



CORPORATE AFFAIRS: THREE GREEN SHOOTS IN THE HIRING MARKET

Amid the struggles of the coronavirus pandemic, and the impact it has had on hiring, Andrews Partnership has nevertheless seen increasing executive search demand in the communications profession over recent months.

As search specialists in Corporate Affairs, Communications and Investor Relations, many of our clients and candidates at Andrews Partnership have been setting the corporate pace during the crisis – unprecedented issues-management efforts; global senior-stakeholder engagement; and all the challenges of communicating internally and externally when normal channels have been disrupted and audiences suddenly become isolated.

The industries we have seen predominantly scanning the market for top talent with renewed vigour over this period have been financial services, insurance, and consumer. Within these sectors, however, we have seen three skillsets in particular demand: internal communications; public affairs/

government relations; and environmental social governance (ESG). These roles have predominantly been in Hong Kong and Mainland China, where we have seen a heightened demand for candidates with cross-culture experience, proficient in technology and digital communications, with a strong stakeholder-management skillset, impeccable cross-functional communications experience, and bilingual if not trilingual abilities. Here we look at these three disciplines and the talent requirements being set.

Internal Communications

At such a critical time, it has fallen to the region's internal communications professionals to ensure, more than anything, that a 'single source of truth' is implemented in their organisations – vital to workforces getting clear and consistent information from their employers during these troubling times, cutting through all the other noise about COVID-19.

In a recent study carried out by Andrews Partnership, almost 25% of organisations

in the region reported that, throughout the pandemic, their single greatest challenge to effective strategic communications has been navigating counter-productive external narratives – fake news, and confusing advice from authorities (e.g., from the WHO and governments). Most companies report that working from home has now become the general rule. As a result, internal communications teams in Asia have had to implement new communication channels to ensure everyone is still heard; to ensure people understand how their companies are maintaining 'business as usual'; and to prepare everyone for an eventual return to normality.

It has also been a time for the profession to raise its profile. "We have seen Heads of Internal Communications being invited to the executive table much earlier in the conversation during the pandemic," said Emma Donald, Director, APAC at Andrews Partnership. "Their input is being valued to a much greater degree than ever before". The personal touch has proven to be a

key element in managing the crisis, whether it be sending care packages to employees in tough circumstances or bringing teams together for Friday virtual drinks. Beyond providing top-down information to employees, it has also become vital for Heads of Internal Communications through this period to be actively listening more, and using that insight to advise stakeholders on the morale and mental health of their workforces. We expect many of these processes to remain in place beyond the current situation.

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Public Affairs/Government Relations

Regulatory responses by governments have put new pressures on businesses in the region, and have driven calls from public and government affairs professionals for a renewed focus on talent.

Central to the requirements for these roles are an ability to monitor a changing regulatory environment with agility; to maintain positive and close relations with key interlocutors; and, where necessary, to lobby to protect the business, now and into the future.

Everyone knows that reputations hang in the balance in crises such as this, with

the potential for long-term damage if companies don't respond well through their government relations and wider communications. That danger is acute, immediate and urgent.

It's also a time of reprioritisation for businesses, as intended 2020 strategies get realigned to a 'new normal.' Public and government affairs professionals are therefore regrouping with business units to determine what initiatives are viable to push in the short term, while ensuring they are in a strong position to restart non-COVID-19 legislative agendas later in the year. It all demands an ability for talent to be able to think creatively about how the nature of public influence is going to change in the short- and medium term.

Environmental Social Governance

As COVID-19 continues to develop, many organisations have taken the opportunity to look inwardly, seeking room for improvement in internal processes and functions. Here, Environmental Social Governance (ESG) – an investment framework that measures an organisation's financial potential through the lens of three sustainability and societal factors – has been gaining in prominence throughout the crisis.

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Across all industries, companies with high ESG ratings have been performing steadily through the uncertainties of Q1 2020, exemplifying why the further development of this function is becoming vital to businesses bouncing back from the commercial turbulence of the crisis. Often overlooked in the past, or deemed non-business critical, ESG in fact represents a uniquely value-adding skillset, and one that continues to evolve rapidly as contributions to 'the public good' become increasingly important to the long-term financial stability of global companies.

Certainly, those companies that already had ESG initiatives in-flight when the pandemic hit have felt themselves reaping the dividends of that work during these turbulent times. But while we've seen increased momentum behind the engagement of strong ESG talent throughout this crisis as a result, there is no reason to expect it to slow down after things return to a sense of normality. When we take into consideration the emerging trend towards greater ESG, paired with all the unknowable future possibilities inherent in a worldwide pandemic, it seems that companies are now making the wise decision to prioritise long-term success by investing in qualified ESG professionals.

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