EUROPEAN COMMUNICATION MONITOR 2026/27

STRATEGISING IN CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS: EXPLORING THE SYNTHETIFICATION OF COMMUNICATION, TRANSFORMATION OF COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENTS AND CAREER TRAJECTORIES OF CCOs



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IMPRINT

Zerfass, A., Laborde, A., Buhmann, A., Navarro, C., Tench, R. & Romenti, S. (2026). *European Communication Monitor 2026/27. Strategising in corporate communications: Exploring the synthetification of communication, transformation of communication departments and career trajectories of CCOs.* EUPRERA.

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 Fink & Fuchs AG, Wiesbaden, Germany. **www.finkfuchs.de.**

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Preface

Keeping companies and other organisations on a path towards sustained success is a demanding task. This is by no means new. Many of the difficulties come with the double-edged nature of many developments – risks and opportunities often arise at the same time. While the digitalisation of corporate and everyday life as well as AI offer unprecedented opportunities, these developments come with growing concerns about cybersecurity, dependency on digital infrastructures and the potential loss of human agency. The benefits of globalisation are equally evident. Longitudinal data from the World Bank show that people in many emerging economies have become significantly better off since 2000. At the same time, income and wealth inequality are increasing around the world. All of this is unfolding against a backdrop of political instability, marked by external threats and leadership crises.

Corporate communications and corporate affairs can play an important role in helping top management understand and navigate this complex environment. Yet communication departments and their leaders are themselves subject to the forces they are expected to help manage: new technologies, increasingly uncertain decision-making environments and resource constraints in the context of an economic downturn are challenging established routines, organisational structures and career paths.

The 2026/27 European Communication Monitor takes an in-depth look at some aspects of these developments. Now in its 19th year, the academic study is based on one-to-one interviews with an elite sample of Chief Communication Officers (CCOs) from Europe's Top 300 companies. This year's edition focuses on three topics: the synthetification of public communication, the transformation and change of communication departments and the career trajectories of senior communication executives. All three topics are examined through the lens of strategising – a key concept in contemporary management theory that provides a distinctive perspective on how organisations act in complex environments.

We 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 work done by our project manager Caroline Siegel. We are indebted to our partners for supporting this independent and non-partisan research: the Academic Society for Management & Communication, Centro per la Comunicazione Strategica (CECOMS), #NORA – The Nordic Alliance for Communication & Management, Entreprises et Médias and Corporate Excellence. Finally, we would like to thank Fink & Fuchs for designing our website and this report.

Enjoy reading – we hope you find it both thought-provoking and inspiring.



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What the report tells us

The European Communication Monitor 2026/27 produces unique insights by analysing the experiences and projections of Chief Communication Officers (CCOs) representing the Top 300 companies in Europe. Overseeing global communications, these senior executives face unprecedented demands in turbulent, dynamic environments. Grounded in the management concept of strategising (strategy as an emergent, ongoing social practice), this academic study uses qualitative interviews with 30 CCOs and quantitative pre-questionnaires to explore strategic choice across three distinct levels of analysis: the synthetification of public communication (macro level), departmental change and transformation (meso level) and CCOs' personal career trajectories (micro level).

The **synthetification of public communication** – driven by generative AI, recommendation algorithms and autonomous agents – is fundamentally reconfiguring the public sphere, transforming how organisations maintain visibility, credibility and trust. While CCOs widely recognise this shift, they often view AI through an instrumental lens of productivity and efficiency rather than assessing its systemic impacts on public communication. To maintain visibility in algorithmic environments, communications may incorporate Generative Engine Optimisation (GEO) alongside a strategic 'renaissance' of owned platforms, direct stakeholder relationships and traditional news relations to anchor corporate credibility. Ultimately, navigating this synthetic landscape requires corporations to broaden their perspective, invest heavily in authenticity and human expertise and critically reflect on the future relevance and ethical accountability of professional communicators and corporate communications in an automated world.

Today's highly volatile environment requires a **transformation and change of communication departments**; they must constantly reorganise themselves to remain effective. The study shows that departmental transformation heavily targets operating models (structures, roles, skills). Contrary to popular industry narratives, it is internal pressure to do more with less, not artificial intelligence, that drives the deepest change. AI, by contrast, tends to bring incremental rather than fundamental shifts. Excellent communication leaders must redesign departments proactively and comprehensively, continuously sensing change, acting on it and reconfiguring the team to stay aligned with the organisation's strategy.

Last but not least, this edition of the monitor explores **CCO careers** as highly fluid, boundaryless and structurally chaotic trajectories. Reaching the top requires a profound identity shift from tactical communications expert to strategic business leader, combined with cultivating deep relational trust with CEOs and boards (e.g., during organisational crises). The study also shows how CCOs employ retrospective sensemaking to construct coherent strategic narratives from serendipitous paths, while absorbing extreme 24/7 demands as a baseline condition with little professional/private boundary management.



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 ECM apart from all other studies 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 companies strategise to address the synthetification of public communication in digital arenas; how communication departments change, transform and adapt their business models to meet new requirements; and how career trajectories and strategic paths of CCOs are developed.

Methodological approach

The deep-dive study design of the European Communication Monitor captures pivotal challenges and dynamics within the field.

A unique study design provides profound insights

The ECM explores current and future challenges of corporate communications and corporate affairs beyond the surface of popular surveys. Such studies, which are frequently conducted by consultancies, service providers, trade media or professional associations, 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.

The ECM research design uses in-depth interviews supported by a short survey to generate new, unique and robust empirical insights for communication research and practice by focusing on the acknowledged leaders in the field. The insights presented in the ECM report this year and in the previous two editions are based on interviewing an annually 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 also key actors impacting all other spheres of life, affecting, e.g., cultural, political and technological change. The highest-ranking communicators of those companies influence the development of the profession in all types of organisations, including agencies, on a global level. Business leaders, communicators, scholars and students alike can learn from their experiences 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, scientific research and the results of accurate pretests. A key concept from communication, organisation and management studies (this year: strategising; see pp. 12–13) is applied to explore three pivotal topics that impact corporate communications on different levels of analysis: the level of companies (organisational 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'

Organisational 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 specialised units, e.g. regarding processes, products, services, resources and value creation.

Personal challenges (Micro level)

How Chief Communication Officers deal with new and persisting expectations and practices in their roles as top-level managers, team leaders and experts for all aspects of corporate communications.

Holistic approach of the ECM study

understanding individually and in detail (Maxwell, 2013). 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 standardised 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 Global 500 Family Business Index (family businesses only) which do not appear in Forbes 2000 are added. Third, country-specific rankings of company revenues and brand values are analysed to ensure that any relevant company in the professional discourse which neither appears in Forbes 2000 nor in Global 500 Family Business Index is included. Companies which, for legal or tax reasons, are formally based in Europe but whose actual headquarters – including their head of communications and main business operations – are located outside Europe (e.g. in the United States) are excluded to ensure that the analysis focuses on a genuinely European perspective. This results in the full ECM company panel showcasing 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 2026/27 listed on page 11 includes 30 Chief Communication Officers (12 female, 18 male). The CCOs are on average 52 years old, have more than 23 years of relevant professional experience in corporate communications and more than 16 years of leadership experience in the field. Their companies are based in 12 different countries with an average annual revenue of 32.5 billion Euros and an average of 97,485 employees. Industries spanned a diverse range, including financial services, consumer goods, retail and ICT.

Gathering data across countries and language zones

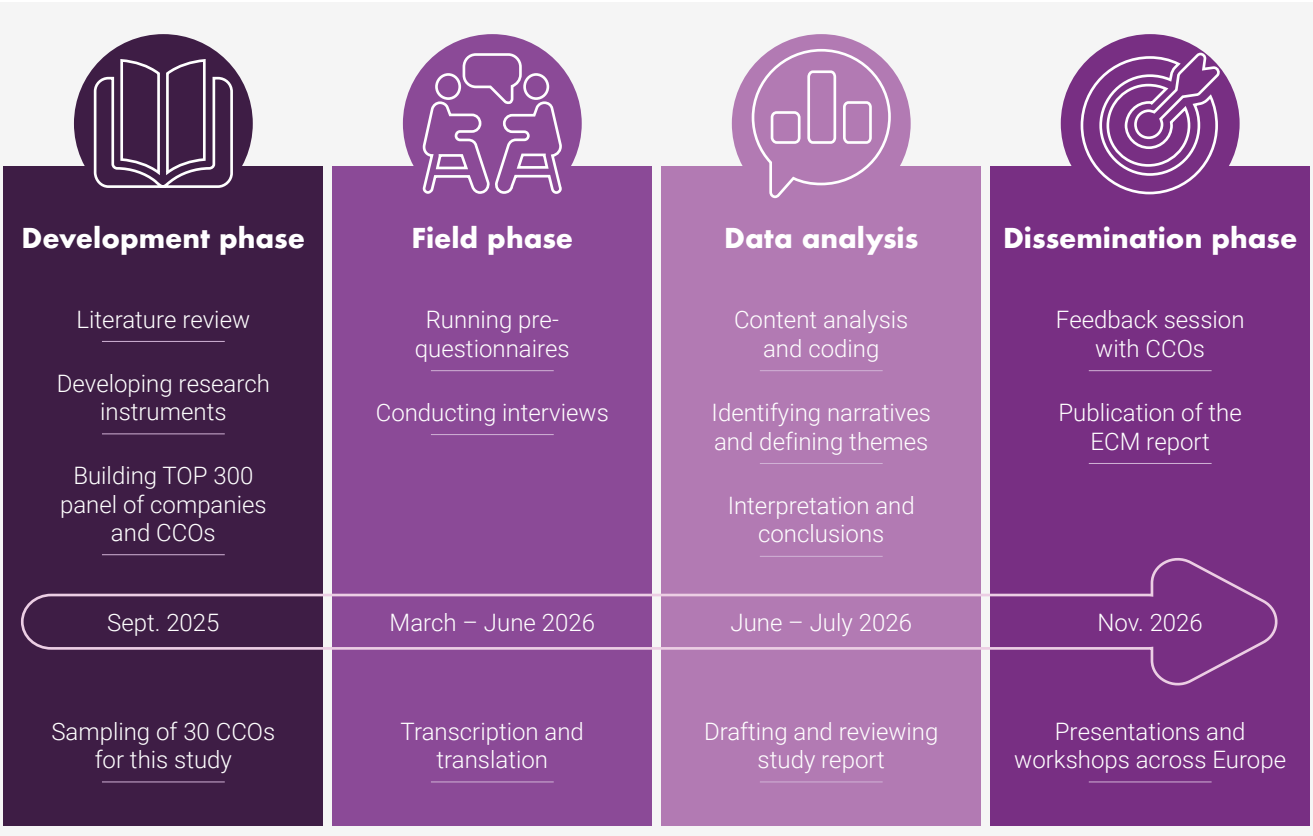
To identify the existing body of knowledge on the main concept (this year: strategising) and to develop research questions according to the three subtopics a comprehensive interdisciplinary literature review was conducted (see pp. 12–13). The research questions were operationalised in two major instruments. A quantitative pre-questionnaire comprising twelve sub-instruments used two 5-point Likert-scale formats to measure agreement with different statements (Strongly disagree – Strongly agree; Never – Very frequently). It also covered demographics, data usage and privacy. A qualitative semi-structured interview guideline included nine open questions and 21 follow-up 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 March and June 2026 with a videoconferencing tool (Paulus & Lester, 2022) and in a language chosen by the interviewees. Interviews lasted 49 minutes on average and were audio-recorded. Participants agreed that their names are listed but all quotes are anonymised.

Analysing and interpreting the data

The quantitative survey was statistically evaluated. Percentages indicate how many respondents supported a statement ("Agree", "Strongly agree") and therefore do not add up to 100 per cent. Figures show either the full five-point distribution or three summarised categories, as indicated in each figure. They refer to the sample and are indicative (not representative) of all Top 300 CCOs.

The qualitative interviews were transcribed, translated to English where necessary, and reviewed several times before analysis. Two coders conducted two rounds of open, in-vivo and axial coding in MAXQDA (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019; Miles et al., 2020). Codes were condensed into themes, which were reviewed, defined and labelled to convey the participants' overall narrative, with quotes selected to illustrate each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis was complemented by a thematic co-occurrence analysis (Scharp, 2021), which captures not only which themes appear but also how they relate to each other within the same interview. A matrix with one row per interview and one column per theme recorded whether a theme emerged and whether it was expressed forcefully. The resulting patterns were interpreted in terms of pervasiveness, direction and balance. The ECM project team then interpreted the data in the light of the previously identified body of knowledge.



The ECM research process

Interviewees

Chief Communication Officers participating in the study			
01	Acciona	Joaquín Mollinedo	Chief Institutional Relations, Communications and Brand Officer
02	Ahold Delhaize	Maria Verheij	Head of Group Communications
03	Air Liquide	Domitille Fafin	Group Chief Communications Officer
04	Amplifon	Salvatore Ricco	Chief Communication Officer
05	Aurubis	Tore Prang	Vice President Corporate Communications and External Affairs
06	Aviva	Stephen Doherty	Chief Brand & Corporate Affairs Officer
07	CaixaBank	María Luisa Martínez	Executive Director Corporate Communications and Institutional Relations
08	Crédit Agricole	Julie de la Palme	Head of Group Communications
09	Danfoss	Kasper Elbjørn	Senior Vice President, Head of Corporate Communication & Public Affairs
10	Davide Campari-Milano	Enrico Bocedi	Group Head of Public Affairs, Communications and Sustainability
11	Deloitte	Jo Ouvry	Partner and Head of Corporate Affairs
12	DNB Bank	Even Westerveld	Group Executive Vice President People & Communication
13	Generali	Simone Bemporad	Group Chief Communications and Public Affairs Officer
14	Hapag-Lloyd	Nils Haupt	Senior Director Group Communications
15	Intesa Sanpaolo	Paola Musso	Executive Director Image and Communication
16	KONE	Eveliina Linderborg	Senior Vice President, Communications
17	Mapfre	Javier Fernández	Group Head of Communication
18	National Grid	Christopher Hayton	Director of Corporate Affairs
19	Naturgy	Jordi García Tabernero	Global Head of Public Affairs and Sustainability
20	OMV	Sylvia Shin	Senior Vice President, Group Communications
21	REWE Group	Ines Juen	Group Director Corporate Communications
22	Safran	Kate Philipps	Executive Vice President, Group Communications
23	SCOR	Alexandre Garcia	Group Head of Communications and Marketing
24	Siemens Energy	Robin Zimmermann	Senior Vice President Corporate Communication, Government Affairs, CSR
25	Sisal	Fabio Ventoruzzo	Senior Director Corporate Communications
26	Skanska	Karolina Cederhage	Senior Vice President Group Communications and Marketing
27	Sodexo	Jeanne Houssin	Group Chief Communications & Public Affairs Officer
28	Telefónica	Salvador García Ruiz	Chief Communications and Brand Officer
29	Vodafone	Matthew Johnson	Group Communications Director
30	Zurich Insurance	Alessio Vinci	Chief Communications Officer

Sample of the ECM 2026/27

Strategising in corporate communications

Why the topics explored in this study are timely and relevant

Contemporary management theory and practice claim that businesses operate in increasingly complex, turbulent, dynamic and unpredictable environments (Madsen & Berg, 2026). This puts specific pressure on corporate leaders (Gottfredson & Crane, 2026) – both in general management and in functions like corporate communications and corporate affairs. Navigating through uncharted waters requires leaders who combine clear vision (Dhlamini, 2025) with strong personal values (Thams & Dau, 2023) and engage in sound strategic thinking (Chermack et al., 2026; Gruenbichler, 2026). Delving deeper into the latter, there is strong evidence that the capability to strategise is a critical basis of sustained competitive advantage and long-term organisational performance (Burgelman & Grove, 2007; Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Teece et al., 1997).

Strategising is more than having a plan

But what exactly is strategising, how can it be conceptualised and what does it mean for management in the context of corporate communications? Strategising does not simply refer to developing a plan for a communication campaign. Instead, strategising is an activity situated in concrete organisational settings, through which leaders and other actors construct, negotiate and enact strategy in daily practice (Bencherki et al., 2021; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Seidl et al., 2024). The term intentionally moves beyond the common use of "strategy" (with its focus on documents and extant plans) to focus on the social, cognitive, political and practical activities through which strategy is formed, negotiated and enacted over time (i.e., viewing strategy as a process, see also below). Strategising requires taking the perspective of an entire organisation, for example your own company. It involves an ongoing calculus of opportunities, risks and choices in the face of limited resources and limited predictability. It also requires focusing on issues and activities that are relevant for the core positioning, survival and sustained success of the organisation – in contrast to operational choices that sustain routine business (Zerfass et al., 2018).

This understanding of strategising is rooted in the strategy-as-practice (SAP) movement (Whittington, 2006), which shifted attention from viewing strategy as a plan to understanding strategy as something people actively do. In this perspective, strategy is an activity rather than a static organisational asset. The theory captures this through the so-called 3Ps: the *practices* that provide shared norms, methods and frameworks for strategic work (such as communication strategy frameworks, planning routines and established measurement and evaluation tools); the *praxis*, meaning the concrete episodes of action (such as meetings and decision-making processes) in which strategising takes place; and *people,* that is, the wide range of actors involved in strategy-making (such as colleagues, consultants, customers). Strategising therefore reflects the dynamic interplay of these three elements over time and highlights how strategy becomes "real" and gains traction (or not) in everyday organisational life.



Conceptual framework for analysing strategy-as-practice (adopted from Jarzabkowski et al., 2007)

What it means for corporate communications

Strategising may be enacted differently depending on whether choices are made for the corporation (macro level), the communication department (meso level) or communication executives (micro level). Each of these levels faces its own dynamic environment – the industry, the organisation, the job market and work environment – and the challenge of positioning itself within it.

At the same time, strategising can take different forms (Gulbrandsen & Just, 2020; Mintzberg et al., 2009). These range from rational and deliberate approaches (e.g., if CCOs run workshops with their leadership team to define a transformation strategy for the department) to emergent modes, where solutions arise from experimentation or simply daily practices and routines. Supporting such bottom-up initiatives and institutionalising suitable outcomes is a strategic choice leaders can take. Mixed forms are common as well – for example, leaders set an initial direction, while the concrete strategies take shape and are adjusted over time by those who work with them.

Strategising is strategy in action, driven by the practices, praxis and people engaged in making choices, taking action and adapting course amid uncertainty.

How we research strategising in this study

Despite its wide recognition as a subject of study in organisation and management research, strategising has not yet been adequately explored in the field of corporate communications. CCOs are not only expected to 'have' a strategy – they continuously make choices that set a direction, under conditions they only partly control. Such choices concern the way their organisations communicate in public arenas (macro level), the set-up of their own department (meso level) or their individual role and conduct as senior executives (micro level).

Against the backdrop of three major topics in the field of corporate communications, these levels of analysis can be applied to explore:

- **Strategising the synthetification of public communication:** when CCOs have to position their organisations in digital arenas increasingly shaped by AI-generated content and agentic communicative AI; e.g. deciding how far to draw on synthetic content in their own communication, or how to secure visibility and credibility when the conditions of public communication are set through the decisions and agency of agentic AI (macro level → pp. 15–22).

- **Strategising departmental change and transformation:** when communication departments are restructured, expanded or redefined; e.g. pursuing change deliberately through a defined transformation agenda, or responding to shifts that other units and external developments impose on the department (meso level → pp. 23–30).

- **Strategising CCOs' path to the top job:** when CCOs make choices about their own professional trajectory; e.g. building and legitimising a route into the leading function or sustaining that position while the requirements of the role keep changing (micro level → pp. 31–38).

Because choices are made continuously – for the organisation, for the department and for CCOs themselves – it is important to examine how they are actually made in practice and what distinguishes choices that set new and lasting directions from those that merely keep operations running. The ECM 2026/27 addresses this research need by exploring which strategies are pursued by CCOs in each context and how these strategies are developed and enacted. Answering these questions provides a deep exploration of current practices as well as exciting insights into new and impactful solutions developed by those who shape the profession at a global level. The following chapters introduce each topic and present the empirical results and conclusions.

Managing communications in times of synthetification



AI systems, algorithms and automated agents are reshaping public communication and the context of corporate communications. The interviews show that companies mainly address these developments from the perspective of tools, efficiency and actionable measures. Strategic initiatives focus on visibility, trust and capabilities, while more comprehensive reconfigurations of the communicative environment are largely overlooked by organisations in their responses.

Introduction

Generative AI, algorithms and automated agents are reshaping public communication, creating new opportunities and unprecedented challenges for organisations.

A profound reconfiguration of the digital public sphere

Digital public communication is undergoing a metamorphosis. While the rapid emergence of generative AI has attracted widespread attention, it represents only one element of a broader evolution driven by recommendation algorithms, automated agents, platform infrastructures and synthetic media. Together, these developments are reshaping how information is produced, distributed, amplified and encountered across the digital public sphere (Corsi et al., 2024; Jungherr & Schroeder, 2023; Smyrnaios & Baisnée, 2023).

These developments should not be understood simply as the diffusion of new communication technologies. Rather, they are transforming the conditions under which public communication takes place by changing how information becomes visible, how attention is organised and how public debates evolve. Increasingly, communication is shaped by socio-technical infrastructures in which platforms, algorithms and AI systems actively influence the circulation of information and the dynamics of the public arena (Habermas, 2023; Jungherr & Schroeder, 2023).

At the same time, the growing production of synthetic content is challenging long-established assumptions about authenticity, credibility and verification (Buttle & Parokkil, 2025). More broadly, automated systems are increasingly participating in the production, amplification and mediation of public communication, creating new forms of epistemic uncertainty (Godulla & Hoffmann, 2025). Recent research also highlights the emergence of "synthetic public opinion" and its effects on deliberation in democratic societies (Calvo & Saura García, 2025). At the same time, studies on audience behaviour show that AI-assisted information seeking (Zhou & Li, 2026) is on the rise, meaning that both humans and machines increasingly rely on hallucination-prone GenAI systems (Kalai et al., 2026) to access information, rather than relying on original content, traditional media or search engines.

Synthetification: A new framework for understanding the communicative context

As research on these developments has expanded rapidly, a growing number of concepts have emerged to explain the changing role of automated systems in strategic communication. However, the field remains fragmented, with different disciplines and authors emphasising different dimensions of the phenomenon (Weller & Lock, 2025). A common conceptual framework describing the new communicative context in which companies operate is missing.

Current communication research describes this through a variety of complementary perspectives with several concepts: communicative AI (Guzman & Lewis, 2020; Hepp et al., 2023), which highlights the growing role of AI systems as active communicators; artificial communication (Esposito, 2024), which shifts attention from machine 'intelligence' to machine participation in communication; synthetic media (Godulla & Hoffmann, 2025), which focuses on AI-generated content; and algorithmic power (Sökmen Alaca et al., 2026), which examines how automated systems influence information flows, knowledge production and power relations. Although these concepts differ in their

theoretical foundations and scope, they point towards a common trend: public communication is increasingly taking place in environments where automated systems participate in producing, distributing, amplifying and shaping communication alongside human actors – if not actually outperforming them. This progressively changes who communicates, how communication is produced and circulated and how visibility, credibility and trust are constructed in public spheres (European Commission, 2026).

In this report, we introduce the concept of *synthetification* as an integrative framework to describe this broader reconfiguration of public communication. Rather than referring to isolated developments, this captures the growing share of public communication that is produced, amplified or mediated by generative AI, algorithms, bots and other automated agents. It therefore provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the structural shift of the environment in which strategic communication takes place.

Implications and challenges for corporate communications

Profound transformations of public spheres inevitably change the conditions under which organisations communicate. Rather than affecting isolated communication practices, synthetification reshapes how companies gain visibility, establish credibility, build trust and influence stakeholders within digitally mediated public arenas – and how audiences gain information and build their perceptions about organisations (Jungherr & Schroeder, 2023; Weller & Lock, 2025; Wloka & Zerfass, 2026).

For corporate communications, these developments create both opportunities and challenges. Automated communication systems enable unprecedented gains in efficiency, scalability and personalisation of content, while simultaneously contributing to information saturation and epistemic uncertainty (Weller & Lock, 2025). It also reshapes dissemination and visibility, as organisations must adapt to algorithmically curated platforms and AI systems in which the outreach of content depends on opaque and constantly changing logics. More broadly, the rise of manipulated content, uncertain attribution and synthetic public opinion raises questions about how organisations monitor public debates, identify stakeholders and evaluate communicative influence (Calvo & Saura García, 2025). Despite these growing concerns, little is known about how communication leaders themselves perceive these developments or how they respond strategically. The findings presented in this report provide new insights into this emerging challenge.

> **The synthetification of public communication refers to the process by which an increasing proportion of content, interactions and the flow of information in public spheres is produced, amplified or mediated by algorithmic systems and non-human agents, reconfiguring the conditions of visibility, credibility and trust.**

Results

Contrasting perceptions of shifts in public communication

A large majority of the interviewed CCOs recognise that public communication is undergoing a profound reconfiguration. For many, these developments are reshaping the communication ecosystem itself and deserve to become a strategic priority for their companies. One interviewee states: "It should be a kind of a top worry for any corporate affairs leader, I'd say, would be in your kind of top three or four things that should be on your minds and constantly aware of and thinking through." (CCO L47) Only a small minority minimise their significance or question their scale. This is supported by findings from the pre-questionnaire. A clear majority (80%) of the CCOs state that the synthetification of communication – described to them as outlined on the previous pages – is a highly relevant issue and has become a strategic concern for their companies. Nine out of ten believe that the topic will become even more important by 2030.

However, these developments are rarely perceived as a complete rupture. Most interviewees place the synthetification of public communication within a longer trajectory of digital transformation that began with the internet, social media and platformisation. Rather than replacing previous developments, AI, algorithms and autonomous agents are seen as accelerating existing dynamics. "I think this is a bit of an extension" (N81), says one CCO, while another observes that "It's completely transformed ... but I'd say it's a bit incremental." (C56) Others stress that adapting to successive technological shifts has always been part of the profession: "It's always constantly changing. And we have to adapt." (B34)

Although the shift is widely recognised, considerable uncertainty remains. One communication head explains that "we're really still at the very beginning ... we don't even have a clue yet where this is going to take us." (R87) Another one describes the scale of the shift "from humans influencing humans ... now getting to AI talking to AI" (M69) and questions how organisations will continue to reach audiences in increasingly AI-mediated communication environments.

Attitudes nevertheless remain ambivalent. The interviewees frequently combine enthusiasm for AI's potential with concerns about trust, democracy and public debate. As one interviewee notes, "I personally do see huge opportunities in this arena. But we need to be fast." (A85)

Two distinct ways of understanding these developments nevertheless emerge. Some interviewees adopt a broader societal perspective, discussing a restructuring of the communication ecosystem, the digital public sphere and stakeholder relationships. More frequently, however, synthetification is interpreted through an instrumental lens, focusing on how AI can help communication departments work. As a result, discussions on the effects and strategies to be implemented remain centred on organisational applications and uses rather than on the structural shift of the communicative environment.

> **"There is an enormous change. For me it is a tectonic change ... There is a reconfiguration, a very deep change of the communication ecosystem.**
>
> (CCO K32)

New conditions for practising corporate communications

The recognition that synthetification is reshaping public communication translates into a broad reassessment of corporate communications. Across the interviews, this reassessment surfaces in three areas: how information is produced and circulated, how credibility and trust are sustained and how communication work itself is changing.

A first set of effects concerns the production and circulation of information. The interviewed CCOs primarily associate AI with productivity gains through drafting, translation, summarisation and content adaptation. As one respondent explains, AI enables organisations to communicate "more effectively, more economically, more rapidly." (K25) Enhanced creativity, multilingual communication and automated dissemination are also perceived as important opportunities.

These gains are accompanied by growing concerns about visibility in AI-mediated information environments. Communication teams increasingly seek to optimise content not only for search engines but also for LLMs. As one interviewee asks, "how do you publish information in such a way that your information is being included in the various models and by the various agents?" (E91) Others stress that corporate communications must now perform across increasingly algorithmic environments (D60). One respondent summarises the challenge succinctly: "you're writing something ... to make sure that it is being captured by AI machines. Because if the AI machine doesn't capture it again, you become irrelevant." (B17)

A second set of effects concerns credibility, trust, reputation and stakeholder relations and is perceived predominantly as a challenge. The benefits in this area are rarely mentioned in the interviews and mainly relate to clearer communication and more targeted stakeholder engagement. The CCOs more frequently raised concerns about authenticity, standardisation, disinformation, impersonation and fraud. As one interviewee notes, "it also standardises a lot of it and that's our job ... to exercise that discernment." (C56) Another one argues that, if synthetic attacks occur, organisations will increasingly depend on the trust already built around their brands. Interviewees also identify the emergence of synthetic audiences as a new challenge, whereas hallucinations – which are steeply rising according to latest research (Kalai et al., 2026) – are mentioned only occasionally.

Perceived effects of synthetification on corporate communications

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Requires a rethinking of the role and contribution of corporate communications in the company	86.7%	10.0%	3.3%
Makes authentic content and content approved by trusted intermediaries (e.g. journalists) much more valuable	86.7%	6.7%	6.7%
Significantly increases the unpredictability of public debates the company is involved in	86.7%	6.7%	6.7%
Makes it harder for recipients to obtain accurate information about companies and their brands	83.3%	13.3%	3.3%
Limits the ability to shape the debate in strategically important public spheres	83.3%	10.0%	6.7%
Requires efforts to redefine the communicative responsibilities of the company in society	70.0%	23.3%	6.7%
Complicates the monitoring of debates and stakeholders	70.0%	16.7%	13.3%
Offers better opportunities to create content and influence opinion-building	66.7%	13.3%	20.0%

A third set of effects concerns communication work itself. Interviewees consistently argue that the synthetification of public communication is transforming the profession from within. AI is expected to reduce costs, accelerate execution and automate routine tasks. As one respondent observes, "In five minutes it has made you a summary which used to take ... five hours." (K25) Yet these gains are widely seen as triggering a broader shift in the profession.

Rather than producing more content, communicators are expected to focus on supervision, strategic judgement and quality assurance. As one interviewee argues, "we have to switch ... from content production to management." (B34) Several CCOs also warn that entry-level positions are becoming more vulnerable because "the foundational tasks once handed to junior hires ... are now entirely automated by AI." (G45) Future communicators will increasingly be valued for their ability to interpret, challenge and contextualise AI outputs. As one respondent explains, "We need people who can analyse what AI produces ... and know how to analyse what AI is saying." (Q65)

Beyond these specific effects, two cross-cutting patterns emerge. First, CCOs spontaneously cite the effects linked to their own activities – visibility, reputation, monitoring and professional capabilities – rather than the broader effects of the process of synthetification of public communication on society and democracy. Consequently, the ethical and accountability considerations of large international companies and their corporate communication activities within this process are scarcely mentioned. Second, perceptions vary across sectors: organisations operating in highly exposed B2C environments emphasise visibility, trust and misinformation, whereas B2B companies more often highlight stakeholder specificity and report feeling less immediately affected.

> **"Today, I have real uncertainty about my ability – my personal ability to keep up with this pace in an environment that's changing so quickly – and quite simply about my usefulness ... Will companies really still need one? I don't know; it's an open question, really.**
>
> (CCO R87)

From experimentation to strategic responses

Rather than attempting to shape the broader shift of public communication, the companies in the sample primarily develop adaptive strategies aimed at preserving their ability to communicate effectively in increasingly synthetificated environments. The pre-questionnaire findings confirm this orientation: a large majority of CCOs prioritise communication in controllable digital arenas and deliberately avoid highly automated environments and a similar share focus on adapting communication practices to AI-driven search and on investing more in owned platforms, trusted media and authentic communication. Overall, organisational responses are primarily developed for issues perceived as directly actionable (visibility, reputation, governance, skills). More systemic developments in the public sphere rarely give rise to explicit response strategies. Companies combine deliberate responses (enhancing governance, skills, reputation) with more emergent strategies (for monitoring, experimentation, continuous adaptation).

A first cluster of strategies seeks to protect reputation and trust. As synthetic content and AI-mediated information increase uncertainty about the origin and reliability of information, companies seek to reinforce their role as trusted sources. Interviewees also describe stronger investments in relationship-based communication, more disciplined communication practices, continuous monitoring and crisis preparedness. Rather than competing with synthetic communication artefacts on their own terms, many emphasise the value of trusted brands: "when people are confused by what's real, what's not real, they'll go to the brand they trust." (N81)

A second strategic approach is maintaining visibility in an AI-mediated information environment. Communication plans increasingly include GEO (Generative Engine Optimisation), aiming at content optimisation for large language models as well as dedicated AI visibility initiatives. As one interviewee explains, "we have a small team ... monitoring and understanding changes to algorithms, trying to adapt to them." (T30) Others describe dedicated task forces working on GEO (P43). Alongside these technical responses, many organisations are rediscovering the traditional roots of strategic communication by strengthening owned media, investing in press relations, producing distinctive content and reinforcing direct stakeholder relationships. As one CCO notes, "trusted news sources remain super important sources of information for LLMs ... our corporate PR activity is even more important." (N81) Another interviewee explicitly refers to "the return to traditional media" and "the return to live events." (T30) This view is supported by several other CCOs: "I do foresee ... a renaissance of traditional media ... this also means that we have to invest into those relations again." (A12)

These strategies, however, remain largely under construction. The interviews suggest that they relate more to the internal use of AI than to a broader strategy focusing on the new communicative environment. The measures implemented reflect the somehow limited perception of developments currently taking place, as well as the scope for action perceived by the companies in the sample. Two out of three CCOs report that they are experimenting and building capacity to better understand the synthetification of public communication. But this is the least consensual response identified in the pre-survey, suggesting that many companies are still exploring rather than stabilising their approaches. As this interviewee says: "So we are experimenting ... we want to take it step by step because we want to really become a trusted source of information." (A85) Internal working groups and guidelines, as well as training programmes are progressively emerging. One organisation has established "an AI council ... to make sure that there is proper governance around ... reputation, credibility, accountability" (U52), while another has declared 2026 "the AI year." (C39)

When it comes to strategising practices, the study reveals that strategic approaches are primarily driven by communications teams, supported by AI specialists and governance structures. This shows that Human oversight is strongly and consistently maintained. As one CCO stresses, "there is still a human accountable for every single output" (U52), while another insists that "there is still a human planning ... there is not a delegation to AI." (F23) Interestingly, broader reconfigurations of public spheres – including algorithmic power, democratic implications and synthetic public opinion – rarely give rise to explicit strategic initiatives so far, even among large international corporations.

> **"We are trying, we are testing ... I don't have a clue where we're actually heading, to be fair.**
>
> (CCO W96)

Conclusion

The real challenge is no longer the use of AI, but the new context of corporate communications: The synthetification of public spheres requires new strategies – but it is open whether organisations can win the race.

The interviews show that CCOs widely recognise the profound shifts in public communication linked to the rise of algorithms and autonomous agents as strategically significant. So far, however, synthetification is treated more as an operational challenge than as a threat for corporate communications as a whole. The responses remain largely pragmatic and adaptive; more systemic shifts in public communication are rarely addressed by explicit strategies. In this context, five priorities emerge.

1. Broadening. Taking a wider perspective beyond current strategies that focus on integrating AI into communication practices is necessary. Contexts and ecosystems matter as much as corporate activities.

2. Nuance. Dealing with an ecosystem dominated by algorithms and machines evolves as a new challenge. This requires nuanced strategic thinking to anticipate the lasting implications for corporate communications.

3. Trust. Investing in assets such as authenticity, quality of information, human expertise and stakeholder relationships can strengthen trust in organisations. It is a way to safeguard companies and brands in times of synthetification.

4. Responsibility. Large corporations are not only adapting to changing public spheres, but also actively shaping them. Communication leaders should be aware of this power and act responsibly.

5. Relevance. It remains unclear whether corporate communications can continue to live up to its own promise in the age of synthetification – namely, to engage with stakeholders and advise senior management. The pressure to redefine contributions and value propositions is increasing.

Transformation and change of communication departments



Communication departments operate in highly volatile environments. This requires constant change and, sometimes, a fundamental transformation of their business models and operations. Interviews with high-level CCOs reveal that efficiency gains – rather than, e.g., new capabilities of AI and digitalisation – are the main drivers of change. Different transformation journeys are linked to various modes of strategising. But the dynamic capabilities required to manage them remain the same.

Introduction

Communication departments need to transform their business models to stay relevant. Making this happen is far from straightforward.

Change and transformation are the backbone of enduring success

Companies must constantly change to survive. Organisational change "can be described as a pattern of endless changes in work processes and social practices" (Weick & Quinn, 1999, p. 366). Management research and practice, however, posit that a conceptual difference has to be taken into account (Newman, 2000): *Change* refers to incremental adjustments to structures, processes and practices within the current logic of an organisation and its core identity (first-order change); *transformation* denotes more fundamental episodes of change of the entire business model or at least parts of it" (Fiedler et al., 2023, p. 272) which "take organisations outside their familiar domains and alter the bases of power" (Starbuck, 1983, p. 99) (second-order change).

Episodes of change and transformation can be actively managed. Extant research has shown that this can have a positive impact on organisational performance (Hasan et al., 2025). This is why every manager responsible for competitiveness and success is expected to actively drive transformation and design or redesign their areas of responsibility (Cunha et al., 2022).

What this means for communication departments

Communication leaders face a double challenge here. On the one hand, they need to support the entire organisation's transition through professional change communication (Elving, 2024). On the other hand, they are in charge of transforming their own departments. This is necessary to ensure that corporate communications continues to create value under new circumstances and that communication experts stay relevant. After all, Chief Communication Officers are hired and evaluated by top management primarily for their ability to adapt and innovate, not simply for their ability to execute professional tasks.

The urgency to reinvent the positioning and design of communication departments has increased in recent times (Deloitte, 2026; Oxford-GlobeScan, 2026; Zerfass & Brockhaus, 2025). Numerous reports and authors claim that digital technologies and AI as well as other external drivers like changing media use among audiences call for new responsibilities and roles (Cheng & Verčič, 2026; Corporate Excellence, 2025; Ipsos, 2025; Sutherland, 2025; United Minds, 2025). Others propose a broader view, taking also internal developments into account, such as new corporate strategies, mergers, or cost-cutting programmes (Falkheimer & Heide, 2026; Tench et al., 2017; Zerfass & Link, 2022).

So far, there is hardly any empirical evidence why and to what extent communication departments are changing and transforming themselves and who is involved. CCOs are the key source of such information. How they assess the need for adjustments and how they initiate or approve related initiatives shapes actual practices in the field.

Strategies to transform affect the communication business model

Identifying the extent of change (or transformation) and its focus in communication departments requires a holistic perspective. A suitable framework for this is the *Communication Business Model* (Zerfass & Lautenbach, 2025; Zerfass & Link, 2024). It combines

the business model approach (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010; Wirtz, 2020) with theories of communication management (Falkheimer & Heide, 2026; Tench & Waddington, 2026) and organisational transformation, which explicitly use business models as a reference point for second-order change (Christou & Piller, 2024; Fiedler et al., 2023).

The business model of a communication department provides answers to four essential questions: Which assets does an organisation provide for communications, and how are they allocated (Resources & Revenues)? How does the communication department manage and carry out its activities (Operations)? What is delivered to whom, and with what effect (Services & Products)? Which values are generated for the organisation through communications, and how are they captured (Value Creation)?

This approach helps to describe the current set-up of any communication department as well as potential strategies for change and transformation. CCOs can use strategies to (1) modify the mandate and internal positioning of the department within the company; (2) secure new resources and income streams; (3) redesign the department's operating model through new structures, culture, technologies, etc.; (4) develop new services for internal clients and/or relevant stakeholders; or (5) change the department's value proposition, e.g., by focusing more strongly on providing insights for business decisions instead of enhancing publicity and reputation.

How transformation can be strategised and what capabilities are needed

Applying the strategy-as-practice perspective introduced above, departmental transformation can be analysed along the three Ps – the practices communication units draw on, the praxis of redesign and the people involved. Strategies for managing episodes of change and transformation can be deliberately developed by the CCO or a designated group of team members. They can also emerge over time from experimentation and daily practices. Or they can be based on hybrid approaches that combine an initial setting of direction with an iterative and spread-out creation of concrete strategies.

In any case, leaders need dynamic capabilities that allow them to successfully initiate and lead transformation (Christou & Piller, 2024). CCOs and those in charge of organisational redesign need to be strong in sensing (to identify new needs and opportunities); seizing (to exploit opportunities and define new business models); and reconfiguring (to combine all elements anew) (Teece, 2007).

Shedding light on these largely unknown but highly relevant topics contributes to better understanding the management of communication departments in modern organisations.

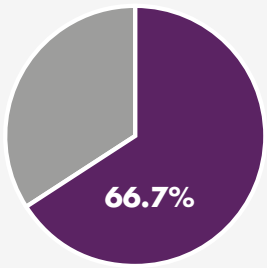
> **The transformation of a communication department involves a fundamental change of its business model, or large parts of it, i.e., its mandate and resources, how it operates, what services it provides and how it creates value for the organisation. This often occurs alongside incremental change, where adjustments are made within the department's current logic and positioning.**

Results

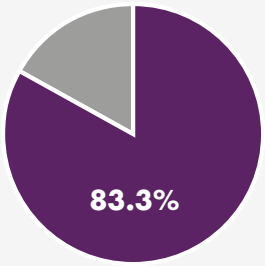
The significance and targets of departmental transformation and change

The need to rethink and adjust established practices of managing and executing corporate communications is clearly accentuated by the interviewed CCOs. Two-thirds say that changing or transforming their department is currently on their agenda, as one interviewee points out: "This is the year we've decided to have a very clear focus to understand how we work, what processes, what tasks that we do can be automated, what can be streamlined, what can be done in different ways, mapping that, setting a roadmap for us ahead." (CCO D78) Even more claim that this will be more important until 2030.

The urgency of change in communication departments



Great need to change or transform the department



Need to change or transform will increase over the next four years

In most communication departments, incremental change within the existing logic and more profound phases of transformation go hand in hand. This implies that there are different understandings of the situation and urgency within the teams, as described by one CCO: "My department thinks it's in a moment of change and I want it to be in a moment of transformation." (I70) Most of the examples mentioned in the interviews, however, in fact refer to first-order change: "There are always updates, let's say, in the structure. But the basic … thought behind it remains the same." (H67) Transformatory developments are also common and usually described as a repositioning of the department. One CCO explains: "We used to operate as an internal service function heavily tied to execution. Today, I am architecting a completely different, highly strategic organisational model. The mandate has shifted to stakeholder relationship governance and relationship intelligence." (G45) Only a few interviewees state that their units are currently in a phase of stability because necessary adjustments have already been implemented.

While initiatives for change or transformation can, in principle, target all dimensions of a communication department's business model (Zerfass & Link, 2024), the interviews reveal a strong focus on the operating model. Many CCOs report that roles and skills, structures and setup, processes and workflows, technology and data, or team culture and mindset are adjusted: "I worried enormously about breaking the silos: there was the brand person, who didn't talk to the other one … We saw that transversality increased the capacity to manage [our company's] reputation." (K32) For others, the focus lies on people and skills, as routine tasks become automatable. One interviewee describes the shift: "So my main focus, in relation to my upcoming team transformation, is figuring out how [the team mem-

bers] … can take a step forward and accept it. For one simple reason: everything else they do on a more routine basis, etc., is highly automatable. [They need] … to develop critical thinking, leadership skills, assertiveness and the ability to form well-considered opinions on many matters." (T30) Episodes focusing on renewing services and products, the value proposition, or the mandate and positioning of the department are less prevalent. Rarely mentioned are attempts to change resources and revenues – and if so, only by claiming the necessity and not by creating new income streams or returns: "In order to advance, we need to invest in technology." (D78) Another describes a defensive posture towards the existing budget: "So defend the budget and try to increase it in positive years." (H58)

Interestingly, modifying processes and workflows as well as services and products are more often described as incremental first-order change, whereas everything closer to the communication departments' identity and remit (mandate, structures, roles) is more often linked to transformative efforts. The interviewed CCOs clearly sense that fundamental renewal requires more than optimising the operating model.

> **"It evolves and it requires, first of all, new ways of thinking, new processes, new tools and also new skills.**
>
> (CCO A12)

Drivers of change and how leaders frame their responsibilities

Why is there a need to change and transform communication departments? The interviewed CCOs – in line with the prevailing narrative in the profession – most frequently cite external pressure from the spread of digital technologies and particularly AI: "There were technological evolutions imposed from the outside, so what we have done has always been to look at what we could innovate from the point of view of how we communicate, where we communicate, what we communicate." (F23) Another relevant catalyst is the rise of geopolitical risks. One CCO states: "The external environment is having a much bigger impact, not only on the way we are running communications, but I think the way CEOs and boards are thinking about business. I would have never thought that my geopolitical experience, coming from myself being a war correspondent … would come to help today." (B17) Other external factors – though discussed much less frequently – include difficult economic conditions, crises, globalisation and regulatory requirements.

At first glance, internal demands arising from within the organisation, its top management or the CCO themselves are mentioned less often. A deeper analysis, however, shows that efficiency needs – that is, the internal pressure to achieve more with fewer resources – often have a more profound impact and lead to transformation, whilst AI and technological innovations are usually linked to incremental change. One CCO reports: "And then [the CEO] said but I won't give you more money or more of these. And I said: Okay, that's good. So let's define the order you give me. And the order was: same resources, better results." (B34) In another company, this creates a "clear expectation that we also become quite efficient in how we do it, also including sound judgement, because this is what AI cannot replace." (A85)

Therefore, this study does not support the prevailing view that digitalisation and AI are the main drivers of transformation in communication departments. On the contrary: both in the interviews and in the pre-questionnaire, internal triggers are regarded as more important. In addition to efficiency gains, the need to adapt to business changes and requirements (such as new strategies, restructuring, mergers) is frequently mentioned: "All corporate functions, including my function, had to contribute more to business impact … we had to move from focusing on the green transition to focusing on how do we increase competitiveness." (Y40) Further internal drivers include new expectations from top management, as well as

self-imposed goals such as being innovative, upscaling the department, or trying to survive as a separate unit within the organisation.

One of the most interesting findings concerns the way in which CCOs portray change and transformation. They usually frame these as something that is imposed on them and their departments – they are constantly responding to internal and external demands. One interviewee reflects: "What's not stable is the world around us ... So, you know, there's more pressure on us." (E91) Change is very rarely described as a matter of one's own choice. Nevertheless, CCOs claim agency when it comes to tackling such challenges. They primarily justify adjustments of their departments with future necessity, readiness and foresight. This means that, for success, it is important to recognise the best time to take action: "Things are moving so rapidly right now that if you move too early, you get crushed; if you move too late, you are left out. You must identify the rhythm and match it." (G45)

> **"It is a terrain that is in permanent change, because in the end your job is to manage an external reality that you do not control.**
>
> (CCO J92)

Strategising for adjusting communication departments

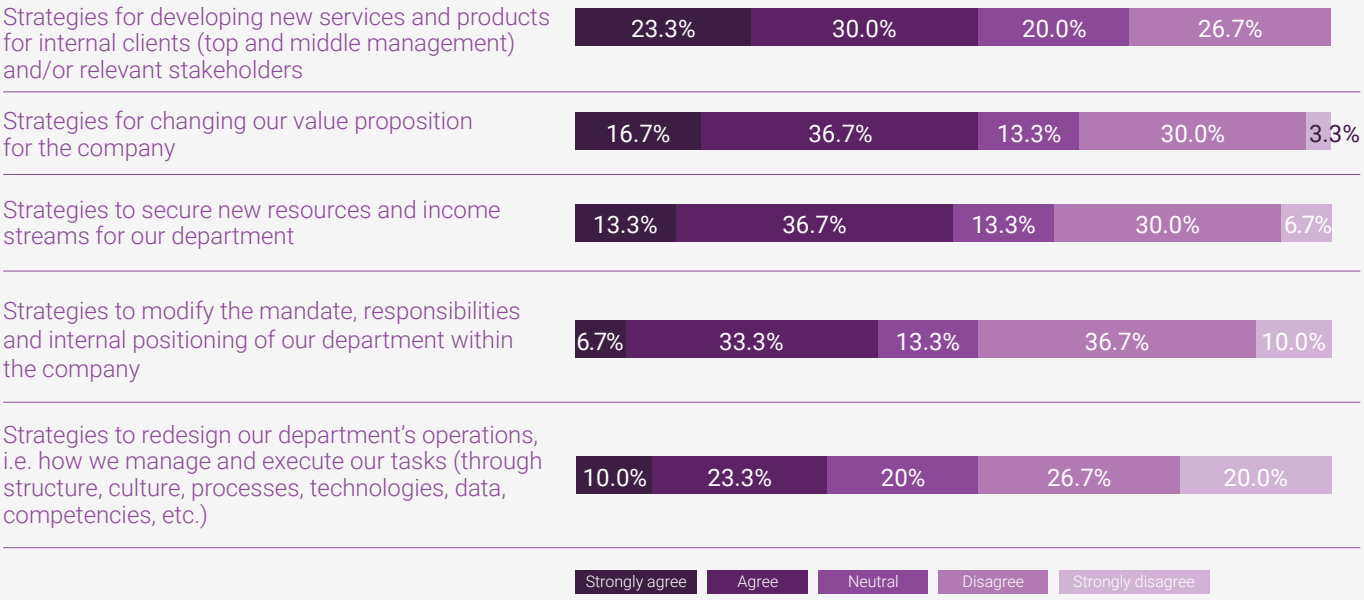
Strategies for changing or transforming communication departments emerge in different ways – no predominant approach was evident from the interviews. Some CCOs practise a deliberate mode of strategising through setting direction and giving clear guidance: "In this I'm very Cartesian: I need certain order because otherwise there's no roadmap. People need to have tangible things to do and objectives and challenges." (K32) Others rely on strategies arising bottom-up from experimentation and daily practice. For example, dealing with potential AI applications can be facilitated through "regular workshops with our team sharing how each other are using it and kind of using case studies and examples of that." (L47) Hybrid and adaptive modes are also used. They combine an initial setting of the direction with iterative modifications within the teams and projects when trying to bring the idea to life.

This variety corresponds with another insight: People involved in strategising as well as the methods and settings used are quite diverse. The key actor is the department's leadership team, i.e., the direct reports of the CCOs. They are involved in nearly all methods (formal planning, cross-functional collaboration, etc.), which means that it has to be ensured that they "are all consistent in terms of understanding the case for change." (U52) Other members of the department, dedicated change leaders or project teams are also mentioned – overall, the inner group dominates strategy development. Other actors within the organisation, including executives from other functions, the CEO or the board, play a role as well. External players are mentioned less often. If so, it is mostly about management consultancies: "The last time when we did it in a bigger way, was when we asked [Consultancy] to help us to first analyse the department. Where are we standing? What are we doing? Well, what could we do better? We did that together with the entire department." (C39) Experts for certain issues such as AI trainers, peers and professional associations are utilised in some cases.

What stands out from the interviews and the pre-questionnaire is that the strategies for change or transformation target the different dimensions of the communication department's business model quite differently. First, strategies for adjusting the operating model and for shifting the mandate are used less frequently than those dealing with more hands-on aspects like developing new communication products or services. Second, a code-relation analysis of the interviews reveals that strategies for certain aspects (e.g., structure, roles) are developed more often deliberately, whereas emergent modes are more frequently mentioned in episodes about

processes and services. Ideally, however, all dimensions and all modes of strategising should be given equal consideration to fully leverage the potential of all actors involved and keep the system in balance.

Strategies used to change or transform communication departments



Dynamic capabilities utilised by communication leaders

Last but not least, the CCO interviews confirmed the theory from management research (Teece, 2007) that leading transformation processes requires a combination of three dynamic capabilities: sensing, seizing and reconfiguring. These are linked to different practices as part of the strategising efforts. Sensing is needed for scanning activities such as benchmarking or networking. One CCO reports about testing new ideas in informal talks with leaders of other corporate functions: "I consulted the head of commercial, I consulted the head of supply chain, I consulted the head of HR so that they say, oh yeah." (X28) Seizing is often linked to advocacy practices. Reconfiguring capabilities are prevalent in descriptions of developing formal plans, alignments, or roadmaps.

Mastering the strategic dimension of transforming the communication department in turbulent times is crucial for every communication leader. But it is just as important to meet expectations and deliver what has been promised in terms of additional services, optimised workflows, or value creation for the organisation. One interviewee emphasises this: "When I go to my CEO ... it's a strategy we've developed over several months and it's extremely robust. And behind that, I know I have the capacity to execute it as well." (R87) Ultimately, excellent communication departments combine robust strategies with seamless implementation.

Conclusion

Redesigning communication departments is a never-ending task. It requires a holistic perspective and a comprehensive understanding of strategising.

Communication departments must constantly reinvent themselves to remain relevant for their organisations. The elite sample of Chief Communication Officers interviewed clearly supports this assertion. Usually, a combination of incremental changes and fundamental transformations of the department's business model is required. These adjustments, varying in intensity, may focus on the mandate of the department, its operating model, services and products, the value proposition for the company, or on resources and revenue streams. Managing these developments in such a way that the infrastructure for corporate communications keeps pace with the rapid changes in business strategies, technologies and society is a hallmark of excellent communication leaders. The results of the study show that four aspects should be taken into account.

1. Proactivity. Taking ownership for changing and transforming the communication department when others have not yet recognised the need is crucial for staying ahead of the curve. This is demanding due to the 24/7 nature of managing communications in a highly unpredictable environment.

2. Alignment. Any adjustments must focus on optimising performance and creating added value for one's own organisation. This requires greater business acumen and a critical look at prevailing narratives within the profession.

3. Comprehensiveness. All elements of a communication department's business model must be given equal consideration when strategising change or transformation. A holistic approach ensures that partial improvements are not undermined by an imbalance of the overall system.

4. Capabilities. Communication leaders need a dynamic set of transformation capabilities to master the endless game of reshaping their departments and the function at large. Sensing, seizing and reconfiguring competencies facilitate strategy development in deliberate, emergent or hybrid modes.

The career trajectories of senior communication executives



How do Chief Communication Officers reach the C-suite? Unbound by linear blueprints, CCO career paths are multi-directional and driven by serendipity. To navigate this fluid landscape, communicators must transition from technical experts to strategic business leaders, build deep relational trust with CEOs and use storytelling to reframe chance events into a coherent, intentional career strategy.

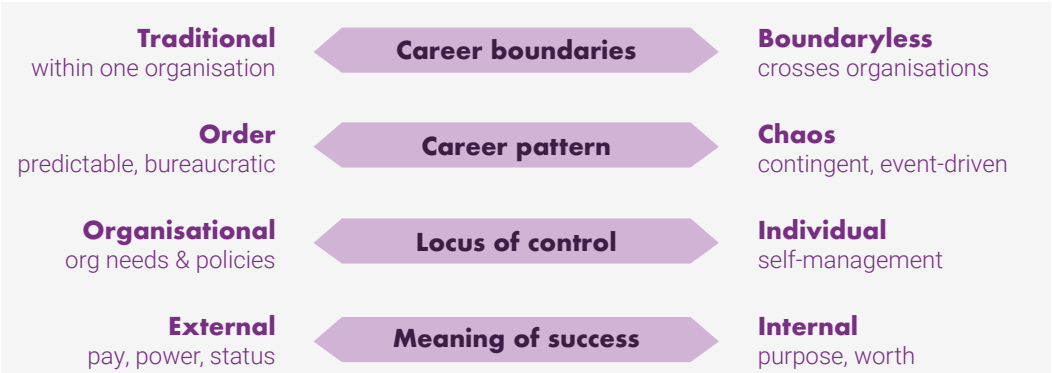
Introduction

Reaching the top of the corporate communications ladder: conceptualising CCO careers as a strategic project

Navigating the open road: CCO trajectories as contemporary executive careers

In the scholarly sense, a career denotes the sequence of jobs and roles a person has held over their work life (Gunz & Mayrhofer, 2018). To trace and analyse how communication professionals navigate this sequence successfully – potentially even towards a career pinnacle in a senior leadership role – requires understanding the fundamental difference between career development (i.e., the continuous stream of positive or negative, linear or non-linear career-relevant events "that may or may not be subject to personal agency") and career management (i.e., the "active engagement in steering and directing the course of career development") (Lent & Brown, 2013, p. 12).

Unlike highly standardised, structured and professionalised fields such as law or medicine, where careers are tightly organised and siloed, careers in communications are fundamentally open. Because senior communication executives frequently come from diverse backgrounds and do not have a common portfolio of specific training as communicators, the path to the executive suite is not pre-drawn, or rather: "the path" does not exist. This openness means that the further a communicator rises towards the upper echelons of an organisation, the more they navigate a "manager career" rather than an "occupational career". Specifically, this implies that aspiring communication leaders must actively shape their own career transitions – those planned periods of personal change that act as passages between sequentially held positions (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Louis, 1980).



Four tensions shaping contemporary executive careers (adapted from Baruch, 2006)

In career studies, these transitions are understood as sequences of shifts "of a career actor's positions and condition within a bounded social and geographic space over their life to date" (Gunz & Mayrhofer, 2018, p. 18). Understanding how one navigates this space requires examining four core tensions that shape contemporary executive career trajectories (Baruch, 2006): (1) Boundaryless vs. traditional careers: Is the career path confined within single organisations or does it cross physical and organisational boundaries to build expertise and success? (2) Career order vs. career chaos: Is the trajectory built on predictable 'bureaucratic' climbing frames or is it shaped by rather random events and therein relying on highly individual intelligence, flexibility and proactive choices? (3) Organisational vs. individual focus: This is the question of who controls career progression, i.e., to what extent does the executive career rely on individual career self-management, self-direction

and personal values rather than organisational needs, changes and/or policies? (4) External vs. internal career success: Is the sense of 'career success' measured by organisational feedback, incentives and remuneration (e.g., power or compensation) while "climbing the ladder" or by one's own subjective, internal evaluation of achievement, purpose and personal worthiness?

Cracking the C-suite code: Why the CCO journey has remained a black box

CCOs occupy a crucial role in modern organisations and they have been a key interest of corporate communications research. This research can be organised in two large groups: the first stream of research treats CCOs primarily as expert informants to analyse broader trends and industry developments (much like the ECM studies). Researchers use insights from CCOs to trace trends in internal communications (Verčič et al., 2015), CEO positioning (Zerfass et al., 2016), ethics (Bowen, 2024) or innovation (Gutiérrez-García et al., 2021). The second stream of research treats CCOs as an object of study, exploring the day-to-day practices of senior communicators (Nothhaft, 2010), their strategic thinking (Brønn, 2001), their performance evaluation (Murphy, 2024) or their C-suite reporting (Likely, 2013). This line of research also includes many important studies on senior communicators' executive leadership styles (e.g., Meng & Berger, 2013; Jin, 2010).

However, both these research streams share a blind spot: they study senior communicators because they are in an executive position, but they ignore how they became executives. While neighbouring disciplines like journalism (Davidson & Meyers, 2016; Pereira, 2023) and marketing (Bacon, 2017) have long studied career development, strategic communication literature has rarely focused on careers (Andsager & Hust, 2005; Penning et al., 2024; Yaxley, 2013) and few studies have addressed what the ECM 2026/27 considers as a key question: How do Chief Communication Officers develop their careers?

The strategist's playbook: How the CCO self-manages their way to the top

To understand how CCOs navigate the boundaryless career spaces that surround them, we position CCOs as active agents accumulating career capital through strategic career self-management (King, 2004). Such executive self-management encompasses three primary behavioural domains: positioning behaviours (initiating job mobility, investing in human capital, developing social networks and innovating job content), influence behaviours (leveraging self-promotion, ingratiation and upward influence to negotiate terms) and boundary management (regulating work-nonwork limits and psychological role transitions). Driven by self-efficacy, desires for control and core career anchors, these behaviours are operationalised in this study through a strategy-as-practice perspective (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Seidl et al., 2024), as introduced earlier. This lens frames CCO career strategising across the three interconnected dimensions: practices (tools, norms and methods), praxis (concrete negotiation episodes and processes) and people (gatekeepers, recruiters and mentors who shape career paths).

> **CCO career strategising denotes the situated practices, concrete episodes and people through which individuals construct, negotiate and enact strategy to affect their career positioning, influence key organisational gatekeepers and manage personal boundaries to advance towards a top leadership position in communications.**

Results

Navigating the multi-directional road: Boundarylessness, contingency and retrospective agency in CCO careers

The careers of corporate communications leaders do not unfold within the predictable, vertical confines of a single organisation or industry. Instead, they are characterised by what Baruch (2006) defines as boundaryless career spaces: highly fluid, multi-directional pathways that cross organisational, sectoral and functional boundaries. Our data reveal highly diverse patterns of boundary-crossing across life stages. Entry into corporate communications is clustered in the early exploration phase, with professionals crossing over from journalism, politics or diplomatic training. Mid-career development (career establishment) is then characterised by yet more intense boundary-crossing: agency-to-in-house transitions and job moves across different organisations are most frequent in this phase, marking it as the period of greatest mobility. Only when CCOs reach the top communications role (career maintenance stage) does crossing recede and a 'settling down' emerges, with organisational mobility shifting back towards internal progression.

While CCOs' career paths appear to be physically boundaryless, they are also structurally chaotic. A central tension in career studies is the dialectic between career order (predictable, bureaucratic climbing frames) and career chaos (contingency, chance and unplanned opportunities) (Baruch, 2006). The co-occurrence analysis reveals a striking pattern: the higher the communicator climbs, the more career order evaporates. The ratio of chaotic (contingent, serendipity-driven) episodes to ordered (organisation-defined, succession-driven) episodes rises from a ratio of 2:1 during the exploration phase to a 6:1 ratio during the maintenance phase. Although these counts are small – and the ratios correspondingly sensitive – the direction is consistent: rather than executing long-term blueprints, CCOs at the top of their field navigate a landscape dominated by spontaneous job offers, executive restructurings and sudden vacancies. This reality is reflected in how CCOs discursively account for their trajectories: "I confess to you, I have little faith in the concept of strategy, also because I would not have known how to apply it. Therefore, I see it more like von Clausewitz: 'Amateurs talk about strategy, professionals talk about logistics.' ... I built my path one piece at a time, without knowing where I would go ... I have had a lot of luck." (CCO V74) This sentiment is echoed across the sample: as one CCO puts it: "I haven't written an application for more than 33 years ... always a coincidence, network or whatever." (C39) Overall, there are numerous instances describing developments shaped by chance encounters and serendipity rather than formal strategy.

> **"A CCO career is built on "one-third luck, one-third hard work and one-third talent."**
> (CCO R87)

Beyond the descriptions of career chaos, we also see clear instances of order, when CCOs reconcile relative degrees of career chaos with the professional identity as a 'master strategist'. These might well be instances of retrospective sensemaking through which senior communicators superimpose a highly agentic, strategic narrative over chance-driven events. The co-occurrence analysis of the interviews bears this out: emergent tellings align with chaotic episodes, yet a marked 'discursive gap' emerges where a strategic narrative is mapped directly onto otherwise chaotic paths. This retrospective sensemaking co-occurs more often with chaotic episodes than with ordered ones. Thus, despite the career chaos – or because of it – CCOs author a coherent, agentic professional self, pairing chance events with a logic of progression or reframing them altogether as deliberate steps in a greater career narrative of sovereign self-development. For example, one CCO, whose career crossed four distinct sectors, reclaims control over what appeared at other instances of the interview as serendipity: "While these four

chapters might seem fortuitous, I can't credit chance alone ... you cannot be a great communicator based solely on the technical skills you learn; you must be a good communicator because you have built a clear vision of where you want to go." (G45)

Interestingly, some CCOs even explicitly acknowledge such claims as rhetorical manoeuvres in their self-presentation over time, as one explains: "Earlier I would have said it was luck, but I've changed my discourse: I have known how to choose, probably unconsciously, but I have known how to choose." (J10) By reframing serendipitous encounters as active choices and often casting 'timing' as strategic readiness, CCOs discursively transform the unpredictable road of career chaos into an agentic, strategic success.

Shifting self-conceptions: The transition from expert to leader

The career of a CCO is defined not merely by vertical progression, but by a fundamental, qualitative shift in professional identity: the transition from a communications expert to a leader of experts and other leaders.

In the early career stages (exploration), a communicator's value proposition is rooted in technical, operational execution: crafting press releases, managing relationships with the media and coordinating campaign tactics. As they transition into mid-career (establishment) and the apex role (maintenance), this specialist identity undergoes a profound shift: the co-occurrence analysis reveals that the 'expert to leader shift' is overwhelmingly associated with the transition to senior leadership – showing vividly as CCOs reflect on their upward transitions into positions of managing large, complex functions, often showing a somewhat contentious identity reconstruction. One interviewee describes this as follows: "First there was the decision between an expert career and a leadership career ... PR people tend to say, 'Oh, nobody understands us ... we do such nice content and nobody knows how strategic and important we are.' And I hate this [idea that] ... providing content for a company is a strategic move. It's not." (B34)

To facilitate their upward trajectory paired with a shift in identity, communicators actively acquire business acumen to move 'beyond' communications. This is echoed by one CCO when stating: "I don't feel like a communications director anymore. I feel like a leader and a part of the leadership team ... more a leader with the communication and people kind of approach to leadership". (B34) This self-conception as a strategic business leader is widely accompanied by a massive expansion in team complexity, sometimes spanning multiple functions (combining, for instance, communications and human resources).

This transition in self-conception is mirrored by a dramatic shift in the locus of career management. In the exploration stage, career progression is driven almost exclusively by individual agency (desire for self-development, personal curiosity and opportunity-seizing). Organisational drivers – such as strategic direction, corporate restructurings or crisis-driven role requirements – do not appear in the early career biographies. However, once professionals enter the establishment and maintenance phases, the organisation takes over as the primary steering force. At the top end, CCO careers are heavily shaped by corporate transformations and restructurings that they do not initiate but must navigate reactively and discursively integrate them into their career trajectory. At this career stage, everything becomes more fluid, as one CCO explains that the steepest part of

their growth occurred when they "evolved from a subject matter expert to more like a leader in senior leadership, where you have to juggle with different priorities, different stakeholder interests and volatility of the environment". (A85)

As individual ambition meets corporate restructuring at the senior level, CCOs find themselves navigating large-scale transformations and progressing 'through' them. As one CCO describes, their trajectory was shaped by massive shifts, including managing two IPOs in two and a half years (A12). Rather than viewing these as constraints, CCOs strategically frame them as developmental platforms to be 'seized'. Another CCO describes the transition from the agency world to corporate leadership as a deliberate effort to build, transform and grow as a leader, viewing an immense organisational rehabilitation task as their personal career "Everest" (N81; see longer quote below). Through these identity shifts, CCOs successfully transition from tactical communication experts into indispensable members of the executive core.

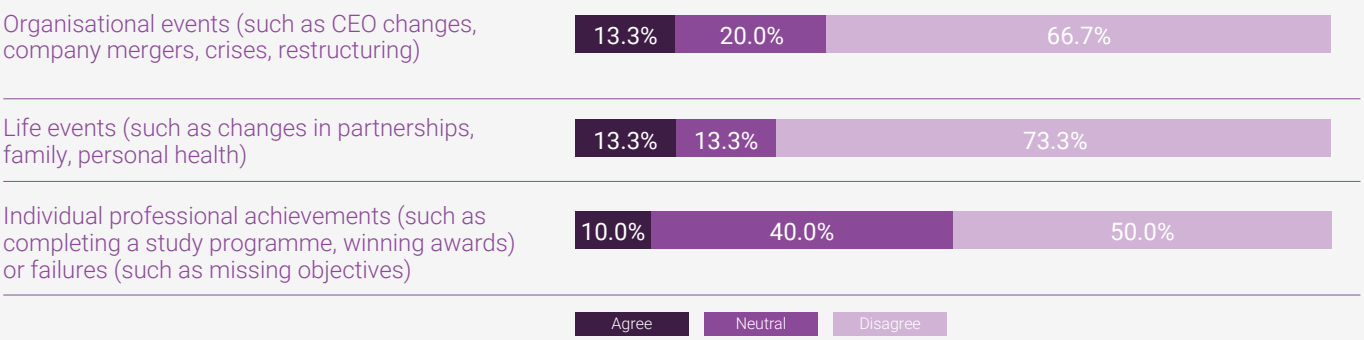
CCO career strategising: Saturated positioning, relational influence and the silence on boundaries

Viewed through the strategising concept, CCO career strategy emerges out of the relationship of three interconnected dimensions: practices (habitual routines, methods and tools), praxis (concrete, situated episodes of career negotiation) and people (the constellation of organisational gatekeepers, mentors and recruiters who shape the career). The data show that positioning behaviours (i.e., acts that build individual career capital and market eligibility) are the default practice for CCOs. Every major career practice coded is overwhelmingly aligned with the positioning pole, e.g., diversifying profile, networking or opportunity-seizing. Rather than following a concrete career playbook CCOs build routines to position themselves to remain 'on the radar' by continuously expanding and diversifying their subject expertise and professional networks. For example, one CCO (D78) moved across highly regulated but structurally distinct sectors to diversify their capability base, another (Y40) moved across sectors as a deliberate practice to avoid becoming a narrow specialist. Another important set of practices that emerged from the data on career strategising were influence behaviours (i.e., actions directed at gatekeepers to sway career decisions). Rather than engaging in raw self-promotion or blunt upward lobbying, CCOs employ routines and tools for trust-building: They attempt to manage the people who control career outcomes by establishing deep fiduciary credibility with internal stakeholders and executive boards. As one CCO notes: "I told myself that it's really important to be aware of my own influence and to develop that awareness and be able to use it in the right way." (T30)

Looking at the people dimension of career strategising, two key groups stand out: internal corporate gatekeepers (primarily CEOs and direct managers) represent the most decisive actors of career strategising while mentors act as the secondary relational anchor. Mentoring relationships emerge as a space for testing and validating decisions rather than merely receiving advice. As one CCO puts it: "I would say mentorship and intuition, therefore I have always had someone with whom I consulted, with whom I vented, talked, confronted and tested choices." (H67) Interestingly, external people (such as executive recruiters and head-hunters or industry peers) are treated as secondary resources (e.g., for external positioning, benchmarking or validation) rather than active elements of career strategising.

> **"Relational capacity is the ultimate tool for forging a career path, creating opportunities and engaging in meaningful dialogue.**
>
> (CCO G45)

Moments that triggered CCOs' career strategy formation



The single most important organisational events (situated episodes at work) of career negotiation were corporate crises and 'stretch roles' through which career strategy was developed and enacted. These are used by CCOs to build career capital, test limits and establish strategic authority at the executive table. Often, these are framed as 'fork in the road' moments that call for career strategising under high ambiguity but promised high career reward. As one CCO put it: "… the chairman had been fired and the chief operating officer had been fired. So the entire organisation was decapitated in my opening nine days …. Now, this turned out to be a very serendipitous thing because what it forced was … a massive firebreak and it compelled a much-needed cultural … as well as operational trans-formation … the challenge slash opportunity was kind of my Everest. You know, if I could pull this off … that rehabilitation." (N81)

A further striking finding is how rarely active boundary management surfaces across the strategising dimensions in the data. CCOs discursively treat the extreme, 24/7 demands of the corporate affairs role not as a boundary to be managed, but as a baseline condition that must be passively absorbed. Few of the CCOs describe managing boundaries at all, which is a substantive finding in itself: CCOs do not discursively plan or manage work / non-work boundaries as active career strategies. Instead, work simply colonises the personal sphere. As one CCO states: "There are no boundaries in this profession beyond a certain level of responsibility. Reputation – the foundation of all communication – … does not allow for disconnection." (J10) Another one describes how, even in their free time, their brain remains fully active, scanning the environment: "Let's be clear: people in our line of work don't just put on slippers and switch off their brains … Anything you hear triggers a thought". (G45) When boundary management does appear discursively, it is highly gendered and cyclical, clustering around the intense 'double burden' of early parenthood, described by CCOs as a 'tough decade' of physical and mental exhaustion where work-life balance must be actively negotiated, often via coaching, to prevent burnout. Beyond these episodic crises of well-being, the elite sample largely operates under a professional code where work-life boundaries are sacrificed completely to remain fully connected to 24/7 reputation management and building executive impact.

Conclusion

The CCO career playbook: Four core drivers for navigating the path to the C-suite

Chief Communication Officer (CCO) careers unfold through multi-directional, boundaryless trajectories that cross organisational and functional sectors. The interviews have not only shown the extent to which this is the case but also demonstrated key strategic responses that CCOs have developed in response to this throughout their careers. Taken together, the study results highlight that four main aspects emerge at the core of building a successful communications career towards the C-suite.

1. Serendipity. As communicators ascend towards the C-suite, predictable corporate climbing frames evaporate. Reaching the C-suite relies on cultivating the agility, networking and situational readiness needed to really seize spontaneous offers in diverse industries, agency-to-in-house pivots and corporate restructurings.

2. Identity. Ascending to the apex role requires a profound identity shift towards broad business acumen, taking responsibility for complex, cross-functional teams and positioning yourself as an indispensable business leader (who happens to use communications as a strategic tool).

3. Trust. Career-defining breakthroughs for CCOs emerge from building deep relational trust with key internal gatekeepers (primarily CEOs and boards). Progress is unlocked by demonstrating deep business understanding, speaking the CEO's language and managing the core relationships of the enterprise. Pivotal moments for this are 'stretch roles' and corporate crises.

4. Storytelling. Constructing a coherent, strategic narrative out of contingent, chance-driven trajectories is itself a core executive competency. Reframing accidental or serendipitous career turns discursively as intentional, agency-driven choices of self-development builds leadership authority and strategic credibility in the C-suite.

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 2026/27. 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 2026/27 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 organised within the framework of EUPRERA and supported by five initiatives representing Chief Communication Officers across Europe: The Academic Society for Management & Communication (Germany, Switzerland, Austria), CECOMS (Italy), #NORA (Norway, Finland, Sweden, Denmark), Entreprises et Médias (France) and Corporate Excellence (Spain).

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Supporter

Fink & Fuchs is the agency for innovation communication and has been a strategic partner to companies, associations, and public sector clients for almost 40 years. Headquartered in Wiesbaden with offices in Munich and Berlin, the agency has supported the ECM for many years and designed both the report and the website – **www.finkfuchs.de/en/**

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Partners

Organiser

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 more than 500 members from over 40 countries, mainly universities and other research institutions, the non-profit association headquartered in Brussels provides a platform for high-profile trans-national research projects and networks and builds bridges between research and practice.
Study organiser – **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 more than 50 global companies and five 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 Centre 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 organisational performance and success in a changing world.
Regional partner – **www.bi.edu/nora**

Entreprises et Médias, the French association of communication directors of large corporates and institutions, represents approximately 190 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**

Corporate Excellence, the Centre for Reputation Leadership, is a Spanish non-profit business association that brings together leading companies committed to advancing the strategic management of reputation and other key intangible assets, including communication, brand, purpose and sustainability. Its mission is to professionalise the integrated management of intangibles, generate applied knowledge and promote ethical, innovative and value-driven leadership in organisations.
Regional partner – **www.corporateexcellence.org**



The European Communication Monitor is the longest-running academic study exploring the field of corporate communications worldwide. A random sample of 30 top leaders from the elite group of Chief Communication Officers (CCOs) in the 300 largest companies headquartered in Europe has been interviewed for the 2026/27 edition. The statements, experiences and forecasts from those shaping the future of the field are analysed to provide unique insights into three topics that produce considerable challenges in managing communications:
(1) how companies address the synthetification of public communication;
(2) how communication departments change, transform and adapt their business models to meet new requirements; and (3) how career trajectories and strategic paths of CCOs are developed. 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 rigour and neutrality.

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