in this field can result in a better standing within the company: “We always have to be ... on the lookout, to manage ... risks and also to turn geopolitical events into business opportunities.” (L16).

In the face of geopolitical risks, businesses employ issue management and monitoring processes to anticipate and formulate strategies, control the environment and protect investments, or communicate and position narratives.

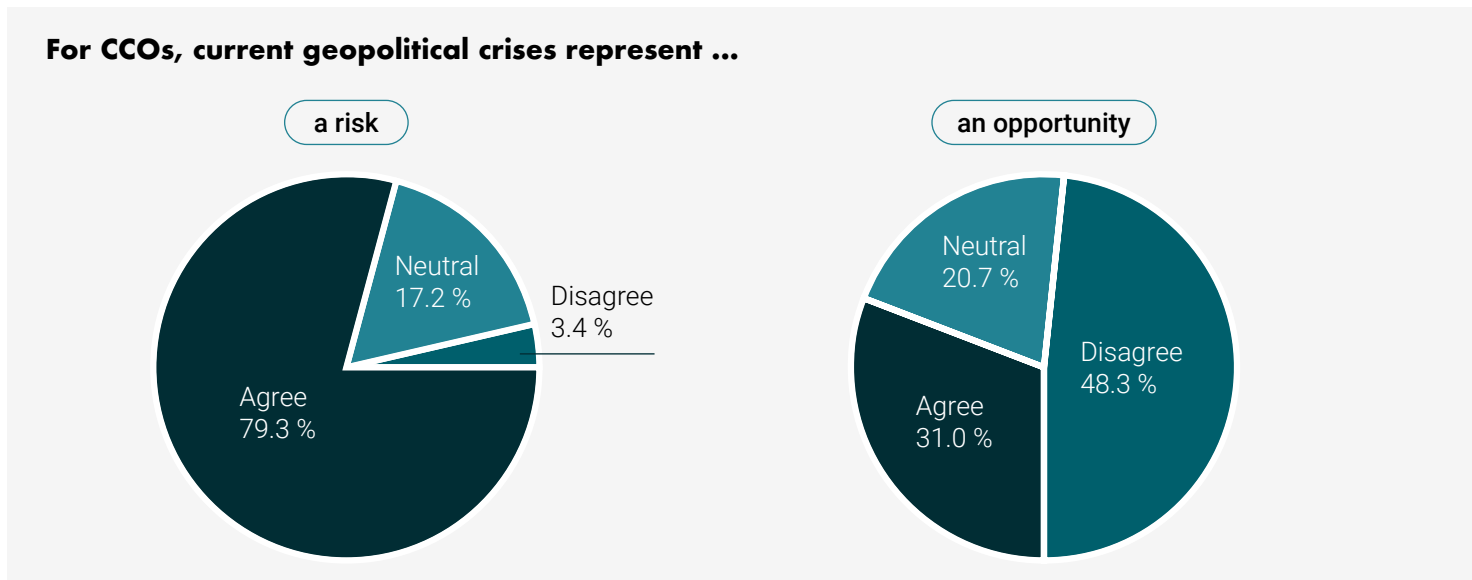
Corporate communications and public affairs are of central importance here and need to be closely aligned. For several CCOs, recent crises have shown that “we had to be better prepared to anticipate events of this nature.” (O45) This is done by investing into social listening and predictive monitoring tools for both internal and external channels.

Corporate communications needs to be organized to adapt to and manage geopolitical risks both within the headquarter and globally: “You also need experienced communicators in different countries who not only have a view of their country, but also understand that even in a global company there is a global view that is not necessarily congruent with the view of each country”. (W16) Getting organized also means developing skills and deploying a network of experts. Today’s geopolitical issues “are heavily nuanced, and you need to have an even more intimate understanding of the issues and the players and the sentiment in order to be able to give effective communications advice.” (X34) Hence, communication departments on all levels need to be able to manage paradoxes and ambiguities. This involves both strategies to explain and successfully frame the corporate position, but also communicators that are open-minded, diplomatic, and understand various viewpoints and cultural perspectives: “We need to be better at explaining what it’s like to run a global company. We need to be more galvanized in terms of dealing with conflict or discussions or controversy.” (D31).

In an unpredictable world marked by acceleration and urgency, businesses need to develop governance frameworks for communications that guide daily action: “We need to be prepared every day to react, and at the same time we have to be very clear about the frames in which we want to react. And where we don’t want to react is almost as important.” (D93) Some of the companies interviewed have already introduced processes to objectify decisions on whether to take a communicative stand on specific issues or not.

Finally, supporting and managing conversations about geopolitical topics within the organization is important to large companies according to the majority of the CCOs interviewed. This is done by listening to leaders and employees on all levels without necessarily being able to meet all expectations, by creating a safe environment where people can express themselves and hold different opinions, and by maintaining a sense of belonging in situations that are sometimes highly emotional and conflictual. This also involves maintaining “a constant dialogue that you have to have with your own people about when and why you’re doing certain things.” (U05).

// **We need to make sure that we understand better all these different types of perspectives that exist around things.”**
(CCO D31)



Conclusion

Companies are adapting their communication strategies to the new global geopolitical context. But many practices are still evolving.

In an increasingly fragmented and polarized world, geopolitical risks put corporate communications under pressure to balance business perspectives with stakeholder expectations. The contradictions and tensions which emerge from intensifying geopolitical risks have several important implications for contemporary corporate communications. Strategies and activities in this field need to be reconfigured to meet the new challenges. Four key points can be highlighted.

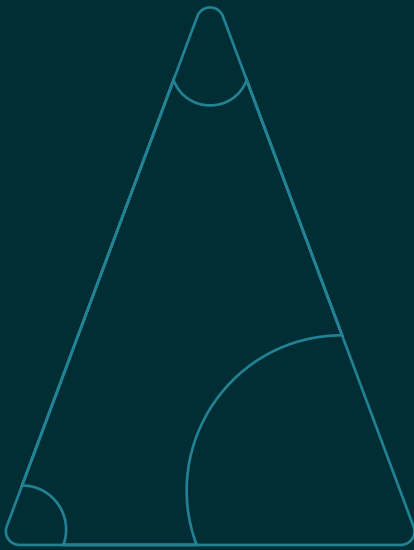
1. Anticipate. The key to effectively dealing with geopolitical risks in corporate communications is to set up an infrastructure of listening and scenario planning.

2. Consolidate. Establishing, strengthening and moderating discussions within global organizations is as important as monitoring external stakeholders and debates.

3. Connect. Businesses should nurture a network of functional leaders and communication experts with diplomatic skills and sensitivity for value-based risks.

4. Navigate. Managing corporate communications for a global company means choosing what to say and what not to say in situations of ambiguity and paradoxes.

Artificial intelligence: a double-edged sword for communication departments



AI holds immense opportunities for communication units and teams. But the speed and uncertainty of technological developments and its social impact produce considerable risks. The interviewed CCOs take a critical look at the status of the transition. Tensions between short-term and long-term goals and ways to manage them are identified. Leveraging AI in large organizations is complex and requires a nuanced view that curbs excessive enthusiasm.

Introduction

Artificial intelligence is a game changer for communication departments. They might become better – but also lose their identity.

The transformation is fundamental and touches the core of the function

Artificial intelligence (see definition on p. 25. based on Corea, 2019) can automatize operations and decisions through a combination of computerized algorithms and large data sets. AI systems are used in communications for a wide array of tasks (Gregory et al., 2023). Natural language processing can generate news releases, convert written texts to speech, or generate promotional materials in multiple languages (Van Noort et al., 2020). AI is also used for management tasks like analyzing media clippings and social media discussions (Balaji et al., 2021), monitoring competitors, or tracking stakeholder journeys along various points of communication contacts with an organization. Further popular use cases include mass personalization of content (Hermann, 2022), for instance via chatbots (Men et al., 2023) in customer service (Ngai et al., 2021) or branding (Lee et al., 2021).

This shows, that on top of using AI for general 'OrgTech' applications (i.e., for generic support activities such as taking meeting notes), there are now vast opportunities for using specialized AI-based tools for the entire 'CommTech' universe (Brockhaus et al., 2023). AI supports primary communication activities (such as content creation or stakeholder interaction) as well as functional support activities (such as media monitoring). The proposed benefits include workflow and efficiency gains, e.g., through taking over routine tasks and freeing up creative capacities (López Jiménez & Ouariachi, 2021), improved accuracy, e.g., in understanding and communicating with stakeholders (Hermann, 2022), and better decision-making (Chintalapati & Pandey, 2022). The adoption of AI drives the digital transformation of communication departments and changes both tactical and strategic dimensions of corporate communications (Huang & Rust, 2021). But how does this change occur, what challenges and tensions emerge, and how can these be managed?

Technical and social dimensions of AI impact in communication departments

Like with other processes of digitalization, the impact of AI can be traced by viewing the communication department as both a technical and a social system (Brockhaus et al., 2022): This means that aspects of AI that relate to technologies and tasks (technical system) influence aspects that relate to people and structures (social system), and vice versa. Debates about particular use cases, like applying AI for video creation, usually focus on technology and tasks. Structure and people often play a role when chief communication officers approve software investments and transformation programs. For example, the willingness and ability of team members to use AI applications influences the choice between automation and augmentation. Automation means that AI-based systems take over human tasks, while augmentation relies on collaboration between humans and AI.

The adverse effects, obstacles, and challenges of AI in communications

Several challenges and obstacles emerge with the increased use and adoption of AI in communications (Buhmann & Gregory, 2023). Chief among them are ethical concerns, e.g., related to data privacy and security or bias and discrimination (Buhmann & White,

2022). Potential bias and discrimination are also widely discussed amidst concerns about risks such as 'AI failures', which may lead to reputational damage. Another often-cited concern is the loss of 'human touch' in communication, i.e., concerns about impersonal communication or emotionally less nuanced interaction, both of which might lead to stakeholder dissatisfaction (Buhmann & Gregory, 2023). Further challenges emerge around the fast innovation in AI on the one hand, and the level of skills and competencies of communication practitioners on the other: While communicators have been in agreement for some time that AI will have great impact on their work future (Zerfass et al., 2020), most still believe they do not have sufficient education and guidance on the use of AI systems (Buhmann & Gregory, 2023). Another prominent concern is that AI may make jobs for communicators redundant, specifically those focused on routine tasks like answering stakeholder queries or drafting reports. However, this could be welcomed by CCOs as it increases the efficiency of large communication units. The real danger, though, is that communication departments may not be able to claim new, more advisory-based roles in the future but instead lose their identity, power, and relevance.

AI-based change and innovation as a decision problem

Communication leaders need to know more about AI than use cases and potential effects. There is a quest for creating empirical insights and frameworks to aid decision-making about AI, which has already taken place in adjacent disciplines like marketing (Huang & Rust, 2021), organization studies (Shrestha et al., 2021), and information systems (Bawack et al., 2021). AI-based systems present decision problems because they raise tensions at a fundamental level. Business literature may offer seemingly straightforward advice for managers, e.g., to prioritize augmentation over automation (Daugherty & Wilson, 2018). However, transforming communication units involves very 'deep' tensions, that are not easily resolved. For instance, research has demonstrated that deciding between automation vs. augmentation creates an inevitable paradox around questions of human oversight as both options have inherent trade-offs which reinforce particular negative outcomes (Raisch & Krakowski, 2021). Furthermore, the quick and cost-effective solutions that AI promises may be outweighed by the disruption of established skills, routines, and resources in the organization or by external reputation risks (Buhmann & White, 2022). This requires investigation and reflection. The ECM 2024/25 is the first to examine AI-induced transformations of leading communication departments in Europe, and how CCOs are dealing with the tensions that arise from these changes.

Artificial intelligence is the ability of machines and software applications to produce results for a task that are indistinguishable from the results achieved by human actors.

Results

The impact of AI in Europe's leading communication departments

Analytics and insights currently stand out as the most established use case for AI in Europe's leading communication departments (e.g., in stakeholder analysis, media monitoring, or sentiment analysis). Both quantitative and qualitative data support this. Currently, over 55% use AI often or always for these tasks, another quarter sometimes. The personal interviews emphasize that AI stands out due to the detail of analysis and analytical performance when dealing with vast data sets, as one CCO exemplifies: "I have a granularity that I wasn't capable of before this massive processing capacity that AI gives me. So that's what it's all about." (W38).

The use of Generative AI for content creation and adoption is also already widespread. Commonly cited uses include the support for non-native English speakers, the production of copy, or the real-time translation of content, such as in speeches from top executives. Data show that the AI systems used are mostly secure/internal versions, which have limited efficiency but, nonetheless, are perceived as highly useful. CCOs commonly frame them as both "low-hanging fruit" (C80) and as a "big step forward" (N58). Interview data emphasize AI use for the creation of automated content, especially for initial drafts and first versions: "All first drafts are now AI ... whether it's a piece of risk analysis, whether it's a piece of a speech, whether it's a piece of content creation." (T74).

The data suggests that the success of AI in monitoring and analysis as well as content creation is due to the highly standardized and repetitive nature of such day-to-day activities in communication departments. Next to being repetitive, these tasks are likely candidates for AI adoption because they are relatively 'low risk': "Right now, we are in that stage of using it in areas that are less high priority because I just don't think it's secure." (F83).

Considerations regarding security are equally important for understanding the low levels of penetration of AI across other task domains. While AI for interacting with stakeholders or content distribution can also serve repetitive tasks, there is skepticism due to the high-stakes and high-risk nature of potential failures: "We put our CEO all of a sudden with his face to speak in languages that he doesn't speak. This might have a reputational risk ... We are killing a lot of ideas just because nothing must go wrong." (D93).

Most established uses of AI-based tools in top companies

1.	Media/Social media monitoring and analysis	55.1 %
2.	Content adaptation	51.7 %
3.	Getting inspiration for content	44.8 %

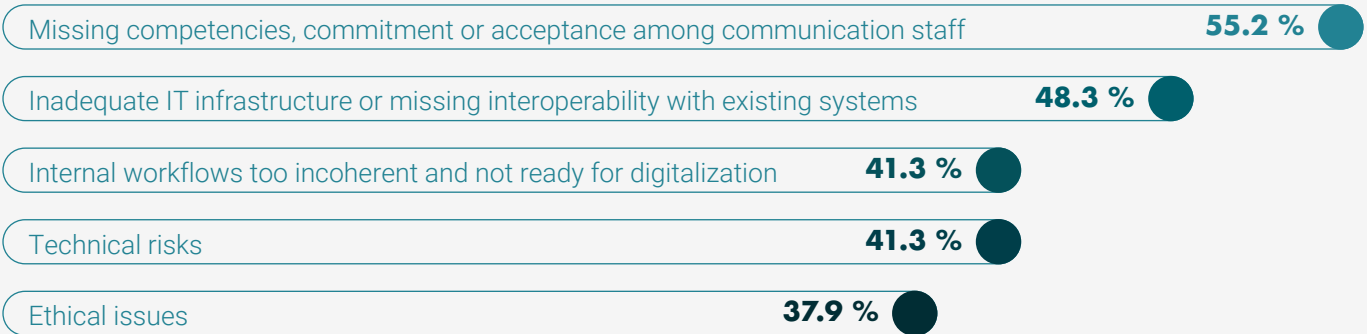
AI uses cases with the lowest penetration

1.	Communication with stakeholders (chatbots etc.)	13.6 %
2.	Managing internal assets (contacts, content)	17.2 %
3.	Optimizing internal workflows and processes	17.2 %

While general enthusiasm about AI for communication departments is high, the lack of suitable competencies and acceptance among staff stands out as a hurdle: “There’s definitely a lot of excitement amongst team members about AI ... But then when you look at it more concretely, it’s still a few front runners that have really incorporated it.” (A77) Further, concerns about technical and ethical risks appear high on the list of barriers, which reinforces that security-based considerations mediate AI adoption.

Looking at the intersection of technology, tasks, processes, and people we see a strong focus on the need for technical skills to use AI and to co-work with the technology. This ‘people dimension’ is discussed frequently in terms of retraining and hiring: “We’ll have to incorporate new people, and at the same time, there must be training.” (M10) However, we do not see significant impact on departments’ structures and processes so far. When discussed in concrete terms, the conversations focus on changing job roles and profiles rather than on replacement. Two complementary lines of argument emerge: first, on quality: “This is not so much about replacing people as having a much stronger foundation that allows people to provide that real added value,” (M10) second, on quantity: “Before we were able to do two articles in one day, now we can do four. So, then what are we doing with that time?” (D93).

Perceived barriers on the road to increased AI implementation



AI-induced tensions in communication departments

The most important tensions emerge from a cluster of contradictions in which one of the most profound aims of AI adoption, increasing efficiency, rubs up against four conflicting goals. In this AI efficiency tension cluster (see figure on next page) the most often mentioned is the aim to build motivated and committed communication teams (1). This is seen as conflicting with AI efficiency as the latter is widely framed as disruptive and potentially harmful to communication practitioners and units. One CCO states: “The challenge to everyone is really, how can they leverage these tools to do their job better and not be overtaken by the fear that it will eliminate their job?” (N58) Less frequently mentioned is the need to build essential human competencies among team members (2). Here, the gains in efficiency are pitted against the aim to retain and build ‘deep’ communication skills that may otherwise diminish: “You have to read, you have to write, you have to correct yourself, you have to expose your thoughts to critical remarks and so on. If we abolish that painful path towards great communications results by using AI, the question is, who still will be able to judge what is great and what isn’t?” (B82).

Another tension emerges between AI efficiency and the need to manage and control the effects of corporate communications (3). AI systems may have negative consequences; either unintended by anyone in particular as “the outputs of AI can influence the course of events, at a political, corporate, and commercial level” (J67), or through intentional misappropriation. The final building block of this tensions cluster is the aim to safeguard high quality and performance of outputs (4). It appears that AI applications are still widely seen as inferior, compared to what human team members can deliver. As one CCO succinctly put it: “Artificial intelligence saves me time, but it doesn’t yet provide intelligence.” (X63).



The risk of misappropriation is real. How do I protect from it?

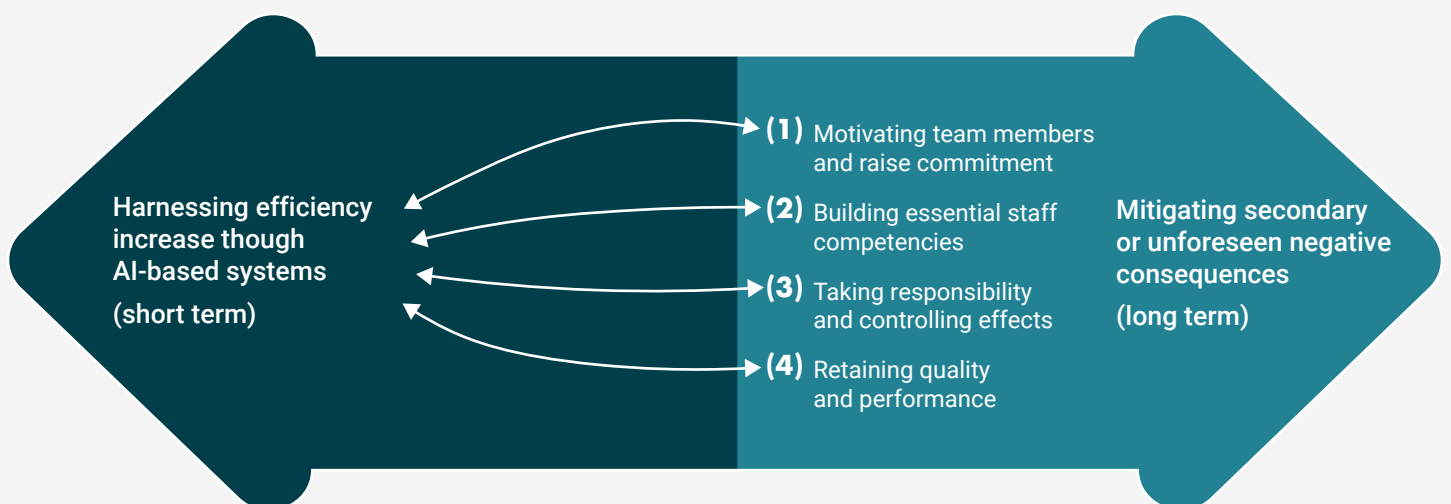
(CCO Y29)

A further tension emerges around AI credibility and trustworthiness. On one end of this tension is the crystalized need to develop AI quickly, on the other the need to remain a reliable partner for internal and external stakeholders. “The currency that we have is the trust of the leadership. That’s my biggest tension point – I want to go faster, that we’re seen as a source of innovation in this space ..., but not so fast that we get something really fundamentally wrong.” (T74) Quotes from CCOs like “Yeah, we have to go, we have no choice ... But besides that, it’s true that we’re taking a big risk” (Y29) highlight that implementing AI inevitably means taking risks and, hence, trusting the technology.

A parallel tension emerges around the aim to have strong and effective AI versus the need to ensure secure and ethical data use. AI is improved by constantly adding training data. However, adding data is limited by security, privacy, and morality concerns: “I think one tension is knowing what content to feed into an AI tool and what not.” (X34) Such concerns are usually followed or preceded with comments on the allure of ‘strong AI’: “Getting to the point where (AI) just writes the annual report for us, we’d absolutely love that. But ... the issue we run into is that the data police understandably don’t want us to stick too much [company data] into it.” (S70).

A final set of tensions emerges around facilitation of new and emergent AI-based roles on the one hand, and the definition and consolidation of the core role of communication departments. The interviewees address this at two levels. First, as a tension for the whole profession: “How do you manage to keep your uniqueness and your identity in this new landscape?” (D93). Second, at the level of teams: “[Before AI] it was very much about being creative, and now we’re running the brand much more analytical, data driven. That causes some people ... to say, ‘Oh! We used to be the creative team. Now, we’re just a bunch of consultants.’” (D31).

The AI efficiency tension cluster



Managing AI-based tensions in communication departments

The efforts of CCOs in managing AI tensions can be observed both with a focus on the human component as well as on the technology. The first approach puts an emphasis on employees and teams. Everyone is actively involved in using the technology but also in discussing and reflecting on use cases. This materializes in common messages towards team members like “I expect you to use the tools ... if you don't have the interaction between the AI and the human, then you don't get anything useful out of it.” (C80), as well as encouragement for joint reflection: “Dialogue is super important. [I'm] not trying to impose; this is good or this is bad. No. But let's sit and discuss ... let's explore, let's see the pros and the cons. Then we decide.” (D93) Another human-centered strategy embraces education and motivation. CCOs believe “that our responsibility, for example, as employers of communications teams [...] is to enable them to know how to use it and to become real experts.” (Y86) Next to formal training, interviewees recognize the affective, motivational, and emotional component: “The arguments ... are different than what we've incurred previously. There is a level of creativity in how we encourage people.” (Q76).

This aspect is both actively managed as well as left to a kind of ‘trust-the-process optimism’. On the one hand, CCOs emphasize active empowerment, e.g., by stressing the key role of human intelligence in corporate communications. On the other hand, they trust in a self-reinforcing cycle of AI use and genuine interest in these technologies: “I think that the more people get exposure to it and see what can be done, the more they will be energized and excited about it.” (F83) This techno-optimism is also visible as a response to the emergent AI efficiency tensions cluster: When discussing ways out of the tensions, CCOs appear predominantly as ‘AI cheerleaders’ (Bourne, 2019), for whom the current tensions are merely part of a transition period, in which the experienced downsides are not seen as a fundamental threat, but as something that will resolve over time. “I think that maybe in a transition period, it will take some time to get up to speed. But I think that, generally, these tools will help us.” (E98).

The second approach to managing tensions focuses on the technology. Here CCOs adopt a dual approach of a) limiting technology and b) limiting application. Limiting technology often concerns confining sets of training data: “We have to limit AI technology to those content pools which are trusted, and which are capsulated in our systems [...] that only our content pools are behind the large language models we use.” (C50) Limiting application refers to, e.g., experimentation in confined use domains: “Right now, we are in that stage of using it in areas that are less high priority because I just don't think it's secure.” (F83) Thus, this approach seeks a constructive way forward between the need to implement AI to innovate and raise efficiency on the one hand, and the aim to mitigate impact of potential risks. In the words of another CCO: “For me, the issue is more about: keeping a bandwidth for experimentation and not missing out on interesting things that we can do, but also not spending all our time, all our money and spreading ourselves too thinly over 10,000 things.” (Y86).



You still have to push forward and try it and experiment.

(CCO F83)

Conclusion

Communication departments must retain their identity and influence when using AI to gain efficiency.

The steady increase in AI implementation, together with the tensions that increased AI use raises, creates significant challenges for communication departments. Chief communication officers need balanced approaches for managing the AI transition. They must ensure that communication teams and practitioners are able to retain or further develop their identity and standing in the organization. Short-term efficiency increases through AI systems have to be weighed against potential long-term negative consequences. This requires situational awareness for the complex and ongoing process of digitalization in communications, as well as robust foresight for the task, structure, people, and technology dimensions of AI implementation. Five aspects need to be taken into account:

1. Trust. Only trustworthy and ethical AI systems will be able to leverage the full potential of AI efficiency and effectiveness in communication departments.

2. Literacy. Departments need to build role-specific competencies among leaders and staff to ensure a robust and continuous assessment and use of AI tools.

3. Experimentation. Limited applications within secure domains can foster learning from concrete yet 'low stakes' use cases and help mitigate risks.

4. Restrictions. The use of AI systems should be limited if data inputs might be sensitive (restricting inputs) or where results might be high stakes (restricting outputs).

5. Emotions. Recognizing and managing team members' affective responses to AI-based change is essential to create a spirit of innovation and engagement.

Managerial learning as a success formula for communication leaders



Acquiring new knowledge to improve performance is considered very important by all chief communication officers interviewed. However, many report that they are unable to invest enough time. Learning opportunities for leaders in the profession are also rare. Examples illustrate the tensions that arise when trying to improve and how these challenges can be met.

Introduction

The fast-paced world forces chief communication officers to constantly acquire new knowledge. This is easier said than done.

Excellent companies require leaders with strong learning capabilities

Changing business environments force executives to learn and innovate at high speed. This is especially true for communication leaders. The factors influencing their work are very volatile, practices evolve quickly, and top management expects them to understand stakeholder relationships and public opinion building in all their complexity. Numerous research has shown that superior organizational learning capabilities drive competitive advantage and financial performance (Do & Mai, 2022) and that organizational learning is closely intertwined with individual learning (Antonacopoulou, 2006; Gorman & Paulsen, 2016; Hoe, 2007). However, little is known about learning practices of business executives (Akrofi 2016; Richter, 2004) – although they are powerful actors whose sensemaking influences their teams, peers, and external partners alike.

This is also true for CCOs. Competency development for communicators in general has been discussed for some time (Tench et al., 2017). Yet, there is no insight about the 'top level' and learning practices in their demanding daily work. Managers learn when they acquire or nurture knowledge, skills and personal characteristics that, taken together, make up their competencies. This can be done in different ways either on the job or through external sources (see definition on p. 33).

Why managerial learning is relevant and how it is done

The importance of learning for leaders grows when companies undergo large-scale changes such as restructuring, technological or cultural shifts. Learning is critically important to reach a higher level of performance, deliver better results, get promoted, and keep one's job. What organizational psychologist David Kolb wrote decades ago in a landmark article in *California Management Review* still holds true today: The "highly successful manager [is] distinguished not so much by any single set of knowledge or skills but by his ability to adapt to and master the changing demands of his job and career – by his ability to learn." (Kolb, 1976, p. 21).

There is no best way to approach managerial learning. People are different and this means that communication leaders practice different learning styles. Empirical investigations, which are lacking so far, can be guided by general typologies from management studies (Mumford, 1987): Activists learn through trial and error; they like to engage in hands-on experiences. Reflectors learn by observing and thinking; they gather information and make informed decisions. Theorists learn by understanding the underlying principles and applying concepts in a logical way. Pragmatists learn through practical application; they often experiment with new ideas in real-world settings.

Making an effort comes with many obstacles and challenges

Continuous learning requires a lot of effort – especially time, which is probably the rarest resource for any leader. But there are more barriers to managerial learning (Longenecker, 2010). Obstacles are either rooted in the organization, profession, or society (extrinsic) or based on individual perceptions, motivations, or emotions (intrinsic) (McCracken, 2004).

External barriers include the expectation that CCOs are available 24/7, e.g., to deal with reputational challenges. This makes it often difficult to utilize planned learning time. Specific development programs for (prospective) communication leaders are rare, although competency gaps are fairly large (Zerfass et al., 2023). And there is only a weak global knowledge base compared to other functions like marketing, human resources, or strategy. The professional discourse, even in the leading associations and trade media, is mainly affirmative and dominated by best practices and studies with inadequate methods by consultants and service providers. Academic research is often perceived as less helpful than in other disciplines. The theory-practice gap in corporate communications is wide and relevant insights are often hidden behind the paywalls of academic journals (Hayes et al., 2023; Wang & Mengqing Zhang, 2022). These factors explain the lack of globally established cognitive frameworks, management tools, and competency inventories for communication management (Volk & Zerfass, 2021).

Intrinsic barriers to managerial learning are quite similar for CCOs and peers in other functions. Leaders may be unaware that they need to learn, or what they need to learn, overestimate their competencies, simplify complex challenges, or even get lost in information (Abreu Pederzini, 2019; Longenecker, 2010).

Achieving new competencies threatens existing patterns of success

Managerial learning is essential, but not without risks. Communication leaders must be aware that their sense-making affects the performance, motivation, and well-being of team members. There is an inevitable conflict between the equally important goals of “building upon and destroying the past” (Wiewiora, 2023, p. 3) when adjusting, renewing, and changing corporate communications. The decision to engage in learning and innovating is often at odds with equally relevant managerial objectives such as ensuring success in the present (performance), fostering focus and efficiency (organizing), and upholding a sense of self and purpose among followers (belonging).

Such learning tensions have been identified in general (Singer & Edmondson, 2008; Smith & Lewis, 2011), but not communication management. Studies in other professions characterized by spontaneous and hard to control work have revealed specific manifestations of tensions (Gaim & Wåhlin, 2008). The ECM 2024/25 is the first attempt to shed light on how CCOs practice managerial learning with all its inherent difficulties.

Managerial learning is the acquisition and development of knowledge, skills, and personal attributes by leaders through study, instruction or experience. It can take place on the job (by trial and error; by applying new concepts) or externally (by observing peers or sharing ideas with them; by gaining insights from studies or seminars).

Results

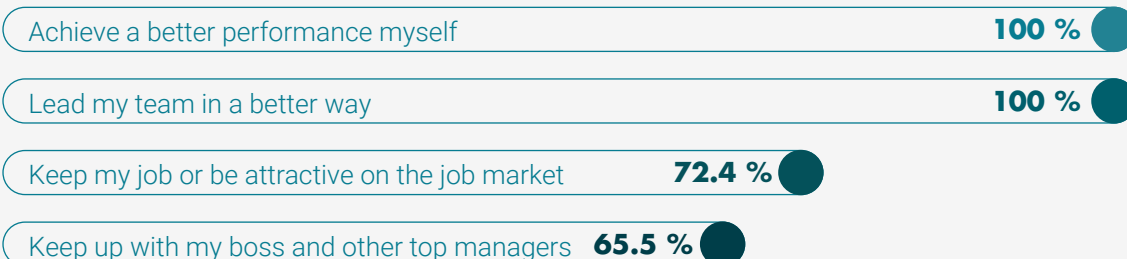
What communication leaders think about managerial learning

The need to expand their personal knowledge, skills, and attributes is fully endorsed by the interviewed CCOs. All of them agree that learning is important for them to perform better and to improve their team leadership. Securing their position or employability and keeping pace with other executives are further reasons for continuous learning – even if not everyone recognizes the relevance for themselves. Dynamic changes in society, markets and organizations create a sense of urgency for learning, as one interviewee points out: “We now have to be more proactive than ever, more foresight than ever ... ahead of the game.” (D93) However, learning is never infinite, and this has to be accepted as well: “I’m an engineer by training, so I tell myself that there are lots of things I don’t know, and I’m fine.” (X63) Nevertheless, all interviewees engage in managerial learning in various ways – and this has helped them to build the competencies needed for their job.

Frequently reported barriers in CCOs’ learning are either intrinsic or extrinsic in nature, which confirms the findings from general management research mentioned above. Three out of four interviewees state that they are aware of what they should learn, that their company supports learning at the executive level, and that they have access to insights from other international communication leaders. But the time required for learning is rare or difficult to reserve due to professional and private duties. Many CCOs point out that they need to process a lot of information to fulfill their core communication tasks, which leaves little time: “We probably don’t invest enough time in our own training. I’d say that what I prioritize when I get there is continuing to learn about [my company’s] business.” (Y86) Some interviewees, on the other hand interpreted time constraints as a lack of motivation or ability: “When people say that they don’t have time, I think it’s bullshit.” (D31) – “Yes, lack of time is sometimes an excuse.” (W38).

Even if top executives support cross-functional learning, others in the company might refrain from sharing their knowledge, as one CCO reports: “When you ask them ‘Tell me more about what you do’, they see it as threatening. [But] it’s not that I’m coming and trying to take your job.” (X34) Every second communication leader is missing external learning opportunities at their level: “There are a lot of development programs but there are actually the fewest for managers.” (W16) – “I think the external training that is specific to communications, ... it’s what I would say subpar.” (F83).

Managerial learning is important to ...



The lack of accessible and relevant academic research is another extrinsic barrier. While the majority of CCOs are aware of such resources, they are critical of their usefulness in other parts of the interviews.

Most important barriers for managerial learning

1.	Lack of time due to job requirements	62.1 %
2.	Learning opportunities in the profession are too basic	51.7 %
3.	Lack of time due to private life	27.6 %
4.	No access to insights from international academic research	20.7 %

Learning engagement, styles, and practices

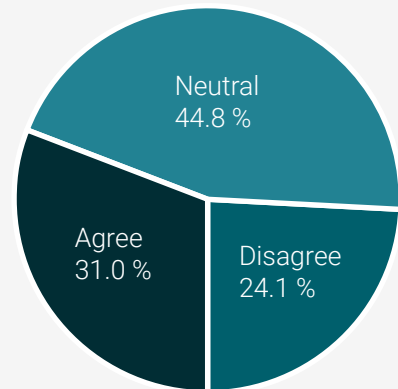
The interviewed CCOs rate their personal learning efforts quite differently. Three out of ten believe that they invest enough time and effort, a quarter sees the necessity to engage more, and almost every second gives a neutral assessment.

Learning styles are also diverse. The majority of CCOs learn on the job, as they develop competencies through experience or learning by doing. One interviewee argues that “the most effective method is proactive learning on the job, in the sense that on the one hand you proactively decide to experiment, with calculated risks, with trial-and-error activities, to see if certain things work and how they work.” (G54) The second most frequent approach is peer learning. Examples reported include engaging with other communication leaders directly, in informal networks or in associations: “In the past several years ... I have tapped into networks and organizations of CCOs so that I can connect more directly with my peers and... leverage those relationships for insights and learnings as we all face new challenges.” (N58) Some leaders also learn from observing competitors’ activities in benchmark projects and from talking to agencies. These approaches reveal that most CCOs favor a pragmatic or activist learning style: They learn through practical application and from their own or others’ experiences.

Reflective and theoretical learning styles are also common, but less widespread. The latter style is characterized by trying to understand underlying principles and typically practiced through attending executive development programs. These programs focus on leadership, general management or digital competencies – nobody reports about specific programs for communication leaders. Some interviewees use personal coaches and a few read books on essential concepts related to the profession: “So all the things I believe in when it comes to stakeholder engagement, for example, are also based upon my fundamental knowledge I’ve gained in sociology or in political science. And I try to keep on, again, reading about it.” (B82).

The reflective learning style is based on gathering evidence to make informed decisions. A few CCOs argue that this starts with reading newspapers and looking into other functions or areas of their industry

Adequate learning engagement
“I invest enough time and effort in learning”



I think most important is still the personal experience on the job and then trying something new.

(CCO A77)

to approach problems holistically. More common, however, is learning from managerial and professional sources – which is also the third most frequent learning practice overall. This includes reading trade magazines, trend reports, attending conferences, etc. Many interviewees take a broad approach beyond their own realm: “I always try to read a lot, stay up to date, read specialized publications, ... but sometimes not only about communication or marketing or brand, but also about executive management, sociological issues, cultural issues, etc.” (O45) Magazines like Harvard Business Review and reports from management consultancies are trusted sources, as exemplified by a long-standing CCO: “I would always read something published by McKinsey or by BCG, for example.” (X35) Studies by communication consultancies, on the other hand, are often used but critically assessed: “When it comes to the agency studies, I think some are good, but some are also a little bit between science and magic. It’s difficult to put some of what they’re researching into a formula that’s actually credible.” (C80) – “They’re very keen to sell stuff. But I read it, and I also get inspired by it.” (D31).

Academic research is mentioned very often when CCOs discuss their learning sources, but in a critical way. The majority reads none or little academic literature because they consider it to be either too small-scale or too complex and difficult to transfer to practice. An interviewee shares the impression that “there really is ... an absence of longer form, high quality corporate affairs specific pieces in academia.” (S70), while another believes that “books written about our function could be [more concise]. There’s 25%, which is really important, 75%, which is stating the bleeding obvious.” (B25) And if it’s relevant, then it’s often difficult to use, because “the more academic the work is, often the harder it is then to apply it to the real world.” (R42) Last but not least, academic research is often difficult to access: “I don’t have time to read real academic current research papers or current research books most of the time.” (A12) This is why some communication leaders rely on recommendations from trusted sources: “I stay updated on the latest research thanks to a collaborator.” (H91).



The biggest challenge is to differentiate between commonplaces and a study that is actually taking you a step further.

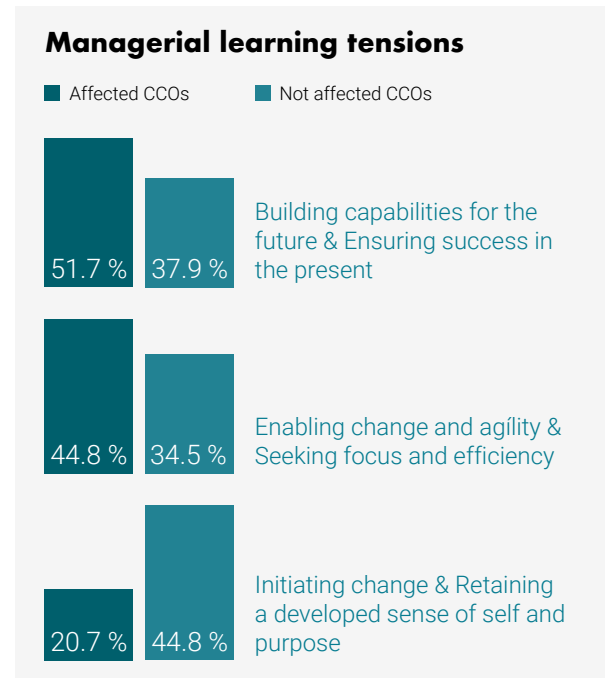
(CCO M10)

Tensions faced by CCOs when expanding their competencies

The decision to engage in managerial learning is sometimes hard. Even if intrinsic and extrinsic obstacles have been removed, learning objectives may conflict with other equally important goals of communication leaders. Many of the CCOs interviewed report a fundamental tension between driving innovation through newly acquired competencies and sticking to proven work methods and mindsets. An interviewee argues that this is specifically difficult for communicators, as “learning is all about letting go of control, being open-minded, being experimental. I don’t think that’s, in general, our strongest suit, because we’re here to control things, stay on message, make sure nothing goes wrong, manage our reputation.” (D31).

A differentiated picture emerges when CCOs assess typical manifestations of the overall tension between renewal and preservation identified in previous research. Every second feels caught between building capabilities for the future and ensuring present success or between enabling change and securing efficiency when taking opportunities to learn. This means that for “an organizational leader with a large team, it’s extremely important to radiate confidence and quiet. And have people concentrate on their job and on the results. And if you’re jumpy and always have something new, then you cannot do that”. (A12) At the same time, a third of the interviewees do not experience such tensions. Tensions related to team culture and self-identify seem to occur less frequently and no examples are reported.

Communication leaders experience two additional, role-specific learning-related tensions. First, CCOs need to be both generalists and specialists, or, as one interviewee put it, “the strategic advisor and the operational practical communicator” (C80) at the same time. Some learning paths can take them too much in either direction. This causes tensions. Second, managerial learning ambitions can conflict with upholding the internal status as someone who has a 360-degree view and is able to advise executives on almost any critical topic: “It will be hard to understand why you need training if you’re already being paid half a million Euros to know everything.” (X63).



Evaluating and managing learning tensions

Chief communication officers are well aware of the tensions related to their personal learning activities. Most believe that taking decisions in the face of equally important but conflicting goals is typical of any leadership position. One interviewee even argued that not everybody wants to become a CCO, because tensions are caused and accelerated both by their role expectations and self-perceptions.

How do communication leaders deal with such tensions? Three approaches emerge from the interviews. Prioritizing learning activities based on one’s own positioning is most frequently mentioned, which means to one CCO “not trying to grow everywhere ... every year but choosing one or two areas where I really want to move the needle.” (T74) Blocking time to learn is another solution; for example: “Try and make sure roughly half the [Friday] is carved out sort of read and think and reflect or at least discuss stuff with people in a more abstract way.” (U05) Last but not least, dealing with tensions is easy when undesirable consequences of learning activities are simply accepted.

Surprisingly, however, most interviewees do not talk about how they themselves handle learning tensions. Instead, they refer to encouraging team members to learn, offering them group learning opportunities, making competency development accountable, hiring people who are willing to learn, and so on. This shifts the tensions to other levels of the hierarchy but does not really address them.



Sometimes we have to bend off and just accept that, well, it’s not working.

(CCO E98)

Conclusion

Current learning practices of communication leaders are quite diverse and pragmatic. It's time to take them to another level.

Staying ahead of the rest and performing as a chief communication officer in global companies requires continuous investment in managerial learning. This is clearly understood by all leaders interviewed in this study. But many find it hard to spend enough time on personal development or to address inevitable tensions that arise. Learning mainly takes place by experimenting or peer exchange; they rarely leave their own work bubble. The quality of the professional discourse lags behind and is driven by agency studies that many CCOs do not take seriously. Academic research, on the other hand, is often seen as decoupled from practice. Dedicated learning opportunities for (prospective) communication leaders with an international scope are rare. Systematic learning is mostly aimed at general management competencies, while conceptual inspirations and resources for future-proofing corporate communications are rare. What is needed?

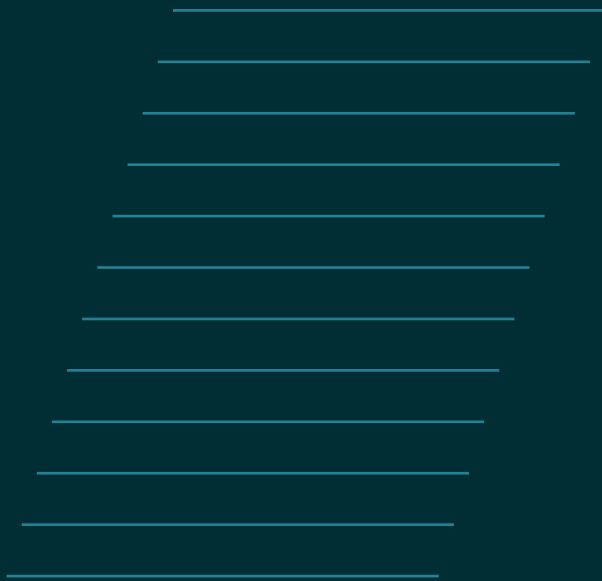
1. Initiative. Today's communication leaders must take responsibility for innovating themselves and their profession. Allocating time for self-development and establishing shared frameworks and management tools is indispensable.

2. Focus. Managerial learning should not be limited to business and leadership knowledge where other executives shine as well. The real discriminators are future-oriented competencies to manage and execute corporate communications.

3. Quality. Impactful learning requires more than experimentation and peer exchange. It needs a reflective professional discourse at a similar level to debates in general management – a discourse that is no longer driven by self-adulation and often criticized agency studies.

4. Reliability. The gap between academia and practice should be closed. Personal and professional maturity need reliable insights and conceptual ideas developed over time – it's neither efficient nor satisfying for every CCO to invent the wheel anew.

References and additional food for thought



The literature cited in this report is listed on the following pages. This includes conceptual articles and books, as well as other empirical studies on the topics covered in the ECM 2024/25. The references reveal the body of knowledge on which the research team relies. They ensure transparency and are an indispensable part of solid research projects. They can also be used by readers to identify interesting sources that provide a deeper insight into the debate.

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Authors and partners of the study



The quality and neutrality of the ECM 2024/25 is guaranteed by a team of six professors from leading research universities in France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom and the Nordics. The non-profit study is organized within the framework of EUPRERA and supported by four initiatives representing chief communication directors across Europe: The Academic Society for Management & Communication (Germany, Switzerland, Austria), CECOMS (Italy), #NORA (Norway, Finland, Sweden, Denmark), and Entreprises & Médias (France).

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Partners

Organizer

EUPRERA, the European Public Relations Education and Research Association, represents the academic research community in Europe committed to enhancing and promoting innovation in knowledge, research, education, and practice of strategic communication. With almost 500 members from 40 countries, mainly universities and other research institutions, the non-profit association headquartered in Brussels provides a platform for high-profile transnational research projects and networks and builds bridges between research and practice.

Study organizer – www.euprera.org



Partners

The **Academic Society for Management & Communication** is Europe's leading non-profit think tank for corporate communications, an initiative driven by chief communication officers of 50 global companies and four research universities based in Germany, Switzerland and Austria. It promotes innovation by funding multidisciplinary research projects, provides a platform for thought-leaders, and supports knowledge transfer.

Premium partner – www.academic-society.net



CECOMS, the Center for Strategic Communication (Centro per la Comunicazione Strategica) at Università IULM in Milan is committed to basic and applied research on how strategic communication and PR create value within and for complex organisations. It collaborates with leading communication directors in the region.

Regional partner – www.bit.ly/CECOMS



#NORA, the Nordic Alliance for Communication & Management hosted by BI Norwegian Business School, Oslo, is a cross-disciplinary research group from Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland collaborating with communication leaders of top companies in those countries and focusing on communication as a strategic driver of sustainable organizational performance and success in a changing world.

Regional partner – www.bi.edu/nora



Entreprises et Médias, the association of communication directors of large corporates and institutions in France, represents more than 180 members. A place for joint reflection, interaction, and proposals, it focuses on the evolution of communication, the key issues at stake and its practices, drawing on its core belief that communication is a key part in companies' transformation, economic and societal performance.

Regional partner – www.entreprises-medias.org



Supporter

Fink & Fuchs, a specialist for the communication of change and technological transformation, has been the strategic partner for companies, associations, and public clients for over 35 years. The agency, based in Wiesbaden, Munich and Berlin, supports the ECM since many years and has designed the report and website – www.finkfuchs.de/en/



The European Communication Monitor is the longest-running academic study exploring the field of corporate communications worldwide. The 2024/25 study is the first to apply an ambitious new research design. A random sample of 30 top leaders from the elite group of chief communication officers (CCOs) in the 300 largest companies headquartered in Europe is interviewed. The statements, experiences, and forecasts from those shaping the future of the field are analyzed to provide unique insights into three topics that produce considerable tensions in managing contemporary communications: (1) the need of companies to deal with geopolitical risks; (2) the adoption of artificial intelligence in communication departments; and (3) the managerial learning practices of CCOs that ensure innovation and excellence. The study is conducted by a team of six renowned professors from research universities across Europe and supported by key industry players. It meets the highest standards of scientific rigor and neutrality.

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