

The Rise of the Internal Communicator

A RESEARCH REPORT

*on the role of senior
internal communication
practitioners*

*conducted in 37 major
UK and US businesses*

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executive search

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1. INTRODUCTION

i) Background

Most companies now recognise that the nature of the employer/employee relationship has changed, and that work is no longer about loyalty to some paternalistic corporate entity. The clichéd phrase ‘our employees are our greatest asset’ is no longer spoken in platitudinal terms, and the need to engage employees – to get their ‘buy in’ – is now very much a boardroom issue. In this context, professionally managed internal communication has now become a critical business success factor.

It would be reasonable to assume that this situation is providing internal communication practitioners with greater responsibility and opportunity, and that their specialist skills and experience will inevitably be gaining greater recognition.

To investigate whether this was indeed the case Watson Helsby, a specialist executive search firm that has extensive experience of recruiting into this discipline, conducted an extensive research study amongst internal communication professionals. Specifically the research set out to explore whether the role is becoming more complex and more influential, whether the skill set has changed, what they do and where they add value, and to what degree internal communicators are equipped to capitalise on the opportunities within this new communications landscape.

In addition to shedding new light on what is still an immature role, the report is designed to provide organisations, practitioners and others with a route map that sets out the directions in which the internal communication role could develop. We also believed that investment in an exercise of this type would enhance our ability to scope and define clients’ internal communication and broader employee engagement resourcing requirements.

ii) Methodology

Watson Helsby held individual face to face interviews with 37 practitioners from major UK and US organisations. We also conducted telephone interviews with people from other management functions to get their perspective on the role. These were all conducted by Nick Helsby.

All quotes are in italics and at the request of those involved have not been attributed.

iii) List of respondents

Our thanks go to the following who participated in this research:

Internal Communications Manager	AXA Sunlife
Director of Internal Communication	BAE Systems
Internal Communications Manager	Barclays
Head of Communication	Bass (Six Continents)
Head of Internal Communications	BBC
Internal Communications Manager	Body Shop
Head of Group Internal Communications	Boots
Head of Internal Communications	British Airways
Internal Communications Manager	BSKYB
Head of Group Communications Online	BT
Internal Communications Manager	Cadbury Schweppes
Head of Internal Communications	Centrica

Director of Communications Strategy
Director of Internal Communication
Internal Communications Manager
Head of Internal Communications
VP Global Internal Communication
Manager, Internal Communication
Internal Communications Manager
Internal Communications Manager
Internal Communications Manager
Director of Internal Communications
Director of Internal Communications
Head of Internal Communications
Head of Internal Communications
Internal Communications Manager
Head of Internal Communications
Head of Communications EMEA
Head of Internal Communication
Internal Communications Manager
Head of Group Communication
Internal Communications Manager
Internal Communications Manager
Internal Communications Director
Head of Internal Communications
Group Internal Communications Manager
Head of Internal Communications

Consignia
Deloitte & Touche
Diageo
egg
GlaxoSmithKline
HSBC
IBM
McDonalds
Microsoft UK
Motorola
NatWest
Norwich Union
NTL
Pearson
Powergen
PriceWaterhouseCoopers
Railtrack
Royal & Sun Alliance
Shell International
London Stock Exchange
Tesco
UDV
Unilever
Vodafone
Woolwich

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Mike Betts
John Harben
James Harkness
Victoria Mellor
Bill Quirke

Juice
ex Smythe Dorward Lambert
Harkness Consulting
Melcrum Publishing
Synopsis

About us

Watson Helsby is an executive search firm which specialises exclusively in middle to senior level assignments in corporate affairs/communications, internal communications, brand communications, media relations, investor relations, public and regulatory affairs and corporate social responsibility.

We have extensive recruitment experience in all of these areas and our clients include FTSE 100's and US corporations, PR and other specialist communications consultancies and the brand consultancy sector.

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is considerable confusion about the role of internal communication at the top of many organisations. Some see it at a task level, essentially a messaging service, and fail to understand how it fits into the bigger picture. Others view it as a key change agent essential to the management of a large, complex organisation.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, the overriding impression gained from the research is of a diverse, under-utilised yet fundamentally optimistic group of professionals. While interpretation of the role can vary widely from individual to individual there is widespread frustration that internal communication is not better understood and valued in boardrooms. Despite this the vast bulk of practitioners are optimistic because they see positive change emerging.

Internal communication is still a relatively immature discipline that has yet to establish a clear *raison d'être*. In recent years interest in the discipline has increased greatly and many new positions have been created. But there has often been muddled thinking over the linkages between internal communication and business objectives and too much focus on tools rather than strategy.

Given the above it is not surprising that companies are often confused over which function should “own” internal communication. Practitioners can be found in HR, corporate communication or marketing, although, as the research indicated, they are generally located within communications (see ‘Where do they sit’ p.5). This is certainly the preference of most practitioners, who believe that the role can be both disadvantaged and under-exploited if it sits in either HR or marketing.

This issue of where the role sits is in fact a distraction since it should always depend on the organisation and its strategy and priorities. Furthermore it is a cross-functional discipline that works collaboratively within businesses to create value.

Most of the respondents believed that internal communication is now on the leadership agenda, although not yet a priority. CEO’s are generally more preoccupied with the external environment, which is perceived to have a much greater impact on corporate reputation. Senior management also remain unconvinced of the financial return from internal communication, which is notoriously difficult to evaluate (see ‘Obstacles to progress’ p.14). The inability of most internal communicators to “speak the language of business” only serves further to reinforce and justify senior management’s opinion.

The middling quality of many practitioners is, in fact, a fundamental issue. While there are some talented practitioners – it is not unusual to find internal communication specialists earning salaries of between £60k and £80k and salaries over £100k are not unheard of – there are still too many ‘mechanics’ who are not highly regarded by colleagues. At a time when the role has become more complex and the skill set correspondingly more sophisticated, (see ‘Skill set and professional development’ p.19) the inconsistent quality of practitioners is creating concern.

The qualities that are absolutely critical in this role, and yet so frequently lacking, are business awareness and the ability to influence at board level and to build relationships across the organisation. This, after all, is a role that has no formal authority, yet is inherently cross-functional and inevitably strays into many areas of line management responsibility.

Traditionally, most practitioners have migrated into internal communication from broader communications work. However, as the role deepens in scope it is drawing on a broader spectrum of people with backgrounds in fields such as management consultancy, brand consultancy and general management.

There is no clearly defined or recognised career progression in internal communication and, in many companies, the most senior role stops some way below senior management status. This is changing for the better but the notion that there is a fixed ceiling beyond which you cannot go is still very much in evidence, although the ceiling is rising.

The research, however, provides encouraging evidence that internal communication is on a rising trend. A growing number of business leaders regard good internal communication as a hard nosed business priority. These converts recognise that an understanding of, and commitment to, business goals and strategy can significantly improve staff performance. Securing this kind of employee buy-in requires, amongst other things, specialist communications expertise.

Leadership teams also increasingly accept that the internal customer is as important an audience for the corporate brand as external customers. In many companies employees are now frequently shareholders and this affects their information needs, and creates a much higher level of awareness of their employer's business issues.

The business case for an improved communications culture has therefore become irrefutable and this has helped to make internal communication a boardroom issue. The research found that some practitioners enjoy regular access to chief executives and other directors, and it is now clear that there is a wider appreciation of how internal communication can engage employees and influence behaviour (See 'How do they add value? p.30). Several of our respondents were involved in high level organisational strategy projects, involving culture, values and behavioural change.

The outlook is very different to what it was five years ago. Demands and expectations of the role are much greater, as are the opportunities for talented practitioners. Leadership teams are genuinely interested in strategically-gearred internal communication and are looking for innovation. This is likely to stimulate the emergence of new roles and organisational structures. Developments might include:

- A new advisory and coaching role, highly influential, driven by the increasing focus within certain organisations on the employer/employee relationship, and the influence that behaviour and communication have on this. The individual will advise on all issues relating to employee engagement – communication, culture, leadership style, values – as well as providing intelligence on internal stakeholders (how decisions will 'play out').
- New organisational structures that help to align communication, HR and marketing into a holistic unit with an exclusive employee focus.
- An amalgamation of HR and marketing, creating a function with an absolute customer focus, both external and internal.
- Coupling HR and corporate communication to create one focal point for the integration of key stakeholder issues into the management of the business.
- The addition of heavyweight, strategically-minded specialists to corporate communications teams. The management of internal reputation is more complex than it was – internal dissension can easily spill out into the public domain – and communications directors tend to be more externally focused. Consequently they are looking to supplement their existing resource with someone who can manage this more substantial task.

What is beyond doubt is that the tentacles of the internal communication role will spread to *all* areas of an organisation. Given the volume of messages that employees receive in any one day, both intended and unintended, this would give the role a very broad remit indeed.

Internal communicators with the intellect, authority and drive to reach senior management must concentrate on building the skills that will both enable them to be more credible at board level and to consult beyond their specialism.

The bottom line is that internal communication now has a clear opportunity to become a key strategic business discipline. Whether it is taken to a higher level by communication professionals or individuals from other backgrounds will depend, very largely, on the degree to which the former upgrade their skill base and effectively promote their cause in the senior corridors of corporate Britain.

3. WHERE DO THEY SIT?

Because of its relative novelty the internal communication (IC) role is at different stages of maturity and at different levels of perceived value in the respondents' organisations. Understanding of what it is, what it does and where it should therefore sit is unsurprisingly, wildly inconsistent.

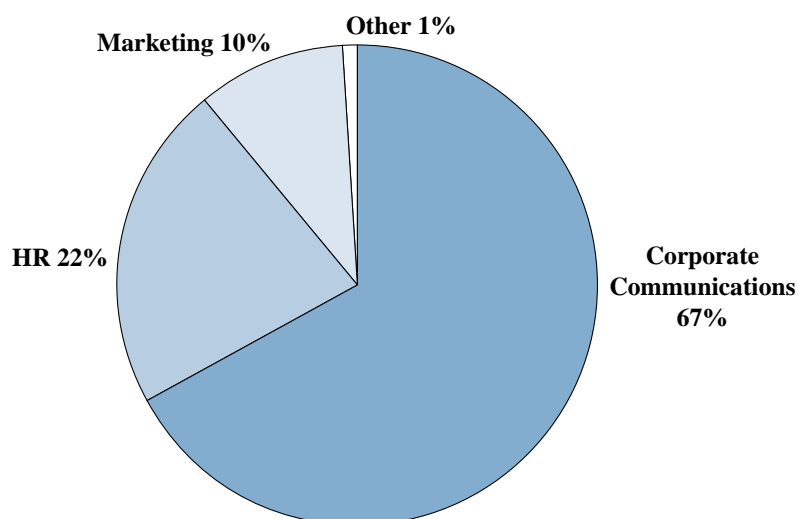
'It has historically been something that people don't know where to put'.

A significant proportion of the sample expressed the view that there is no prescribed best practice on this issue – the reporting line should be determined by an organisation's priorities and business strategy. The maturity of the wider communication function is also a consideration. And, as several of the respondents noted, IC is cross functional, and works in partnership with others to create value.

'You need to build so many relationships across the organisation that it becomes irrelevant. Its more about the individual'.

'It must work in close partnership with every element of the business to be fully effective in its role as 'the glue' of the organisation'.

However, the findings from this research confirm that the IC role is predominantly located within the communications function:



This result may have been slightly skewed by the fact that a large proportion of the sample were working at Group level, and at the centre it tends to report to corporate communications. A reporting line into HR is more common in the business units, if only by default.

'There is only one corporate communications function in all the operating companies, which is at group level, so there is no option'.

The majority of the interviewees felt comfortable with this reporting line, for the following reasons:

- They see the importance of aligning internal and external communications roles to achieve consistency of message, delivery and tone. If they are not aligned within one department, there is a potential fall-out.

'What the external people are planning to say to investors or the media will often be unacceptable internally. Therefore the two must be aligned and coordinated'.

- By any measure, employees are a key stakeholder audience in their own right – their views are key determinants of the reputation of the business. There is a strong sense of needing to be involved with

other professionals concerned with corporate reputation, especially when these other professionals have the complimentary skill sets and outlook of the typical corporate communication function.

'I wouldn't like to see the internal communications separated from corporate communications. It's a fundamental part of the audience understanding team'.

- Corporate communication functions tends to be closer and more intimate with the leadership.

'The CEO is more likely to walk into the corporate communications department than into HR'.

There is, however a downside to this structure. It is not a priority area for many communications directors and it can be demoted to a glorified messaging function.

'There is a danger of channels and message delivery taking over. It then becomes a parallel activity to what is going on in the business'.

This means that the IC role can be seen as the least attractive within this department, attracting the smallest budgets and sometimes the lowest calibre people.

In bed with HR...?

There was some distinct ambivalence on the subject of IC reporting to Human Resources. If an organisation is undergoing significant change, there was an acceptance amongst some respondents that it should sit with HR, particularly if HR is driving change. Certainly when it strays into the area of culture/change management it will need HR support to succeed. Furthermore location in HR also enables internal communication to plug into all aspects of human engagement, such as compensation and benefits, training and management development.

However several respondents felt strongly – the subject provoked some trenchant comments – that HR is not an effective voice on the board for the discipline. It is not seen as connected to employees or sensitive to their communication needs, and it was believed that this arrangement inhibits the role's true potential and indeed could compromise it:

- HR is too process driven for a role that has to capture and engage the hearts and minds of employees. It still has an element of a policing associated with it that does not sit easily with the bigger picture issues of employee engagement.

'They are the most unpeople focused individuals in the company. All about manuals and legal issues. They like things written down in a book. You need to be creative, intuitive'.

'Definitely not HR, they always fall back on process. If you treat communications the same way, it won't work'.

- HR does not naturally integrate communications into its role, and also rarely understands the external/brand dimension of culture.
- The IC discipline has to be seen by employees as objective. As an example, feedback sessions will be invalid and useless if conducted under the auspices of HR.

'It should be nowhere near HR – there is a danger of it not being seen to be objective'.

- It will be viewed internally as a messaging function for HR.

'If it is in HR it's just communicating HR messages'.

'HR is increasingly seen as a factory, and as such can be easily outsourced'.

'Less good at thinking through the everyday experience of the employee'.

- Lastly, there was some comment on HR's inability to understand the scope of internal communication.

'I have yet to meet an HR Director who has the bandwidth to really understand what internal communications can do'.

... or in bed with marketing?

Respondents acknowledged that in major customer facing sectors such as retail, there was a case for integrating the role with Marketing. The brand and the customer, they argue, should be at the core of the business; the delivery of the brand promise through employees can potentially make or break a business.

As the overall brand custodian, it's argued by some, Marketing should manage IC activities to ensure that there is no dissonance between brand positioning and promise and the actual brand experience delivered by employees.

It was also suggested that marketing disciplines and techniques should be applied to internal audiences and that this would be done most effectively when working alongside marketing professionals.

But there's a different view as well:

'Marketers have a natural preoccupation with the external customer. They have a resistance to taking the internal audience seriously, since it is not glamorous'.

'If it is in marketing, it is the death knell for it – it will always be a second-class citizen'.

Some respondents felt that the marketing function generally doesn't recognise that employees are the primary communicators of the brand. The net result, say the respondents, is that internal communication's primary role is as:

'A provider of channels or media for getting the external message across internally'.

Our respondents' conclusions

There was no unanimity on this issue, but the key consideration is that wherever it sits, it must be where the power is.

'It doesn't matter, so long as I am close to the key decision makers. It only works if it has the total support of the CEO'.

'Key messages come from senior management. Therefore it needs to be close to it'.

Our respondents generally agreed that:

- The department head with responsibility for IC must champion the role with authority and conviction.
- That HR, communication and the marketing/brand teams are aligned and work closely together on IC issues, since the skills and knowledge of all three are required.
- Wherever it sits it can be a lonely existence. There is often a sense that *'my own agenda is not being shared by those around me'*.

Our view

There is no right answer on this issue, and any debates about departmental ownership can be an unnecessary distraction. The sole arbiter of where it sits should be business strategy, which will itself determine what the organisation wants IC to do.

It would, however be wrong to assume that it does not actually matter where it sits. Its location can make a fundamental difference to perspective, priorities, remit and skill set – and the funding that is made available. Whilst several of our respondents would like to see a dedicated stand alone internal communication function reporting to the CEO, most recognise that this is a highly improbable scenario.

What is more likely, and this is already beginning to happen in a small number of companies, is that the relevant expertise of the HR, communication and marketing departments will be integrated into a new function, whose remit will encompass people, communication, change and the internal brand. This is a scenario that would satisfy most of the sample and it would help optimise the value of the role.

4. WHO ARE THEY?

Internal communication is not a recognised career choice for graduates. Traditionally PR and journalism have been the routes through which most people have come into the role – sometimes by design and sometimes by accident.

A large proportion of the sample (65%) agreed that their move into the role was a deliberate and pre-meditated decision. The motivation varied from person to person, but tended to fall into one of the following three categories.

- Previous involvement in, or exposure to, change management projects.
- An interest in the potential of internal communications to motivate and engage employees, and the power of what it could achieve within ‘the business’.
- An opportunity to energise and increase the sophistication of a previously reactive function.

‘It was a new niche and it was underdeveloped’.

*‘I was fascinated by the projects I heard about at PA Consulting.
It was more of a consultancy role’.*

*‘I had seen the effect on employees when communications was done well.
I had seen it work for me, and wanted the opportunity to influence senior management colleagues
to show how it could work for them’.*

So most of this group had some form of exposure to internal communication projects and regarded the area as exciting and underdeveloped. In the words of one respondent it provided an opportunity to

‘link the harder business edge with the softer people side’.

For the remainder of the sample the move into internal communication was either a process of natural evolution or just complete chance.

‘it just naturally happened’.

*‘I started out in broader PR and moved into employee communications
as my Intranet work developed’.*

*‘No I fell into it. I was doing PR roles, and was asked to cover the organising/messaging
for a staff conference when the person who should have been doing it fell sick.
It really went well and the MD, who was intrigued to put PR skills to work internally,
created an internal communications role for me to do’.*

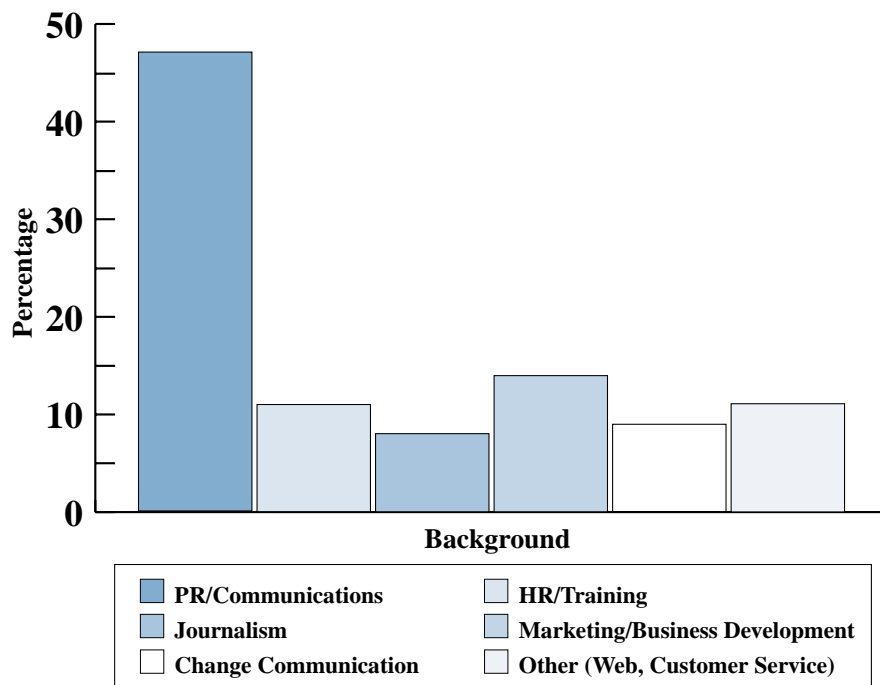
*‘Came into it by chance while I was doing an MBA and I was asked to redesign the magazine.
I was involved in a change management project but it had never struck me as something I wanted.
I wasn’t really aware of it’.*

*‘No, not by design. I was running our visual communication department
when it was realised that the company should have an internal communication function.
We joined forces with the house journal and hey presto,
we thought we had an internal communication function’.*

‘Who, in their right mind, would go into it intentionally’.

An interesting point was raised whilst exploring this issue. Those doing the job within a group function do not normally serve an initial internal communication ‘apprenticeship’ in an operating company. It was felt by some that this would be a benefit – it would help sustain authority over those internal communicators that work within the business units and create more empathy with their issues/needs.

Only one respondent went straight into a predetermined communication role. For the remainder of our analysis revealed the following:



Conclusion

PR/communications remains the main source of candidates. The transition from an external to an internal communication role is a reasonable straightforward one, and seems motivated by two factors; a sense that external communications/PR is less intellectually demanding, or a desire from a professional development perspective to become a fully rounded communications practitioner.

However as the role becomes more involved in activity relating to values, culture, change and internal branding, it is likely the role will source people from a wider range of disciplines.

5. SALARIES

We used the research as an opportunity to supplement the information on remuneration contained within our database. This confirmed that salaries paid to internal communicators, with one or two notable exceptions, are going up in line with the increasing importance of the role.

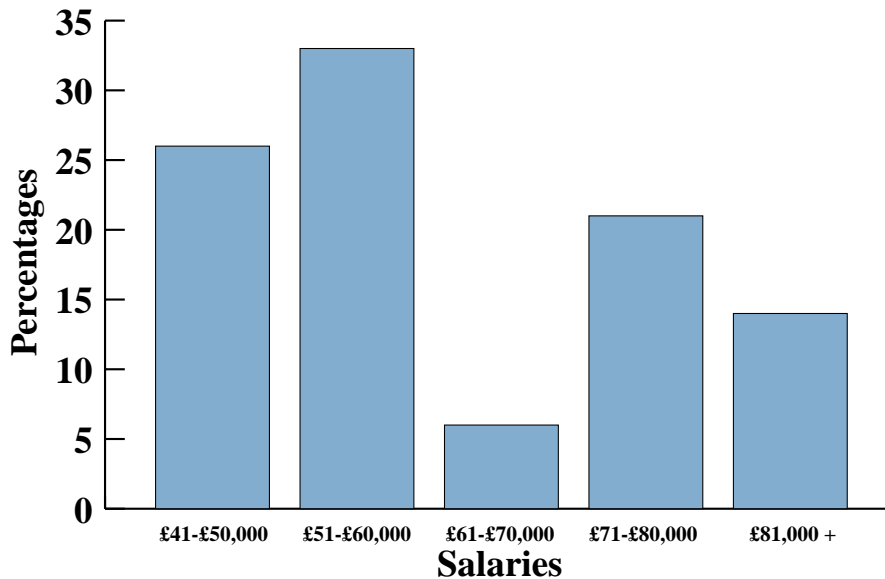
Salary levels are obviously determined by a number of factors including:

- Level of experience
- Profile and status of the function
- Background of practitioners
- Group vs. operating company

which means that there is no 'going rate' as such.

The research did not investigate bonus structure and percentages, or broader benefits packages.

The following breakdown is based on the findings from the research:



Our view

Salaries in excess of £80,000 are rare and the results above are slightly distorted by the inclusion of practitioners who either have a broader communications remit, or have been seconded to internal communications from another more senior role.

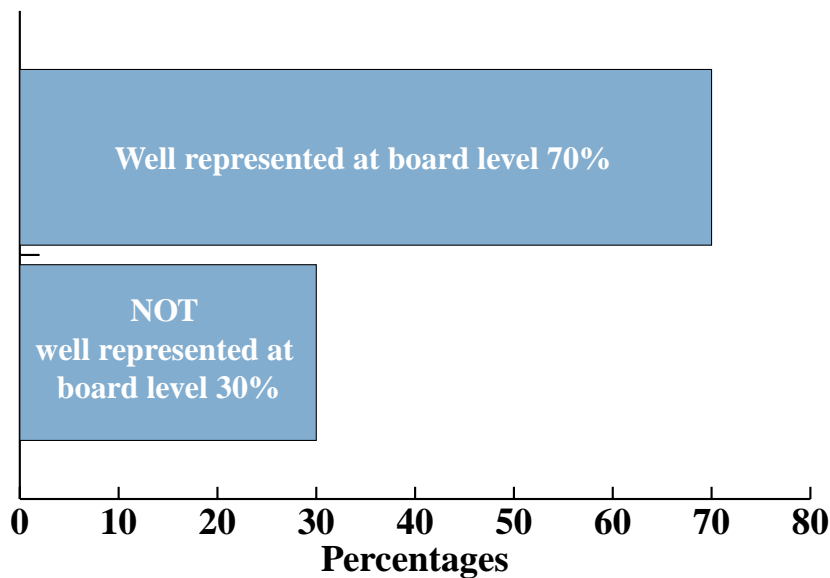
The average salary for the role now ranges between £50,000 and £60,000, but salaries in the £60,000 to £80,000 bracket are becoming increasingly common.

6. HOW IMPORTANT ARE THEY?

We asked two questions to get some idea of the current status of the internal communication role:

- How well represented is it at board level?
- Does it have the ear of the CEO?

6.1 At board level



Encouragingly 70% of the sample believe that it is represented effectively at board or executive committee level.

'The corporate affairs director understands it and champions it making sure it gets discussed at the Board'.

'It is represented at board level by the HR Director who does it well'.

This should not be confused with the overall 'buy in' of the Board which is an altogether different matter. In fact it is clear that a unanimous and united commitment to internal communication at Board level is still a rare phenomenon. This is as much a function of understanding as it is of cultural or attitudinal resistance.

'Not many of the Board have a deep understanding of what it is about'.

'The senior people see communications as about bits of paper'.

'Conflict between those that think it is information, and those that think it is about facilitating effective relationships'.

Doubt about the effectiveness of its representation was most evident amongst those who sat in corporate communications, either because the director had relatively low aspirations for the role and a limited grasp of its strategic significance...

'The corporate communications director is nervous about it, and lacks the confidence and knowledge to represent it well'.

or because he/she was more externally focused and naturally leant more towards their comfort zone, ie the City, media (which naturally mirror the CEO's priorities).

'He understands it, but his first love is external, and I don't get the impression that he really places the same emphasis on it in relation to external'.

'He is much more interested in external. Internal is not his area of expertise. Getting him to think differently about internal will be one of my main challenges'.

However these instances were rare and it is generally felt that there is a new breed of communications directors who know it is important, who do understand it, and who are therefore highly supportive.

6.2 The CEO's perspective

Most of the respondents believe that internal communications is very much on the leadership agenda.

'The CEO is very interested and I have a monthly afternoon meeting with him which he regards as sacrosanct'.

'The CEO is a strong believer in internal communication. He realises that it is key in business transformation'.

Both the CEO's of the organisations above are in their early 40's and the new and younger breed of CEO seems more likely to be enlightened about its importance. The findings from the research certainly indicate that there is an increasing number of CEO's who are passionate about the engagement and commitment of their employees, and are convinced of the value of internal communication in helping achieve that goal.

'The CEO has added resource to the department. He is fully behind it and personally gives support to it – he is a personal sponsor and there are not many things he is prepared to sponsor'.

However this CEO commitment did not resonate with everybody's experience and for some the picture is not quite as rosy. Their CEO's have it on their agenda but it is not a priority. They recognise its importance in a traditional sense, acknowledging the need to communicate with employees, but it is largely a platitudinal stance. There is no real behavioural or emotional buy in; it is not yet embedded in the fabric of the organisation. The external environment is always more pressing and is perceived to have a much greater impact on corporate reputation. As a result the person with responsibility for external communications is deemed more important and therefore has greater access to the CEO.

'He is supportive and committed but what keeps him awake at night is the media and the City'.

'Crises are always external, which means that the external person will always be the first point of contact for the CEO'.

'It is still a battle to get from an implementation function to an advisory function'.

Importantly this last quote came from a practitioner in a company where the role is well represented at board level and where it has the ear of the CEO. This gives some insight into the scale of the challenge.

What is beyond any reasonable doubt is that the underlying corporate philosophy has changed in recent years, and there is encouraging evidence of organisations' belief in the value added properties of enhanced communication,

'Not terribly well represented at board level but we're getting there. We have a respected voice'.

'It has become more senior over the past two years, and now has a greater input into strategy'.

'They (the senior management team) are just beginning to appreciate that you need to communicate all the time, rather than when you have a big announcement'.

'It's getting to the stage where it is beginning to be seen as more strategic'.

*'The senior management team recognises its value
but doesn't understand how strategic it can be'.*

'It's gaining more authority, the senior team are beginning to be convinced'.

6.3 Obstacles to progress

- As a group, IC practitioners are not yet sufficiently business focused and their activities are not yet linked to (nor measured against) specific business outcomes. It is a notoriously difficult activity to measure, since internal communication is essentially an enabler or facilitator, not a deliverer. Inevitably therefore there is still a lack of evidence, acceptable to the leadership, that demonstrates the impact of internal communication on business performance. As long as the benefits remain difficult to quantify in financial terms, requests for funding will compare unfavourably with other demands. It also means that it will not get the leadership airtime it needs.

'The biggest resource issue is senior management time'.

The lack of resource referred to above creates a vicious circle: internal communication requires budget and time to demonstrate its value, but it is often given neither, since it is not deemed to add significant value.

Deprived of budget and resource, practitioners face an uphill struggle.

*'Difficult to be strategic if you are bogged down in reactive
and operational stuff that you can't delegate to anyone else'.*

- A lack of understanding still within business generally about what it is and what it can do. Too often 'internal communication' is seen as an outcome in itself, but not as a clearly defined role that can impact on business performance. And because it is something that is supposedly part of everyone's job its broader purpose and its remit is unclear.

*'It can get lost in terms of its own identity, as it is subsumed
into different departments, business units or cross functional teams'.*

- Perceptions and image – its origins and perceived role remain a fundamental obstacle in that the association with the management of the delivery channels and messages still remains, thereby devaluing and restricting the potential of the discipline,

'It still has not shaken off this newsletter image'.

'perceptions, the man that does the magazine'.

*'limited perceptions of what it is, and can do.
It limits your ability to get your solutions heard'.*

which means that it is often seen as merely a disseminator of information, an activity that is deemed non-strategic.

'they just look to internal communication to produce things/magazines'.

- Everyone has a view on it, which means that it does not have the authority of other specialist fields of expertise.

*'A lot of people think they can do internal communication
and that they know better'.*

Since it is not a precise science, with well accepted and measurable outcomes, interpretation of what communications entails is seen by non-communications people as highly subjective.

'There is very little to prevent the senior management team saying 'I disagree with you', even after you have presented a well thought out proposal'.

- Many practitioners simply do not understand or speak the language of business and finance. Respondents were almost unanimous on this point. Also in an attempt to create some form of mystique around what they do they have tended to create their own communications language.

'Most internal communication people try and create a mumbo jumbo around what they do'.

Some respondents also highlighted the risk of adopting language akin to that of a 'welfare officer' ('we can be too idealistic at times').

This undermines both the credibility and relevance of the function. Practitioners need to be more pragmatic and business focused. If the benefits and impact of internal communications cannot be extolled in business/financial language, it is virtually impossible to command the attention and respect of the board.

- Whilst the quality of practitioners may have improved dramatically over the past five years, the internal communication role has not attracted enough high calibre individuals. Inevitably perceptions of the value of internal communication are intrinsically intertwined with the quality of the people who represent it. This has helped ensure that the function remains peripheral in many organisations,

'people think we are boring, banging on about process'.

resulting in a mindset which could be described as half paranoia and half inferiority complex.

Furthermore practitioners, by their own admission, have not been sufficiently convincing and effective at championing the cause of internal communication.

'We have to be seen as credible business people, not banging on about things that don't matter'.

- The job title itself is regarded as obsolete by most respondents. It is restrictive and has the effect of compartmentalising the discipline. It also has a certain amount of negative baggage attached to it.

7. WHAT DO THEY DO?

The research was not designed to undertake an in-depth analysis of current best practice or provide a comprehensive audit of internal communication activities in the UK. Others have done that and we had no wish to emulate their good work.

However to get some sense of what IC is actually doing in business today, we asked interviewees to summarise their key areas of focus.

For further information on the responsibilities associated with the role, two **Role Specifications** have been included in the Appendices.

The research confirmed that its remit and focus varies enormously between organisations.

■ **Communicating strategy**

Over 60% of the sample mentioned that the primary purpose of the function is to ensure clarity of understanding of business goals and strategy, so that everyone understands where the company is going and why.

'The obvious thing, corporate strategy and turning it into English in a way that is consistent with external. When I joined no one knew what the strategy was'.

For global organisations with employees spread across the world, who often have a tenuous connection with the corporate centre, an awareness and understanding of the company strategy, and their part in its achievement, is a pre-requisite of performance.

'Managers must understand the priorities of the business. How can they make decisions if they don't know these'.

■ **Driving employee engagement and aligning them behind company goals.**

The natural next stage, and therefore mentioned by a similar percentage of respondents, is the use of communication to motivate and engage employees behind the business strategy with a view to facilitating the achievement of certain business objectives.

'My job is to unplug the flow of information that helps people know how to do their job and how it fits into the achievement of organisational goals'.

'Communications now has a significant input into most business planning and strategy issues, as well as individual business initiatives; how to we tell them about it and get them to do it'.

■ **Change communications/behavioural change**

Using communication as an instrument to drive cultural and organisational change or to change behaviours is widespread, and it is the task which practitioners find most fulfilling and stimulating, partly because it puts them at the heart of the organisation, and partly because it is more intellectually demanding.

Several members of the sample were involved in top level behavioural change projects, working with top execs (e.g. MD's of the businesses) on the development of leadership behaviours that are consistent with and reinforce corporate values, goals etc. ('Walk the talk').

'We are working on relevant leadership behaviours that will help the employees engage'.

'We have identified the changes in leadership behaviour that will lead to growth'.

■ Designing communication structures/processes

This covers everything that relates to building, integrating, and enhancing the communications infrastructure. Tasks included the creation of delivery channels and feedback mechanisms, helping business units develop their own expertise by creating a network of ‘communicators’ and putting in the processes and structures to facilitate the flow of information throughout the organisation.

‘Integration of the global function and creating a communications function that suited the shape of the new company’.

■ Employee branding/internalising the brand

This facet of the role tended to be more prevalent amongst organisations with strong customer facing operations. Communicating a brand position through above the line advertising is only part of the communication challenge. Organisations need to ensure that their employees’ behaviour reflects the brand values and brand promise. In this context internal communicators, although not yet a significant number, play a key role in exposing customer facing staff to the thinking behind the new positioning and translating its meaning into relevant behaviours. Some were also involved in projects to help staff to understand the things that drive customer satisfaction and getting employees to buy into this. One respondent referred to this as ‘helping staff better serve customers’.

‘A large part of my work is concerned with brand management; how to reflect the brand from inside out, and ensuring employees know how to behave as brand ambassadors’.

■ Knowledge sharing

It is now axiomatic that one of the ways of increasing efficiency within an organisation is to increase knowledge sharing. The best ways of doing things are often in people’s heads and this information needs to be unlocked. For some members of our sample this is very much the focus of their role – trying to engineer a change from a ‘Push’ to ‘Pull’ communications culture, and developing the communications infrastructure to support this (e-enabling the internal communication process).

‘It’s about unravelling the wealth of intelligence within the business, and then directing it’.

This remit – creating the mechanisms and culture that will help encourage and enable knowledge sharing – can give the communication role considerable influence.

■ Leadership communication/behaviours

Only a small proportion of the surveyed practitioners were involved in this level of work. Normally working closely with HR it involves developing the leadership’s communication skills so that they communicate and connect with employees more effectively as well as providing them with the information that would enable them to be more effective leaders. Formulating leadership behaviours that reflect the values and vision of the company is the other important aspect of this advisory role.

■ Putting communication ‘into line’

This is becoming an increasingly important part of the role, and one that several respondents were involved in. It entails liaising closely with business unit heads and their management teams to raise the level of communication skills, as well as ‘coaching’ managers on their messaging.

‘The logical conclusion if this is done well, is that you make yourself redundant’.

‘The key weapon is the line manager’.

■ Intranet

In most instances, responsibility for the development and management of the intranet as a communication tool – content and targeting – lies with the internal communication discipline. However this was the focus of the role for only a small percentage of the respondents (less than 10%). It tended to be delegated to a member of the team.

*‘If you are in internal communications, and you haven’t got intranet,
you’ve lost your most powerful tool.
If you have ownership of the intranet then you have power and identity’.*

In fact only a small proportion of the respondents placed much emphasis on tools and delivery channels as the primary focus of their role. This may be an encouraging sign that practitioners are progressing to a higher and more strategic level.

However, it may not be wise for IC people to take their eyes off the need to demonstrate real skills in the search for some illusory notion of seniority. Delivering on the basic craft aspects of the role, against which they are primarily measured, is a pre-requisite to moving up the intellectual food chain.

‘You’ve got to earn your spurs in implementing’.

8. SKILL SET AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

8.1 Current skill set

There is no consensus of opinion among our respondents about the skills, expertise and knowledge that are required of today's internal communication professional. We identified over 25 different, although often overlapping skills that our respondents said they needed, all of which could be reasonably deemed as mandatory.

This is not altogether surprising since the role sits in one of three different departments – corporate communications, HR, marketing – and respondents inevitably highlight the skills and components of the role that are relevant to the focus and remit of that department. It is also, as we have seen, a more mature role in some organisations than others.

However what is beyond any doubt is that the breadth, sophistication and rigour of the skill set, along with the impact, influence and importance of the role, has changed dramatically over the past five years. The role is considerably more diverse and complex than it used to be.

The new breed of communicator (few in number as yet) must be equally comfortable with brand management, change management, organisational behaviour, and reputation management. They also need to equip themselves with new skills such as coaching and facilitating. In other words they need to be equally at home in marketing, corporate communication or HR, and versatile enough to operate beyond the confines of the function in which they sit.

It does not, however, mean that one has to be an expert in all these,

*'When we are working with HR,
we will defer to them on organisational behaviour and design issues'.*

What is also abundantly clear is that if the role is to gain respect, and also to achieve the status its practitioners want – to be seen as a key strategic function – they must concentrate on developing:

- i) Core management and behavioural competencies, such as influencing skills.
- ii) Business and financial acumen – they have to learn to speak the language of business. In Myers Briggs terms internal communications professionals are typically NF's (intuition, feeling) and they must focus on acquiring the skills and learning the language of ST's (sensing and thinking), the very people they are seeking to impress.

Neither of the above attributes are traditionally associated with the internal communication role, but it is shortcomings in these two areas that are the root of the image problem that the role has to contend with. Without them it is difficult to operate with any degree of real authority.

In an attempt to create a template of the skill set and competencies of today's modern practitioner, we have pulled together and analysed the wide range of responses from respondents. These have been broken into two categories; Soft (the behavioural competencies referred to above) and Hard (technical, business).

i) Soft skills

■ Influencing

The ability to influence decisions, perceptions and opinions at all levels, was deemed to be the most important attribute. For a role that has no real authority, (and a business value that is far from proven), but yet impacts on everyone in the company at all levels, it is obvious that knowing who to influence, and how to influence them is mandatory. It is a straightforward formulae:

If you cannot present a rigorous business case with authority and conviction you will not get the airtime.

‘Influence and persuasiveness – there is so much competition for people’s attention. Why should they listen to you?’.

‘The ability to influence the leadership teams in senior management populations (who always want a quick fix) and to persuade them to invest their time’.

■ **Political skills/diplomacy**

Often it is a high profile role that has a multitude of interfaces across the company and which inevitably strays into many areas of line management responsibility. It is also regularly at the hub of the politics of any company.

‘If you can’t weave your way through the political minefield you cannot operate effectively’.

‘You have to be politically astute. It can be high profile and you tend to know a lot more about what is going on. Other more senior people in the company may know less’.

Managing this tension in a diplomatic and sensitive manner is an art that has to be mastered if success in the role is to be achieved.

■ **Relationship building/networking**

Respondents told us that to be effective, practitioners need to be connected. In order to be connected they have to be good networkers. This puts a premium on relationship building and people skills, which have to be exercised at all levels. Interestingly three interviewees used identical words in the context of this particular skill,

‘You must like people’.

A genuine interest and curiosity in people, an easy and approachable manner, and an outgoing personality are all seen as fundamental.

‘You have to be approachable or people will not be prepared to tell you negative things’.

It is also critical that the internal communicator has his/her ear to the ground and knows what is going on, what the issues are, how and where employees get information and what they do with it. Because if you cannot offer intelligence and insight, you will be unable to add the value from which you will derive credibility and competitive edge (vis à vis other members of senior management).

‘If the MD asks what the general view is on some issue I need to have an answer’.

In essence it is a linking function which has to connect daily, and develop meaningful relationships with many parts of the organisation at all levels. Along with influencing skills this is a skill that historically has not been associated with the role, and has been a significant factor in its struggle to gain credibility.

■ **Listening skills**

Curiosity, sensitivity, keen antennae are all key components of relationship building, networking and political skills, and are similarly key requirements of the skilled listener.

*‘You have to have ferocious listening skills
– you have to understand where people are coming from’.*

‘A good listener, since you can’t be effective if you don’t know what is going on’.

■ Resilience and tenacity

Most internal communicators are engaged in a constant struggle to demonstrate the value of what they do. Too much time can be spent overcoming an intrinsic resistance and scepticism that exists in many organisations. Being at the hub of the politics of a company exposes the role to further sniping and carping. Internal communication practitioners will simply not survive, and will certainly not prosper if they do not possess above average levels of resilience, stubbornness (*‘I have to be bloody minded’*) and tenacity.

‘A lot of people regularly require you to prove you are worthwhile’.

‘Internal communication people get brow beaten, depressed and leave’.

*‘It is an area where you get so many knock backs
– you have to be strong and be prepared to stand your ground’.*

■ Drive, energy and passion

Internal communicators have got to be able to enthuse and excite people, and need a real, uncompromising belief in what they are trying to achieve. It is this quality that gets them noticed, and helps them to stand out.

*‘The best IC people want to make the company a better place.
They tend to be ballsy!’.*

ii) Hard skills

■ Writing

‘You have got to be a good writer. This is a core skill and critical’.

This skill was mentioned by 70% of the sample, more than any other. That it was not mentioned by 100% of the sample was probably because it is a given (*‘a basic hygiene factor’*) and because of the understandable desire to emphasise the more high value skills that shift the focus from the role’s newsletter/message crafting origins, as illustrated by the following comments.

*‘There is too much emphasis on crafting and broadcasting the message.
It is important, but it should be more outcome focused, not activity focused’.*

‘The days of the ex-journalist are numbered’.

But the fact remains that good writing skills are an essential part of the internal communicator’s armoury, without which they cannot do the most basic parts of the job expected of them.

Essentially it is the ability to:

- Write well in different mediums (Board papers, articles, memos, announcements, speeches, presentations).
- Pick out, distil and translate key messages.
- Write for other people and turn management speak into something communicable and engaging.

*‘A facility to help people express what they want to say in a way that is engaging.
For instance putting the CEO’s plans/ideas in good copy’.*

- Making things understandable and more importantly to understand the translation process between what is said (meant) and what is heard/received (understood).

■ **Media management/electronic communications**

Our respondents said that a well developed understanding of different media and their relevance to different audiences and messages is essential. As is an understanding of how to communicate with new technology and understand the impact it will have.

*‘Which media for which message, we have 1500 intranet sites.
If you’re going to move from push to pull it is vital to help people navigate’.*

■ **Business and financial literacy**

Previously perhaps less critical, but now the attribute that is most lacking amongst practitioners – and the one most likely to transform the credibility of the role. All the respondents recognised this shortcoming.

*‘We have to be seen as credible business people,
not banging on about things that don’t matter’.*

If people in the role do not develop this attribute they will not be taken as seriously as they would like.

■ **Understanding the audience/customer focus**

Just as the external communicator must understand and therefore be able to provide insights into external audiences and their needs, so the internal communicator has to understand and provide intelligence on internal audiences and interpret their needs. There was a general agreement amongst most of the sample that they should focus on developing their expertise in this area since it is possibly the greatest asset they have.

‘A good communications person gathers intelligence’.

*‘Your area of expertise is what you know about the people in your company.
People at the top can’t know as much about the way
people in the company are responding to your CEO’s message’.*

*‘Being the repository of all the qualitative and
quantitative information about employees gives you a lot of influence’.*

It requires analysis, research, intelligence and dialogue as well as empathy and real sensitivity to the moods, emotions and insecurities of employees.

*‘An ability to put yourself in the place of employees and realise
the impact that an issue will have on them, and how they will react to that.
It requires a wider perspective than working life.
You have to think in the context of family, job security, holidays,
and communicate to them in the mode of getting up and coming to work,
not in the mode of corporate goals’.*

However a number of interviewees cautioned against two possible dangers. First the claim to possess special insight into the employee audience could antagonise line managers, provoking the ‘So you know more about my people than I do’ response. Second the risk of being seen as an unofficial welfare officer representing the needs of the employee. The accent should be on

rigorous analysis, enabling the internal communicator to answer questions such as:

- Where is morale low?
- Why?
- What does this mean in business terms?
- What can be done about it and how?
- Is it worth it, what is the payback?

■ **Knowledge of the business**

Internal communicators must have a comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the organisation, its goals, the strategy, how it works, the politics etc.

‘You have to know what is going on. If you don’t you are not particularly valuable’.

They must be aware of the issues that are driving the CEO, the FD, the strategy director (*‘understanding of what keeps the business awake at night’*), and ensure that their communication programmes are designed to address these wherever possible.

‘You have got to talk to them about business, not communications’.

■ **Strategic insight**

Strategic thinking skills are now expected of senior managers in almost every function of an organisation, and internal communication is no exception. At the most basic level practitioners must have the intellectual ability to understand and be interested in corporate strategy. The ability to engage in strategic dialogue with senior managers in the businesses, and in other functions, is also a prerequisite to being taken seriously.

‘Think strategically, bigger picture and make the links, as well as evaluating the knock on effect’.

‘Bigger picture also entails accommodating the external environment into the thinking process’.

Long term strategic vision, as one interviewee pointed out, is also necessary to help determine the future purpose and direction of the role (*‘What you are trying to do with the role’*).

■ **Change management**

Major organisational change is very much a fact of life for most UK employees, which means that a ‘steady state’ or ‘business as usual’ communication is pretty rare. A basic (at the least) knowledge of change management (processes, theory, psychology, facilitation etc) and how a change management programme works is therefore critical. Internal communication practitioners should aim to add value through their insight into the human perspective of change – how people will react, determining the support that employees and managers need, communication needs and communication strategy etc – and focus on acquiring the experience and skills that will enable them to do that.

■ **Internal branding – ‘Living the brand’**

This was not mentioned by many members of the sample (c. 15%), a reflection of the fact that only a small proportion sat in marketing, where involvement in internal branding programmes – aligning employee behaviour with brand promise/values – is likely to be more pronounced. But increasingly internal communicators are becoming involved in such projects and they will have to develop a more sophisticated understanding of brands and what is involved in building,

communicating and delivering them. Without this they will not have the skills to bring the 'brand alive' internally, or manage the integrity of the brand. If they fail to add value here, they will be excluded from the high level brand thinking and decision making and marketers will appropriate the more exciting tasks.

■ Presentation skills

To get buy in, to win people over, to motivate, to secure bigger budgets etc. All these place a premium on presentation skills. These are now mandatory.

■ Creativity

The challenging task of engaging employees and aligning them behind the goals of the company, changing attitudes and behaviour etc, requires high levels of creativity. This is creativity in the sense of original and innovative thinking, not gimmicks and stunts or the 'sexy' communication that some CEO's are looking for. This takes internal communication into a realm beyond the mechanical production process with which it has historically been associated. Inspired creativity will help ensure that it does add value and will lift it to another level.

8.2 Upskilling

Interviewees were then asked what skills, expertise and knowledge they felt they needed to acquire or develop to enhance their credibility and effectiveness in the role.

The responses in order of frequency of mention were as follows:

- Influencing and negotiation
- Organisational change/change management
- Psychology of communication
- Organisational development
- Understanding the business
- Training, coaching, consulting
- Leadership communication and behaviour
- Process/best practice (including measurement)
- Political skills (how to understand the politics and how to be a better politician)

Other things mentioned included sales, speech writing, knowledge management, presentation skills, media training and financial literacy (each with one mention).

The amount of interviewees citing measurement was worryingly low (under 10%) particularly as rigorous measurement is a recognised achilles heel, and greater rigour in this area is a pre-requisite to getting senior management on side.

*'Better understanding of how communication activity impacts the bottom line.
Therefore more rigorous measurement capability,
which would support a drive to more central strategic involvement'.*

The lack of interest in improving skills relating to financial and business awareness was equally disconcerting, given the impact that these have on personal credibility and impact.

There was widespread interest in improving influencing and negotiation skills, partly to enhance credibility with senior management and partly because the function has no real authority and has to fight for airtime.

'Influencing skills – to weave through a network of people who have other pressures on them, and to manage some strong and traditional personalities'.

'Better negotiating skills would be helpful when I'm in a sticky position, up against some stubborn bugger'.

Similarly several interviewees were keen to develop a more comprehensive understanding of change and the communications levers that can be deployed to effect change or to break down cultural barriers.

Coaching communication skills to line management is a skill that will probably become a more important part of the armoury for some internal communicators, and was mentioned by several members of the sample,

'Coaching will become the key skill'.

'Coaching managers on their messaging'.

Our view

The role has become more complex, and the regular interaction with the leadership team – not previously a characteristic of the role – has highlighted and exposed weaknesses that previously went undetected when they were less relevant. The skill set is undoubtedly more sophisticated than it was, and broader management competencies and behaviours are essential for the bigger roles. On a positive note this is recognised by the respondents. However there did not seem to be a determination to follow through – one factor being uncertainty over where the necessary training could be sourced.

The skills and competencies that a top-flight professional now needs are laid out below. We appreciate that this is an exceptionally demanding profile, and that it is not realistic to expect someone to fulfil all these criteria. However this is the profile that practitioners should be aspiring to:

- Influencing skills
- Ability to think strategically about communications
- Business awareness/literacy
- Writing and presentation skills
- An understanding of the principles of organisational development
- Branding
- Communications psychology
- Intranet and e-communication development
- Creative communication skills
- Facilitation skills
- Consultancy skills
- Resilience, courage and self belief

8.3 Professional development and training

Respondents were asked what they do to ensure that they are equipped with the right skills and keep abreast of best practice.

The absence of any respected and established training courses/programmes for internal communicators was remarked upon. There was almost universal agreement that there was nothing of any real value.

'Does not exist'.

'If there are, haven't come across them'.

'I don't know of any'.

'No good training available'.

'But where, there lies the rub'.

'I am not aware of their existence'.

There was some awareness of training courses, but since those that mentioned them had not been on them (or received reliable feedback) they were unsure as to the quality and value of them. The Industrial Society which runs a Postgraduate Diploma in Internal Communications Management in association with Kingston University Business School was mentioned a few times. Also mentioned was a new course developed by ASPIC (ITEM Group) and a 3 day course run by the London Business School (The Individualised Corporation).

Conferences were generally regarded as mediocre at best, and a waste of time at worst, although two members of the sample were active participants on the conference speaking circuit.

This situation begs two questions; first, why is there no recognised training programme and second, is one actually needed? The explanation for the first question seemed to lie in the fact that the discipline was still embryonic,

'Dearth of quality because the industry is not big enough'.

In answer to the second question at least half the interviewees believed that there was, if not a pressing need, certainly a gap for a recognised certified training programme or body that brings everything together.

'Should be a body that is broad based and that does the training'.

Obviously it would need strong credentials to break through the scepticism and apathy that currently exists. What would this cover? Compiling the views and suggestions of the interviewees an outline modular programme might look as follows:

- Organisational behaviour and development
- Psychology of communication
- Change management (behavioural change, communicating in a changing environment)
- Electronic communication
- Measurement and evaluation
- Branding/brands and alignment of organisational and brand values
- Business and financial literacy
- NLP & Emotional Intelligence – self awareness, awareness of language, persuasiveness
- Influencing
- Coaching and facilitation

Not everyone was convinced that training in more HR orientated areas such as organisational behaviour and development was necessary,

*'I defer to HR on organisational behaviour and design issues
and I don't have the time to pick up skills in this area'.*
'I have never undertaken any training in organisational design.'

I should have done it, but it has never held me back’.

‘Danger of becoming too academic, too removed. This model and that model’.

The question of who would run this programme was not discussed in any detail, and no real suggestions were forthcoming, but it is a subject that warrants further investigation.

It was interesting to note that interest in business and financial literacy training was quite low in light of the general recognition that greater expertise and rigour is needed in this area to, as one interviewee put it, ‘sit at the top table’. There is no shortage of options, since it is a field that is well served by a number of shorter courses run by the management schools and universities.

Keeping up to date

So if external training is not an integral feature of their personal development plans, how do practitioners keep up to date with the latest thinking in their specialist field. The answer would seem to be through networking, seminars run by organisations such as the IABC, BABC and the Communication Directors Forum (and their websites) and more importantly by ‘tapping into’ and attending the forums (workshops, seminars, etc) run by the specialist consultancies. These have become well recognised networking opportunities and some have now established their own specific network groups.

‘The best way is to go to a specialist company that is doing it all the time’.

‘Interaction with the specialist agencies is the most valuable way of keeping up to date’.

In this context, ITEM Group (The ASPIC lunches), Smythe Dorward Lambert and Hedron received regular mentions. It is, however, accepted that there is ‘no such thing as a free lunch’, and that these are also selling opportunities for the consultancies.

‘They use them to sell themselves, but we also learn a lot’.

However this further underlines the need for neutral ground where networking can take place and an independent training/education body, something that was well illustrated by the following quote,

‘So that you don’t feel you are being sold stuff by the consultancies every time you go training’.

Other bodies and networking groups mentioned included FUEL, the Conference Board and Corporate Leadership Council. Half of our respondents conceded that they do not do enough reading, partly through lack of time (including that available on websites, there is too much to consume) and partly because they found much of the published material turgid and dull.

‘So many industry magazines are dreary and dull’.

9. CAREER PROGRESSION – WHERE CAN THEY GO NEXT?

IC practitioners face two dilemmas: first there is no legitimate and clearly defined career progression through internal communication; and second the most senior job in internal – normally Head of Internal Communications, although Internal Communications Manager can often be the most senior specialist position – stops some way below senior management status.

‘It’s a big question for me. Where do I go next’.

A natural ceiling has been created by a number of factors and there is therefore no obvious position for the more experienced practitioner to aspire to. Therefore not surprisingly there are comparatively few people who can, or choose, to make it a career.

*‘Gone as far as I can with it.
I can’t see a more senior role in internal communication within the community’.*

Furthermore the practical importance of internal versus external is such that the external will always be prioritised in the CEO’s mind. A direct reporting line to the CEO is almost unheard of.

Although it may sit in the corporate communications function most of the sample either did not aspire to the corporate communications director position, or were resigned to the fact that they did not possess the necessary skill set and experience.

‘I’m not interested in being head of corporate communications’.

*‘By this stage we are possibly ill equipped as we have spent too much time
on organisational change and other internal communications’.*

‘We have to face up to the fact that we don’t have the skills to be a communications director’.

Since almost all the respondents were heading up internal communication in their respective organisations, they were asked what they saw as the next step in their career.

In summary, one third of the sample wanted unequivocally to stay in internal communication, and the other two thirds were either more flexible (*‘maybe HR, communications or organisational change’*); on secondment and therefore planning to return to their original function; or simply did not know.

The options that were considered are summarised below. It should be noted that several members of the sample volunteered more than one option – very few had clear and unequivocal intentions.

A bigger role in a bigger company

The route mentioned by most respondents (approx 25% of the group) was a more senior internal communications role in a bigger company (preferably Internal Communications Director).

‘A bigger company with bigger resources and bigger challenges’.

Bigger essentially meant a global communications role in a global organisation;

*‘with this comes the cultural diversity and then new challenges
such as the complexities of scale and time zones’.*

One of the main obstacles to this aspiration, as one person pointed out, however is that,

‘there are still not many internal communication directors roles’.

Same role, bigger company

Given the absence of any structured career ladder within internal communication in most companies, it was not surprising that a move to another similar role in a different organisation was seen as one of the few options available,

*‘if you want bigger and better internal communication jobs
then I think you have to be prepared to move to bigger and better organisations’.*

*‘Moving to another organisation with a similar level of role,
but different challenges/issues’.*

Consultancy

A move into an internal communications consultancy is a popular option. The appeal is the variety of industry sectors and clients, scope for development and growth, the opportunity to develop consulting skills, the distance from client politics, and the perceived troubleshooting nature of client assignments,

‘People need you, so there is always an important job to be done’.

Corporate Communications Director

Six members of the sample expressed an interest in a corporate communications director role within a subsidiary of a larger plc (they recognised that a group role would not be realistic). Two of these had previously held broad communications positions, and therefore felt equipped (now that they also had a period in internal communication under their belt) to take on a remit that encompassed external and internal. An additional incentive in this respect was the recognition that internal has less clout, and that remaining in the role would hold them back,

*‘if I speak to someone internally about media, they will listen to me,
and accept me as an expert. In internal communication everyone has a view,
and it is much more difficult to differentiate yourself as a manager’.*

Change Management

This is seen as an attractive option by a small proportion of the sample (less than 10%).

*‘Next step will hopefully be into change management. But not HR.
In HR you don’t get hard business strategy and communications strategy.
It’s all about personnel’.*

Three respondents had not yet given it much thought and genuinely did not know what they would do next.

The principal issue which arises out of this analysis, is the absence of a recognised career path and related to this the relative non-existence of a more senior (director) level position to which people can aspire. Whether the situation is likely to change in the future, and whether there is any solution that provides practitioners with more options will be explored in the next section.

10. HOW DO THEY ADD VALUE?

While everyone agrees that communication is something that all managers should instinctively and systematically be doing, in reality they don't. Internal communication needs to be planned, facilitated, co-ordinated and linked to business strategy. It also needs to be relevant, and at times distinctive and innovative. This is not something that will happen by chance and nor can it be left to chance. It requires a specialist role with specialist skills to drive it. This is the basic premise underpinning the value that the role brings.

The report's respondents elaborated on this and helped us to summarise how the role of the internal communication professional is currently adding new value to their organisations; and how, as a consequence, the role is gaining more high level support. Some of the most important benefits are outlined below.

- Just as the external communications team provides insights into external stakeholder audiences (the investment community, politicians et al) so the IC function is now recognised as adding considerable value by providing insights into the internal stakeholder audience.

In this capacity the practitioner can reflect back (to the CEO/senior management team) what the employees are thinking, feeling and doing about everything from corporate strategy to a new change programme. This ability to describe how things will *'play out'* amongst employees can significantly affect and improve the decision making process.

- Effectively managed and targetted internal communication activity, that is presented clearly and persuasively can help employees understand what their company is doing and where it is going. In so doing it facilitates the leadership's task of aligning employees behind organisational objectives. It can then help employees to do their job by providing them with information that helps them understand what their role is within the bigger picture.
- But employees must not only understand how they can contribute to success – they must also wish to do so. Internal communication professionals, in partnership with others, play a key role in the process of engaging people in what the business is about, which over time will hopefully lead to both intellectual engagement and emotional involvement on the part of the employee.
- Linked to both of the above, the role of internal communication in a business transformation/change management situation is clearly pivotal. Whether it is an M & A, a downsizing or a restructuring/re-engineering process, successful change depends on more than the management team having a clear vision. Stakeholders must accept the need for change intellectually and emotionally. Two way internal communication is the vital cog that helps engage hearts and minds, without which no change programme can work. It enables individual to understand that reasons for change and increases the likelihood that they themselves will become catalysts for transformation.
- It helps create a dialogue with employees, and in times of change especially, people need to be listened to more than ever. Upward communication opportunities can also relieve employee tension and serve as an early warning device for future problems.
- It leads and holds the key to information flows, and advises on the style, timing, targeting and content of CEO communication.
- For companies in the service economy, where customer service is a key element of the brand experience, internal communication helps ensure that employees are committed and feel motivated to behave in a way that delivers the brand promise to the customer.
- It provides the tools and consultancy to help managers to communicate more professionally with their teams, and therefore plays a key supporting role in driving communications through the line. Influencing the behaviour of line management (via training intervention and remuneration – direct link between behaviour and payment) can also influence the work environment.

*'Role is changing to one of helping middle management
– coaching and equipping middle managers to be better communicators'.*

'Most IC professionals struggle with this issue of how to get managers to communicate more professionally. Yet the key weapon is the line manager'.

It cannot do all of this on its own, but it acts as either the catalyst, glue or link in all of the above – it is the common denominator to all of them.

Companies therefore underestimate the power of internal communication at their peril. Not only can it create a better relationship between employer and employee, it can have a significant impact on the way that employees behave and perform; and therefore the way that a business performs.

11. CONCLUSIONS

11.1 The current situation – summary

The research contains some very positive findings confirming the extent to which the function has matured.

Although there is a ceiling, it is going up (albeit gradually). This was largely agreed by the sample, although there were a few dissenting voices. Average salaries have risen and now regularly go up to the £80K level, and occasionally beyond. Earlier this year for instance a well-known information technology brand was offering a salary well in excess of £100K. The title Head of Internal Communication is also much more common, when previously it rarely progressed above manager level.

In many organisations it has a higher profile, greater influence, and is regarded as an important business discipline that can help enhance staff, and therefore business, performance. It is moving away from its original role as producer and manager of communication mechanisms, and becoming more of a strategic tool, involved in employee engagement and behavioural change projects.

It is increasingly (though as we have seen there is a long way to go) on the CEO's agenda – certainly in companies with less traditional business models, or with more visionary CEO's.

'It is increasingly part of the CEO's gameplan, driven by his employer of choice objective'.

Although the ceiling is going up however, it is still firmly there, and the absence of any natural career path is a constant cause of concern for practitioners.

There is still a sense that the discipline is on the back foot, constantly having to prove its value and win respect and acceptance. It was pointed out on more than one occasion that in terms of credibility internal communication is at the stage that PR was five to ten years ago. It is also facing the same resistance to its advice as PR did (and still to a degree does).

'We are having the same internal debates with the CEO, as external had ten years ago. Then it was 'Why do I have to speak to the press', now it is 'Why do I have to speak to the staff'.

It is lower down the agenda than external communications, and senior management still tend to pay it a lip service which they do not back up with time and resource. In certain industry sectors there is still a cultural resistance to anything but the most basic newsletter function.

If the message that internal communication can improve business performance (rather than just provide and disseminate information) is not getting through to enough companies, it is partly because the skills, rigour, commercial awareness and dynamism of practitioners are not yet of a consistently high level. The discipline is not populated by enough people with the personal and professional authority to inspire confidence and belief in its value.

But, as we shall see in the next section, there is a latent, if not in some cases, overt receptiveness to the benefits that a professional internal communication function can bring.

11.2 Pushing at an open door

There is clearly a growing interest in the whole area of employee engagement and employee branding. It is receiving substantial coverage in the business press and the management pages of the nationals. All the feedback we have received indicate that there is a real appetite for fresh and innovative thinking from leadership teams in this area. Here we attempt to summarise the developments and trends that are capable of elevating internal communication to the status of a key management discipline.

- a) The overused saying ‘*employees are our greatest assets*’ is now truer than ever. But these ‘assets’ now represent a new range of customers that need to be marketed to and won over. Companies are now searching for ways to improve their relationship with their workforce, and to engage them behind what the company is doing and where it is going, and they see professionally managed communication as a way to do this.
- b) The growth of the service-based economy has caused the human element of the brands customers deal with the really come to the fore. In the service economy particularly, employees are an integral part of the brand offering. Recent research in the US indicated that employee attitude is the single largest factor in determining customer loyalty. Good communication can engage and motivate employees, and engaged employees give better service and support the brand where it matters – at the point of delivery. It also helps ensure that they understand the brand values, and how these should be delivered in behavioural terms.

‘Better motivated and better informed staff give better customer service – and this gives competitive edge. The person that helps the company achieve that becomes even more important’.

‘Creating the environment and culture is key and communication is probably top of the list of levers available’.

As products become more homogenised, the way staff behave will become a main point of difference, and more importantly the main source of sustainable competitive advantage.

- c) There has been a fundamental paradigm shift in the relationship between employer and employee. The old social contract no longer exists and work is no longer all about money or loyalty to a paternalistic corporate entity. Employees are therefore less dependant, more questioning and less respectful of senior managers. They do not believe something just because a senior manager says it. There is also an expectation on the behalf of employees to have immediate information, as well as an expectation of the right to debate issues rather than to be hold to do something. These factors require a different and more thoughtful form of communication in terms of both planning and execution.
- d) Major transformational programmes involving fundamental change and the consequent need to engage staff behind the new direction are now a constant and widespread phenomenon. The M & A activity may have dried up for the time being, but change management has become an ongoing task as companies are now having to continuously reinvent themselves to stay at the competitive edge – at a time when the soft issues of organisational change are being taken more seriously.
- e) The social and political landscape is changing and work practices are changing throughout Europe eg. the rapidly growing power and influence of Works Councils. The UK is playing catch-up, but there will be significant implications for the way in which communication is integrated into these processes.
- f) Companies have to talk to employees in different time zones, countries and cultures, who frequently have only a tenuous connection with the brand. How employee communication is managed across a global company is a huge challenge which requires specialist expertise and sophisticated skills.
- g) Employees are also shareholders, which inevitably changes the nature of the relationship with them. This affects their information needs and creates a much higher level of awareness of their employer’s business issues.

‘You can’t treat them as second class citizens’.

- h) The war for talent and the retention and attraction of staff is a key issue. Previously companies could easily replace people and therefore paid lip service to woolly concepts such as employee engagement. Now they must rethink the way they view employees, and that means they must change the way they manage and communicate with them. Managers must listen to and understand the expectations of their employees and be as concerned about this as they are about customer

feedback. In this context the manner in which a company develops its channels of communication is obviously key.

‘Engaging people is what business is about and people hate being kept in the dark’.

- i) Employees have become more vocal and diversified and modern technology has made companies more porous. This creates new reputation management issues as internal dissension spills out into the external domain (Marks and Spencer’s problems in Europe are a recent example of this).
- j) The next wave of CEO’s will be more inclined towards IC, and certainly the more progressive CEO’s think hard about their own communication style and how their own internal image and reputation should be handled.

‘Younger CEO’s with degrees and MBA’s will be more enabling’.

Judging by the experiences of those interviewees whose CEO’s were in their late 30’s/early 40’s, there is a real commitment to internal communication.

- k) The increase in technology ‘take up’ has made communication channels more fragmented and has massively increased the speed of business communication. Managing and co-ordinating the flow of information is becoming a key task for large organisations.

11.3 The Way Forward

If IC is to achieve wider recognition as an influential management discipline that can impact on business performance, it has to consistently behave and contribute in that vein. The following steps would facilitate this process:

- Upskilling is an absolute necessity. Communicators must develop the expertise to consult and deliver beyond their speciality and build skills which will help them operate more effectively at board level.

These would include broader business and commercial awareness; an ability to think strategically in areas beyond communications; an ability to act as a consultant internally and to educate their senior colleagues; an understanding of organisational development, change management and the psychology of communications.

‘It needs differentiation – some unique skills that will set us apart’.

- This should make them more effective in their advocacy of the business case for internal communication, and more rigorous and confident at challenging the sceptics at all levels. They need to set the agenda, demonstrating the benefits that IC could bring to their organisation and linking this to corporate strategy and vision.

‘We internal communication professionals have a responsibility to educate our bosses what it is all about and what it can do’.

- The function has to recruit more high calibre people. Generally the quality of people doing internal communication is not high enough, a fact that is readily conceded by most practitioners, and this inevitably has a detrimental effect on perceptions of its value and importance, at a time when it should really be stamping its mark. It is a classic Catch 22 situation: if it is not seen as high profile, influential, exciting and a step onto something bigger then it will not attract high calibre individuals; and if it is not populated by talented individuals it will not attain the influence and profile it aspires to.

Whilst the role must look to recruit beyond the ranks of communications professionals, communication directors should actively encourage external communications people to spend some time in the role. It should after all be seen as a vital part of their professional development.

There are several appealing facets to the role which are not generally appreciated and which need to be promoted and highlighted:

- direct access (in some instances) to the leadership team, and the opportunity to work with them;
- its increasing involvement in transformational rather than transactional activity, thereby enhancing its status as an adviser and influencer;
- the opportunity to see all parts of the business, and to get a broad understanding of where the business is going, and what helps/slow progress (only the top strategy people and the board will know as much);
- consequently you are in a position to see how things should be joined up across the organisation (vs the narrow, functional, silo perspective in line management);
- potential involvement in many of the ‘sexier’ parts of the business eg. change, culture, branding, reputation management;
- the growing recognition of the importance of the employee/organisation relationship and the role that communication plays within it. This transcends the established boundaries of communication and what it can achieve, taking it into the new areas of behaviours and values which are strongly impacted by communication approach and style.

If it has a broad remit it can be an intellectually challenging role. The main problem is that on a ‘business as usual’ basis, it is not so motivating and if there are no big projects there are no big budgets. Fortunately this is less and less the norm.

- It needs to be promoted to a wider audience to increase awareness and enhance understanding of its strategic importance amongst the next generation of business leaders, fast trackers and graduates. Suggestions that were mentioned during the course of the research included:

- getting it onto the agenda of broader business conferences;

‘dramatic successes that get spoken about at business leaders conferences. Then it becomes a debate’.

- incorporating behavioural change/internal brand engagement into an MBA module;
- more academic thinking around the effect it has on business performance, a process which would be helped if it was championed by a well known management guru;
- more editorial in the business press reporting the results of good internal communication practice.

- Consideration should be given to changing the job title, certainly at a more senior level. To a large extent it will depend on the organisation and the actual position. But the general view is that the job title is an inhibitor to progress (too much baggage and too limiting) and fails to accurately describe what it actually does and can do.

‘Internal communication really doesn’t explain it’.

‘Internal communication sounds dull. It needs a new label’.

‘I would like to reinvent the title and redraw the parameters’.

However it was impossible to get any consensus on possible alternatives. There was some support for (Head of) Business Communication. Other suggestions included Employee Engagement, and Employee Relationships. Clearly communication will be a significant component of the role, but a different title might encourage legitimate consideration of the wider aspects of the role, which may make senior (non-communication) people sit up and take notice.

- Demonstrate ROI and provide more effective measurement techniques. Much work has, and is being done in this area, but it is critical to demonstrate the benefits of internal communication if it is to prove its real value. A suggestion volunteered by one of the participants in the research is to focus on what employees generate or produce, and then develop KPI’s for

internal communication around those dimensions. Certainly as measurement gets better it will force people to take it more seriously.

‘Making it a measurable business process, linking up employee satisfaction with business improvement and shareholder value’.

‘Measurement – boring, loathsome but absolutely critical’.

11.4 The future – respondents’ view

In response to the question ‘Will the role become more important/rise up the management hierarchy’, the majority of the sample believed that it would, albeit at a gradual pace. There was a broad consensus that employee engagement, and all the factors that influence it – communication, culture, change, values, behaviour – will become more of a priority to leadership teams. This will help push internal communication into a more central role.

Most of the respondents, however, gave a qualified yes, in that the role will not make any quantum leap in its current form. It has to acquire an extra dimension and develop a broader remit.

‘If pure internal communication there is definitely a ceiling. But if it was bulked out by change management, building the culture, building the people brand then it could be much bigger’.

For a small number of respondents this is already beginning to happen,

‘I now have the responsibility of internal brand custodian as part of my remit’.

But for most it is still an uphill struggle moving from a narrow implementation remit to a broader strategic role.

The scale of the opportunities that our respondents could envisage were, not surprisingly, influenced by the possibilities or limitations inherent in their current roles.

Just under a fifth of our respondents, for instance, could see no prospect of change. They could not see what could happen (in the medium term) that would make the role more highly valued and taken more seriously. It had gone as far as it could go, a view best summarised by the following quote,

‘I can’t see the ceiling lifting in my lifetime (he is in his thirties). There are not enough good practitioners around to bang the drum. Until you get the next generation of CEO’s it just wouldn’t happen’.

There was a general acceptance amongst the respondents that the extra dimension that they would like their role to acquire (change, culture, brand) would provoke turf wars with HR and marketing. For instance there was a strong interest in acquiring more control over organisational and culture change activity, which was regarded as the catalyst for promotion up the hierarchy.

‘It can only get more senior if it is given change management’.

At the same time it was generally acknowledged that this was HR’s domain and was likely to remain so. With their board level exposure and experience in facilitation, the HR director is more adept at influencing and driving change at a senior level, which is where it has to begin.

‘If it is a major change project, HR would lead it supported by internal communications’.

‘HR professionals tend to see the more strategic activity as their own and are usually represented at executive/board level where they are seen as having ownership of all employee related activity’.

But since the role is inherently cross functional, supposedly creating value in partnership with others, it has less need to be engaged in empire building, a fact recognised by most of the participants.

The two developments that were predicted with some degree of conviction and unanimity were:

- i) A more strategic and holistic internal communication role, moving further away from channel management, focused on advisory/influencing skills both at a senior level, and across the organisation. The individual would influence the type, timing and style of all internal communication. This would mean that their remit would extend beyond the infrastructure run by communications professionals. This is based on the premise that a significant part of the overall communication experience is about conversations with colleagues; the impact of what leaders do and say; and the impact of policies ranging from reward and recognition to corporate ethics.

Communicators cannot control all of these, but they can and should be able to influence them if they are to do the job properly. There is no doubt that organisations would benefit from having a heavy-weight individual who could take a more holistic view of the desired outcomes that internal communication can bring about across the whole organisation.

‘There’s not much point making 10% of the communication experience fabulous if the rest is hopeless’.

- ii) A new consultancy and facilitating/coaching role, driven by the focus of certain organisations on the employer/employee relationship, and the role that behaviour and communication play in this. This transcends the traditional parameters of internal communication, moving the role onto a higher plane, where it will have a greater influence on things such as values and behaviour – which are strongly impacted by communication approach and style. This moves the role on from ‘what needs to be communicated’ to ‘how people should be communicating’.

The internal communicator in this role will be working at the top with the CEO and leadership team,

‘we will know how to coach executives to be more effective communicators to their people, as well as telling them what their people are like, and how they should be communicated with’.

as well as more broadly transferring communication skills to the functional leaders to help them communicate with their teams.

Neither of the above scenarios is far-fetched or fanciful. At least 50% of our respondents noted that their role was much more strategic, and at least 20% now have a more advisory remit.

There was a general consensus that the only way that the role can continue to improve its status, influence and remuneration is for practitioners to:

‘be obviously indispensable – to do a better and better job of it and do more and more to demonstrate the real value gained’.

One respondent used the investor relations role as an interesting analogy,

‘The IR person is often highly valued. But the average director of IR has to maintain good relations with a few dozen analysts and fund managers. A demanding audience, but their needs are clear and consistent. They also bring much less emotional baggage with them. The average head of internal communication is dealing with tens of thousands of staff with several dozen distinct audiences. My guess is that the internal job is more complex and just as important, though tougher to measure and less immediately impactful. So there is no reason why the average director of IR is earning twice as much as the average Head of Internal Communications’.

There was widespread agreement that the internal communication director title will remain the exception, certainly for the next five years. Most CEO’s do not want to add to their direct reports, and

it is still not regarded as sufficiently important to warrant higher level representation, particularly if it is already represented by either the corporate communication, marketing or HR director. Also as one interviewee put it,

‘I doubt whether you would ever have an executive that would accept both external and internal communications executives’.

This therefore limits possibilities and the most that is expected is that the Head of Internal Communication title will become more prevalent.

11.5 The future – Watson Helsby’s view

Much will stay the same, yet much will change. There will always be a need for people to manage a company’s communication channels – the intranet, the newsletter, videos and other publications. Many elements of the role will always be mechanical, and in certain industry sectors, the role is likely to remain mechanical – unless change is forced by a highly effective practitioner who can inspire the leadership team to see the bigger, transformational role that IC could play.

In certain industry sectors though, particularly within retail and the broader service economy, the expertise of the more highly skilled practitioners will begin to receive greater recognition, and become more valued. In these sectors where the employee is an integral part of the brand offering, the clichéd brand ambassador, employee engagement is becoming the overriding priority for many companies. There is also a greater recognition in business generally that no change or brand repositioning programme will work without employee ‘buy in’. As a part of this process, leadership teams will look for intelligence – someone ‘feeling the pulse’ of the employee audience – that will enable them to make more informed decisions.

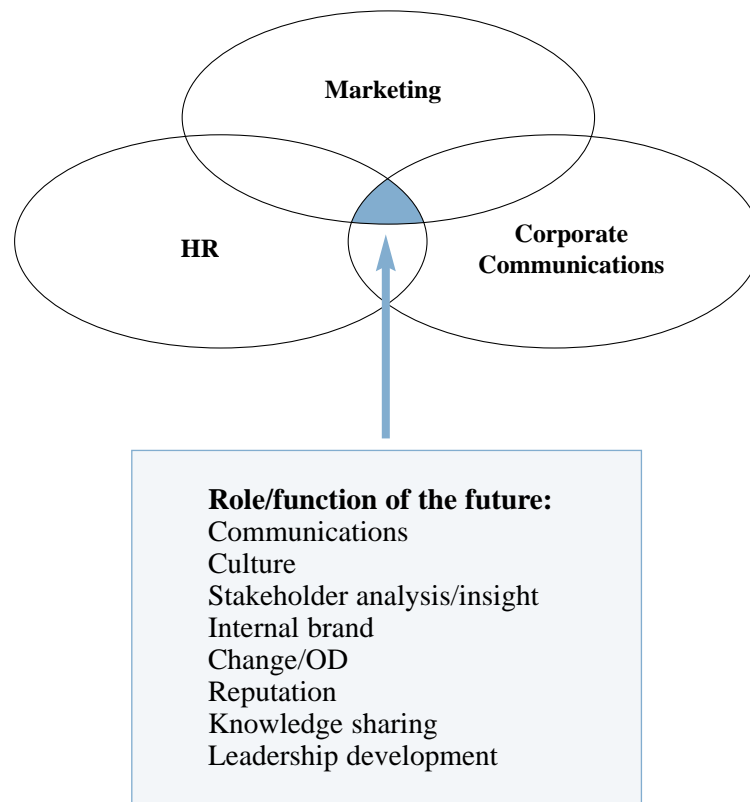
It is clear from the research that organisations are looking for something different in this area and that there is a real appetite for new thinking. As yet there is no departmental ownership of this task. Here the opportunities for the more ambitious internal communications practitioner are exciting. Although, it should be noted, these opportunities will not be the sole preserve of internal communicators. They will be competed for by others, including HR and external communications.

In those organisations where employee engagement and communication are boardroom issues, we see two possible scenarios, both of which provide new and potentially interesting opportunities, both for internal communication professionals and others:

- i) First, new organisational structures and models will evolve in response to the key task of engaging employees. Given that it is a multi-disciplinary task, to which the silo mentality found in many organisations is not suited, some organisations are seeking to establish a stronger and more cohesive alignment between HR, communications and marketing. The following suggestions are either already happening or could happen:
 - Aligning the best of communication, HR and marketing into a more integrated unit, perhaps one that is bought together on a project basis (rather than creating a new department), whose remit will incorporate culture, values, communication and change.
 - An amalgamation of HR and marketing functions, to create a function which has an absolute customer focus, both internal and external. This structure has already been adopted by a small number of more visionary organisations. The internal communication role can sit in this area, thereby aligning and integrating HR, marketing and internal communication into a more focused employee engagement unit. It was interesting to note that one of our respondents works within a department called People and Customers, where he enjoys a broad strategic remit.
 - A more senior level combined HR and corporate communication role, which would have a holistic external and internal stakeholder relationship focus. In this situation internal communication would report into a director with a much broader perspective, and it is

likely that this would endow the role with a more expansive remit. Internal and external communication would then work together in a more cohesive and comprehensive manner than is currently possible within a corporate communications department.

- ii) Second, in those organisations led by one of the new breed of leaders who see two-way dialogue as a fundamental enabler of business success, a new role may evolve. This would be an advisory role with either a dotted or straight line into this dialogue orientated CEO, with a remit incorporating the key elements of employee engagement – communication, culture, behaviour etc. The individual in this role would be an internal advisor to the CEO, if not a coach. As a result the leadership team will be better informed about issues such as the mood of employees (how things will ‘play out’) and how they (ie the leadership team) should be communicating and behaving. The individual will have responsibility for developing a holistic employee engagement strategy, and managing the programme to support it.



The title for this role would not necessarily be Internal Communication. The skill set would encompass communication, commercial awareness, creativity, strategic thinking, influencing and relationship building skills. A good understanding of organisational behaviour and change, and employee branding would also be important. It could be headed up by a very talented internal communication professional, by a more enlightened HR professional, or a more internally focused marketing director. So long as this position has the clear sponsorship of the leadership team, where it sits is not really important. It could even possibly operate as an aide de campe to the CEO.

In those organisations, probably the majority, that are unlikely to introduce organisational models akin to the above, it is likely that the internal communication role will still be expected to add greater value, and this will present practitioners with further opportunities. More importantly these may create career progression options which are currently so conspicuous in their absence.

■ Corporate communications

This is where the internal communication role tends to sit. Any developments affecting the status of IC in this department will therefore impact a large proportion of practitioners. Current trends suggest that there will be some very positive developments. While most communications

directors are more externally focused, internal communication is now emphatically on their agenda in a way that it was not a few years ago.

'The corporate communications director is increasingly accepting of the fact that he/she needs to speak the internal communications language'.

They are accountable for external and internal reputation, and the management of internal reputation is an increasingly complex task, and one that can significantly influence external reputation – which is all too easily undermined by internal issues that spill into the public domain (Barclays and M&S).

In this respect internal communication is now a 'bigger and different beast'. The communications director is therefore becoming increasingly interested in supplementing his/her internal communication resource with a more heavyweight operator. It is no longer enough to have an internal communication manager earning £45K-55K (not uncommon in the corporate communications function) who is focused on delivery channels, crafting the message, writing speeches for the CEO etc. That individual is increasingly being asked to do an awful lot that he/she is probably not equipped to do.

What is needed is someone who can manage and advise on the internal reputation issues that have become too complex, specialist and time consuming for the communications director. Someone with more developed strategic thinking skills who can see the bigger picture. This would effectively create another level within the team to whom the existing manager and the execs (newsletter, event, etc) would report.

■ HR

If HR has a broad remit that encompasses people, change, culture and the employer brand and is led by an enlightened HR Director who is not focused on process and policy, then this is a good place for the internal communication role to sit.

Although a significant proportion of the respondents were deeply uncomfortable with a reporting line into HR, most would accept it if the above conditions applied. We have referred earlier in the report to the fact that there is increasing evidence to suggest that the development implications (training, coaching) of internal communication are pushing it back towards HR.

■ Marketing

Working at a senior level within the marketing function as an internal branding specialist. This would be more relevant to the service economy and companies with distinct customer facing operations (retail, financial services, utilities, telecoms, cable and satellite TV) that in many cases encompass call centre activity.

In these companies customer service is becoming the main source of competitive advantage and the motivation and engagement of the employees concerned is therefore critical. This means that employee branding (getting every member of staff to understand what the company's customer promise actually is, and more importantly what it means in terms of behaviour) will be a key strategic and operational task, as will creating the environment that will motivate staff to deliver against this promise.

There is therefore a role of some considerable substance for the internal communicator in this context, which could in the future be quite senior. Currently much of the thinking is being driven by the specialist brand and internal communication consultancies. Their client contact will also tend to be a brand marketer whose employee communication and engagement skills and interest in the area are likely to be limited. Given its fundamental importance, there is a strong case for a heavyweight in-house specialist driving this forward and representing it/influencing at a senior management level.

■ Change

As a freestanding change function (separate from HR) represented at board level becomes more widespread we will see the internal communication function becoming a direct report of the Director of Change. There is a fundamental logic to this in that communication is a key change management tool. This will effectively integrate the internal communicator into the change process (rather than just being involved in a supporting role).

Since this is a role that goes right across the business – the glue stick whose remit encompasses training, leadership development, communication and technology – this would provide exposure to the wider components of change, thereby broadening their expertise and skill set. This in turn would create a potential career ladder, since it is conceivable that with the addition of some broader experience, the director of change role would not be beyond their capabilities.

■ Strategy

The common thread running through any organisation is the strategy, the development of which frequently comes under the auspices of a Director of Strategy. If the expertise and skill set of the internal communication discipline were more single-mindedly positioned as driving and facilitating the delivery of strategy (by enhancing employee understanding and engagement), there is an argument for having it report in through the strategy function. This again could open up a new career path for internal communicators.

■ Knowledge Management

Knowledge management could create some exciting opportunities because of its breadth and organisational impact, although some of our respondents regard KM as a passing fad. However it is possible that internal communications could be subsumed into this area in some companies, particularly within the hi-tech sector. It is a logical development because the challenge of communicating what the company is, and where it is going, is naturally bundled up with the task of helping people access the intellectual capital they need to do a more effective job on projects. It also, again, opens up an alternative career path.

We can say with reasonable certainty that there will be no industry wide trends if only because the status and maturity of the internal communication role varies so wildly between organisations. The development of the discipline, and the direction it takes will predominantly hinge upon two key factors:

- (i) organisational priorities and the degree to which organisations focus their energy on engagement with the internal stakeholder audience;
- (ii) the resolve of individual practitioners and the extent to which they take responsibility for their own trend setting. They must develop their own skill set and constantly look for ways to add value.

However, there is every reason to be upbeat about the future outlook for the internal communication role. There will be a greater demand for the expertise of the more ambitious and rounded practitioners, and more opportunity for them to demonstrate the business benefits of what they do.

They must learn to cope with greater competition from ‘outside’ talent for the more substantial roles, and concentrate on addressing weaknesses that could be harshly exposed in the future. They must, above all, concentrate on developing some unique skills and insights that set them apart, and give them a recognised authority.

APPENDICES

ROLE AND CANDIDATE SPECIFICATIONS

1. Head of Internal Communication – Current

i) Role

This is a close approximation to the standard job description for the Head of Internal Communication in organisations today.

- Manage the continual development and implementation of the internal communication strategy. Manage internal communication of corporate strategy and plans, including corporate vision and values.
- Develop, manage and coordinate an effective network of internal communication contacts throughout the organisation to maintain close links with all parts of the business, to ensure replication of best practices and consistency of messages and to enable leadership teams to make better decisions.
- Ensure clear and unambiguous information is distributed in a timely, synchronised, relevant, appropriate and strategically aligned manner.
- Manage and produce the internal communication element of major change programmes.
- Provide internal communication consultancy service to HR management (if not in HR), IT and to other project and business managers.
- Oversee and co-ordinate all employee research activity.
- Champion the development of the intranet and develop/manage the content.
- Internal events management. (eg senior management conferences).
- Manage and produce communication tools including publications, videos, posters and Q&A's.
- Set and coordinate framework for team briefings and management cascades.

ii) Candidate

Candidates for this type of role will need to possess the following skills, experience and competencies:

- Influencing skills to persuade and motivate senior executives.
- Excellent communication and presentation skills – written and oral.
- Proven skills in the creation and implementation of communication strategies.
- Ability to develop and produce a range of communications vehicles.
- Knowledge about intranet and e-communication developments.
- Sound understanding of business strategy of the organisation, as well as broader commercial awareness.

- Good project management skills.
- Knowledge of internal communications best practice.
- Change management communications experience, and good understanding of principles of organisational development and people motivation.
- Excellent interpersonal and networking skills and the ability to build good relationships at all levels.
- Good knowledge of research and measurement techniques and their application.
- Diplomatic with the antennae to anticipate and manage organisational and cultural sensitivities.
- Resilient, with the self belief and passion to motivate and excite others.
- Team management and experience of transferring skills (writing, presenting) to others, ie a network of communicators.

2. Head of Internal Communication – Progressive

i) Role

A bigger and broader role, but not yet established. It will become more prevalent, particularly in organisations that are looking at developing differentiation and edge through their employees. For instance:

- ◇ **Customer service organisations where the employee is an integral part of the brand offering (where values and ethos are being sold).**
- ◇ **Organisations whose primary offer is based on intellectual capital (where thought and advice are being sold).**
- To build relationships with the leadership team and win their ‘buy in’ and genuine support.
- Advise (and sometimes coach) on leadership communication, particularly with regard to ensuring consistency and coherency of messages. Create and manage a framework within which two-way dialogue becomes institutionalised.
- To encourage the leadership team (and associates) to adopt the behaviours and attitudes consistent with corporate and brand values.
- Developing an internal communication strategy, driven by an understanding of stakeholder needs/perceptions, which supports and reflects the organisation’s business and cultural goals, and is designed to ensure that all employees understand what the organisation is trying to do, and what their role is in making that happen.
- Develop tailored programmes for the leadership team to ensure and manage their visibility throughout the organisation.
- Enhance leadership understanding of employee mood and attitude ie advise on how certain decisions may ‘play out’.
- Promote understanding of internal communication as a critical business tool, and ensure that internal communication is an organisation-wide activity.
- Foster the brand and brand awareness among all employees.

- Act as internal consultant on behavioural change issues, and plan and implement change communication strategies.
- Develop and run the internal communication infrastructure including all communication media and channels, team briefings and feedback channels.
- Developing the intranet as an effective and efficient means of information and knowledge sharing.
- Team management and development.

ii) Candidate

Candidates considered for this type of role would have to possess a combination of the following skills, experience and knowledge:

- Critical thinking skills and proven ability to understand and articulate business strategy.
- Relationship management including the ability to work with and influence the executive and main board directors.
- Well developed consultancy and advisory skills, and the ability to work at board level on leadership communications.
- Excellent coaching and facilitation skills.
- Ability to deliver internal communication solutions with a particular focus on brand alignment in a wide variety of business environments.
- Strong understanding of organisational development, communications psychology, and people motivation.
- Knowledge of Intranet and developments in knowledge management.
- Thorough understanding of communication planning and in depth knowledge of the range and variety of communication channels and processes to ensure that the right communication reaches the right employee.
- Ability to create and run sophisticated feedback mechanisms to ensure that a sensitive two way dialogue can take place.
- General management experience with specific focus on leading teams of specialists.
- Principled – someone who can act as the conscience of the organisation – ‘that’s not how we do things around here’.
- Stamina, courage, and personal and professional authority.

