

Understanding high performance in corporate communications functions today

Key insights from in-depth interviews
with Chief Communications Officers

March 2017

Research objective

Identify factors that influence and impede performance in corporate communications functions.

Background

CEOs want all corporate functions, including corporate communications, to contribute greater value to the business. But little is known about what “high performance” means for a corporate communications function. This research starts to explore factors that influence, drive and impede performance of corporate communications teams. It’s the first in a two-step process to gain insight into this topic. Findings from this work will help Chief Communications Officers (CCOs) lead and manage their teams more effectively, increasing the value the communications function brings to the business.

Methodology and interviewees

- **Semi-structured telephone interviews with 15 CCOs (or equivalent title) conducted between November 2016 and February 2017.**
- **Interviewees are responsible for a broad portfolio of internal and external communications work. Most work at publicly traded, global companies operating in a variety of industries, including financial services, energy, travel, pharmaceuticals, chemicals, healthcare, manufacturing, accounting and transportation.**
- **Interviewees lead teams ranging from 6-500+ communications professionals (average: 100/company).**

Insights

Our interviews surfaced 5 insights that will inform the next phase of this research.

Insight 1

CCOs agree that high performance is crucially important to business success today, given the rapid pace and enormous scale of change.

Insight 2

CCOs cite several factors as especially important for performance:

- **Clarity** – having a clear strategy, mission, vision and/or direction for the function
- **Leadership** – talented communicators who are also effective business leaders
- **Skills** – having the right mix of talent with essential communications and interpersonal skills
- **Business acumen** – strong understanding of how the business operates
- **Advice** – providing the right recommendations, at the right time, in the right way
- **Adaptability** – staying agile and nimble, especially in times of disruptive change
- **Accountability** – shared commitment to achieve functional and business goals
- **Collaboration** – with stakeholders and influencers inside and outside the company
- **Discipline** – focus and rigor in several areas, including strategic planning, process management, measurement and reporting

Insight 3

CCOs see several impediments to high performance:

- **Lack of clarity, alignment and accountability** in the company and/or on their teams
- **Lack of commitment** to communications by company leadership
- **Ineffective leadership** of the communications function
- **Unhealthy culture** in the company and/or the communications function
- **Inflexible or ineffective processes and systems** in the company and/or the communications function
- **Emphasis on seniority over performance** on the team, especially in times of rapid change
- **Insufficient business and communications skills** in the communications function
- **External forces**, including complexity and continual disruptive change in the industry and/or company

Insight 4

On a scale of 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest), almost all CCOs rate their team's performance as a 6 or 7, which they characterize as "good" or "fairly high."

Insight 5

CCOs are looking for insights on how to define, drive and measure higher performance for their teams. They also want to know how others are organizing and operating their teams to optimize performance.

Questions and implications

This phase of research reinforced certain questions we have and raised some new ones, including:

- If CCOs believe high performance is so important, are they giving it sufficient time/attention?
- Do certain factors drive high performance in communications functions?
- Are these drivers consistent across most communications functions? Or do they differ – and why?
- Do CCOs and their CEOs agree on the definition and drivers of high performance in corporate communications?
- What can CCOs and their teams do about impediments to high performance?

Next steps

We will conduct a quantitative research study with 400+ CCOs to drill down on these and other questions.

Thank you!

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