

Professional development in corporate communications today



Key insights from in-depth interviews with Chief Communications Officers

February 2014



Contents



- Overview and purpose 3
- Methodology 4
- Key insights 5
- Recommendations 36
- Company backgrounds 38

Overview and purpose

- New technologies are rapidly changing how, where and when people work. This is creating opportunities - and it's contributing to a widening gap in skills and capabilities. In one study, more than 70% of organizations said narrowing this capabilities gap is one of their top five challenges.
- For example, social/digital media, big data and other tools are changing how companies engage with stakeholders. This is transforming the nature and practice of modern corporate communications and altering the skill sets communicators at all levels need to succeed.
- Performance expectations are rising. Today, about half of all Chief Communications Officers (CCOs) report directly to their company's chief executive. With this coveted seat at the leadership table come higher expectations that CCOs and their teams will do more to grow the business.
- Chief executives expect CCOs to be more than communications specialists. They want CCOs and their management teams to be superb leaders with organizational savvy and operational agility. They want communicators at all levels to collaborate with people inside and outside the company. They want communicators to play a prominent role in cultivating and activating corporate character (vision, values, purpose, etc.). And they expect measurable communications and business results that build competitive advantage and enterprise value.
- Given the implications of these developments on communications talent, upper 90 consulting commissioned Holton Research to:
 - Examine talent management and professional development in corporate communications today
 - Identify future needs and opportunities.

Methodology

- From late October to early December 2013, information was gathered through in-depth telephone interviews lasting 45-75 minutes each. Prior to these interviews, CCOs completed brief online surveys. Respondents lead core teams of 10 or more professionals and work in a range of industries, including pharmaceuticals, health care, energy, consumer packaged goods, insurance and office furniture.

Key insights

Critical issues

- To understand the context for talent management and professional development in corporate communications, we asked CCOs to rate the importance of several issues to their function.
- Seven business and communications issues rose to the top:
 - Leveraging paid, earned, shared and owned media
 - Collaborating with colleagues in other functions
 - Selecting, developing and retaining talented communications professionals
 - Being a trusted advisor to the CEO/other senior leaders
 - Organizing my team for optimal performance
 - Managing corporate issues and crises
 - Managing the 24-hour news cycle

Competencies

- We also asked CCOs to rate the relative importance of several sets of competencies.
- Overall, communications competencies were seen as important but assumed - the “price of entry” to work in the function, but just a portion of what is required for excellence.
- CCOs said management/leadership and interpersonal competencies are gaining in importance, and they cited several individual skills in particular.

Management/leadership	Interpersonal	Communications
Managing corporate character Adapting to change Running effective teams Hiring and staffing Strategic business thinking	Collaboration Drive for results Personal transparency Organizational savvy Relating with the boss	Issue/crisis communications Media relations

Summary of 8 key insights

- 1. Business fluency is the paramount priority for communications professionals at all levels.**
2. Effective communicators are strong writers and storytellers - still.
- 3. Interpersonal skills turn communicators into valued colleagues and business partners.**
4. To become a CCO, you'll need to demonstrate that you already are a superb manager and leader.
- 5. Progressive CCOs are taking a more disciplined approach to managing communications talent.**
6. CCOs sincerely want to strengthen team skills and performance - but it isn't easy.
- 7. CCOs want to see new training solutions - especially ones that are convenient and affordable.**
8. CCOs want clear standards and best practices for communications staff development/training.



1. **Business fluency is the paramount priority for communications professionals at all levels.**

- **Fluency** - CCOs see business fluency/literacy as fundamental for communicators at all levels. Although business knowledge has long been a skill mastered by top corporate communications leaders, the strong emphasis CCOs now place on it suggest that it has become a paramount priority for junior, middle and senior professionals alike.
- **Operating knowledge** - Business fluency is not merely knowing how to read a balance sheet. CCOs say communicators must understand the full range of business fundamentals (products, operations, regulations, competition, supply chain, etc.) to gain the trust of internal clients, especially C-suite and business unit leaders, and effectively advise them on communications and business topics. It's also important for communicators to "speak the language" of the business if they are embedded in business units or functions.
- **Business first** - Some CCOs prefer to hire and promote professionals who are business people first and communications specialists second. To ground new team members in the business, some CCOs place new hires in field operations for several months shortly after joining.

“(Communicators need to be) a business person first, seeing business through a business lens.”

“To be credible in any company, to have an impact, you’ve got to understand the business of that organization.”

“Communicators need to know a lot about the business... to have business acumen... the real nuts and bolts of how the company works. We are called upon to work closely with other departments and move the business forward together.”

“A communications professional has no problem getting a seat at the table when they demonstrate business knowledge and deliver value that is tied into the company’s critical success factors.”

“Communications is a business-enabling function...

Our staff need to understand the business and that what we do drives business outcomes. We have a material impact on the reputation of the company and its ability to operate.”

“Communicators need to remember why we exist - we have a bigger role to support the overarching objectives of the company. We keep the company in the eyes of the public and help it to survive.”

“If you don’t get the culture... if you don’t get the business in 100 days, you’re toast.”

“We want people to be broader than just a functional player.”



2. Effective communicators are strong writers and storytellers - still.

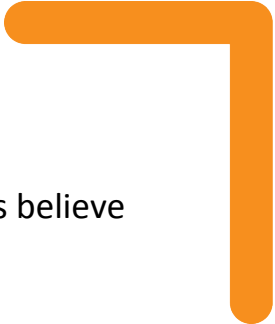
- **Writing** - CCOs say writing remains a core competency for communicators at all levels. Many CCOs describe writing skills as the price of entry for communications roles. Some say writing is becoming more informal as social/digital media takes hold and as “corporate speak” gives way to a more humanistic voice. A few CCOs think skilled writers are becoming harder to find, especially in smaller markets.
- **Storytelling** - CCOs see storytelling skills as more important today. They look for an ability to adapt stories to a wide range of platforms/channels, given the prevalence of social/digital media. A grounding in journalism can help some communicators research and structure more compelling stories while adhering to tight deadlines.

“Writing is no less important today than it has been in the past. It’s the greens fees, the price of entry. I’m finding it hard to find that skill set... it’s been de-prioritized (at universities) but it’s more important than ever.”

“It is critical for our staff to be able to know how to write. Writing is still a big gap. Workplace preparation in college is just not there.”

“Writing and understanding the media are still important. You need to understand social media - how to deploy it and engage people with it.”

“Communications staff must be superb communicators, so skilled in the use of English that they are off the charts.”



3. Interpersonal skills turn communicators into valued colleagues and business partners.

- **Not soft** - Sometimes referred to as “soft skills,” interpersonal skills are anything but soft. CCOs believe they are what distinguishes a communications expert from a trusted business advisor.

- **Emerging skills** - In the collaboration era, CCOs want communicators to master several interpersonal skills, including:
 - **Organizational savvy** - knowing company culture, policies and practices to get things done
 - **Collaboration** - partnering and building interdependencies with others inside and outside the company
 - **Influencing** - using the right information and approach to enlist support and enroll others
 - **Perspective** - having a broad view, able to see multiple scenarios and anticipate implications
 - **Empathy** - understanding and respecting the feelings, thoughts and views of others
 - **Composure** - remaining calm, clear-headed and dependable, even under pressure
 - **Dealing with ambiguity** - deciding and acting despite uncertainty and information gaps
 - **Accountability** - assuming responsibility for oneself and the team
 - **Sense of urgency** - deciding and acting quickly and driving for results
 - **Continuous learning** - having curiosity and an ongoing desire to develop as a professional.

“There are only two places where all of the areas of expertise of the business come together: the CEO and the communications function. We have to have a much broader view of the business than any other function.”

“CEOs want us to think in the context of the whole business...
it’s broader than linear thinking.”

“Interdependence is what we want people to have...
an understanding of how they relate to the rest of the enterprise.”

“If you want to catch fish, you have to think like a fish.
Having empathy for other cultures, knowing what is important
to people in the culture that you are interacting with...”

“Staff needs to have an anticipatory mindset.”

“Communications staff must have the ability to build strong and productive relationships across the enterprise.”

“For junior level staff who are consulting with their internal peers, it is important to help them understand how to interact, to push back in a professional way that creates understanding.”

“There are bright young people coming out of school. But clearly, for many, it has not been emphasized that there is a broader sense of relationships beyond their immediate peers.”

“Inquisitiveness and having the ability to find out what’s going on are critical to our function.”

“Curiosity and the ability to deal with ambiguity are key.”

“A successful communications professional must have a hunger to learn.”

4. To become a CCO, you'll need to demonstrate that you already are a superb manager and leader.

- **From doer to leader** - What got you promoted - your communications skills - won't ensure your success as you climb the corporate ladder. CCOs say you need the whole package - communications expertise, interpersonal skills and management/leadership skills - before stepping into the CCO role.
- **Emerging skills** - CCOs want senior communicators to demonstrate competency in all aspects of leadership, with several skills in particular becoming more important in the function:
 - **Measurement and reporting** - obtaining/reporting the impact of communications on business outcomes
 - **Data synthesis** - synthesizing/interpreting data and turning insights into action
 - **Stakeholder engagement** - building strong, productive relationships with internal/external groups
 - **Process management** - knowing how to efficiently/effectively plan and organize people/activities.

“It used to be that, in the first half of your career, technical ability helped you move up. Now, everybody has to lead at some level. We need to develop leadership skills earlier in careers.”

“Management and leadership skills are king once the foundations are in place. But it’s where a lot of folks fall down. Separating great from good comes down to leadership skills and how well you manage teams.”

“Once, people chose jobs based on industries and compensation. Now, many think about the person they will work for...”

“(We need to know) how to get results from our efforts that have demonstrable value and a return on investment.”

“We need to know how to demonstrate the value of the communications function in a world judged by revenues, net income, profits and share price.”

“We haven’t done a good job in drawing the relationship between our work and the outcomes that the organization is looking for.”

“Reputation is the fourth asset on the balance sheet, and we need to be able to prove that to executives in a measurable way.”

“Our staff needs to be fleet of foot in their ability to assess and understand.”

“We have all had to become much better analytically, to synthesize large amounts of data, generate insights and turn those insights into action.”

“We have to synthesize a huge amount of information coming at us... globalization and technology have made work instantaneous.”

“There is a lot of hands-on work to meet with stakeholders. It’s not good enough to give a handout... now, it’s giving a handshake on issues of mutual concern.”

“Personal interaction and building meaningful relationships are so important. Staff needs to know who to harness for the company’s benefit and who is speaking ill of the company and therefore we need to influence.”

“Our staff needs to be skilled at how to negotiate with people who want your business to take a different tact.”

5. Progressive CCOs are taking a more disciplined approach to managing communications talent.

- **Development plans** - CCOs see individual development plans as an essential tool for setting performance expectations and then managing, measuring and recognizing performance for communicators at every level. They are developing these plans for all staff, not just high-potentials or underperformers.
- **Feedback** - CCOs believe clear, timely feedback is vital to managing individual and team performance. Feedback should be both formal (a few times/year) and informal (often/ongoing). Gen Y staff expect more frequent performance feedback and tend to respond more negatively to critical feedback.
- **Forced rankings** - More companies are using ratings calibrations, 9-box tools and other HR tools to rank performance and potential. Some CCOs are comfortable with these tools when they are properly deployed. But some CCOs have questions about the validity and merit of these tools, especially when limited training resources prevent people from realizing their full potential and when rigid grading scales push decent contributors to the margins.

“I wish we had a template for development plans with the ability to personalize it to us. It would have basic skills but also skills that are relevant to us.”

“We have developed a set of competencies... we wanted to become much more disciplined in how to manage people and their growth within the company. People like it because they have a clear career path, formal mentoring, development plans...”

“We established a vision and values for Corporate Communications and our competencies are established and published. They are complementary to the company’s standard performance management system.”

“We do staff a disservice if they suddenly find out one day that things are not right and they didn't have a chance to correct them. Leaders need to be willing to have candid dialogue in real time.”

“Staff need to understand their strengths and correct things that need to be corrected.”

“We do have a formal performance evaluation process where we set up goals and how staff will achieve them.”

6. CCOs sincerely want to strengthen team skills and performance - but it isn't easy.

- **Sincere desire** - CCOs are sincere about developing talent on their team. They see this as a key aspect of being a responsible leader and know that development improves individual/team performance. Several CCOs would like to be more hands-on with staff development, though they admit this is difficult given their own duties.
- **Capabilities gap** - CCOs are alert to possible capabilities gaps in their functions. They express concern about: a) fewer work-ready university graduates entering corporate communications; b) narrower perspectives that can occur by working only in one function during a career; c) mid-level communicators without the technology and leadership skills required for proficiency at the next level; and d) senior communicators without the business acumen to become trusted advisors on more than communications topics.
- **Limited resources** - With many department budgets flat, training resources are limited at some companies. At other companies, budgets are starting to return to pre-2007 levels. Only the largest companies offer a full range of in-house development/training programs these days, and executive education programs tailored for companies by major universities have been scaled back or dropped. Some CCOs wish their HR departments were better equipped to help them with their staff training needs.
- **Practical realities** - CCOs speak about “the crush of business” and worry that staff time away from the office will disrupt team performance. They are also concerned about the cost for training. They would like to see more value-priced programs that build critical skills and help staff to grow, perhaps delivered through webinars and apps so that staff can train at their own pace in less busy times while remaining productive.

“In-house training at (my company) is almost non-existent today.”

“The (development) road here is open, but you are going to have to pull out a pickax and do some carving.”

“It is harder to send staff to outside courses because we are busier and leaner than ever.”

“We bring in outside experts to train and get a lot of staff who (are pressured to) cancel at the last minute. Leadership needs to walk the talk. We don't do training and development justice. We de-prioritize it through our actions.”

“We have a poorly developed HR function. The onus of responsibility falls on me and my managers to fill the void. (But) to do development really well, the leader needs to be the one who gets involved anyway, and not rely on HR only.”

“There’s a direct correlation between the development of the HR organization in a company and the existence of HR development programs.”

“I’m measured by the quality and performance of my people.
The #1 factor is whether my team is delivering against expectations.”

“My peers in other companies feel professional development is important but we don’t know how to address it. We’re all struggling with the speed of the world and accelerating need and demand.”

7. CCOs want to see new training solutions - especially ones that are convenient and affordable.

- **On-the-job training** - CCOs still see on-the-job training (OJT) as a practical, effective way to develop staff skills. Some CCOs are taking a highly structured approach to ensure that their staff (especially high potentials) receive OJT through a series of job rotations, often involving different business units, functions and field operations. But not every CCO has enough bench strength to take their best people offline - and there are some concerns that the benefits of OJT may not accrue quickly enough to keep pace with fast-changing needs.
- **Flexible delivery** - CCOs are interested in on-demand training programs, such as webinars and apps, for their potential convenience and affordability. They have two concerns about such offerings, however: they may not be tailored to their specific needs and are unlikely to provide valuable networking opportunities.
- **Mentoring and coaching** - CCOs would also like to see more mentorship programs. They want access to mentors inside and outside their company who can provide staff with useful, unbiased feedback. Some CCOs see coaching as their responsibility, while others utilize external coaching professionals.
- **Leadership training** - CCOs believe their high-potential staff would benefit from leadership training. Some have existing company or external resources for such training, but others are unsure where to source it and are wary about the cost.

“I have a really good director who is at a critical inflection point. The skills that got her to this point will not get her to the next level. We need help in training people who have been doers to become leaders.”

“(We could use a) neutral party who doesn’t try to impose their program on you. Somebody who helps you. Goes with you. Has a bit more empathy.”

“Training has to be convenient - more like roadside assistance instead of taking the car into the garage.”

“I want my staff to have interaction with other professionals, to be exposed to ideas, better ways to do things. To learn from others, see how others have done things.”

“I want training for my staff like the Page Society offers, only cheaper.”

“Encourage people to venture out, learn about best practices.
The external dimension is important.”

“(We do a lot of) best practice sharing with
other major companies in our industry.”

“(Training by) example is most of it. How you come across to people, sharing examples, calling out my own gaffes.”

“We recruit students who are late in their college careers. Juniors, seniors, grad students. If we like them, we make them a job offer.”

“(We try to) give them a bigger picture instead of just their job.”

8. CCOs want clear standards and best practices for communications staff development/training.

- **Training spend** - At this time, training spend per employee is not a top-of-mind data point. CCOs generally believe that budgets are okay but insufficient to meet current needs.
- **Best practices** - Approaches to development/training described by respondents vary widely in scope, size, quality and consistency. When CCOs seek to benchmark best practices, they often look within their industry or to peers in other companies. While many speak of taking a “world-class” approach to talent management and development, actual practice appears to be all over the board.

“(Training and development) budgets are never adequate but pretty good... about 5% of someone’s salary, maybe a bit more in some instances.”

“Our philosophy is to put as much money in developing somebody as it would cost to hire someone. Invest before you need to... prevention versus healing.”

“I can carve out money if I think it’s worthwhile. I just don’t have deep pockets. I can find money to do what I need to do, just not for as many people.”

“Learning is ingrained in our DNA.”

“So far, I haven’t had to ask permission.
We are being proactive. What we do complements
and strengthens what we are trying to do as a company.”

“Management will mostly support licensure
and skills that can be tied to revenue generation.”

Recommendations

Recommendations

- 1 In a rapidly transforming world, CCOs must now do even more to elevate individual and team performance. Higher performance has to become a higher priority.
- 2 To boost performance, CCOs should create and take a more proactive, structured and disciplined approach to developing communications talent at all levels.
- 3 Development should focus on interpersonal and leadership skills, not just communications skills. Business fluency makes communicators more trusted advisors.

Company backgrounds

Company backgrounds



- upper 90 consulting LLC is a talent and performance firm that helps help leaders and their teams adapt, grow and excel. We primarily work with senior professionals in corporate communications and other functions, offering three primary services: a) culture-driven programs for higher performance in companies and functions; b) functional assessments and organization design; and c) professional development/training. For more information, visit www.upper90consulting.com
- Holton Research LLC is a custom market research and strategic planning consultancy, started in 2008. We offer a wide variety of market research services, from secondary (desk) research to qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Our clients include major direct selling companies, advertising agencies (on behalf of their clients), financial services, health care and consumer packaged goods. For more information, contact cathy@holtonresearch.com

Professional development in corporate communications today



Key insights from in-depth interviews with Chief Communications Officers

February 2014

