



# COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR 2020

Twenty years ago, a skilful in-house communicator needed a Rolodex stuffed with media contacts willing to take their calls, an ability to articulate corporate plans persuasively and a robust constitution for entertainment. And for those with an investor relations remit, there was also a need to understand the numbers. The role was tactical rather than strategic. Today, the in-house communications function sits at the nexus of business. Media relations remains an important, albeit less critical, duty, while the advent of social media has led to the democratisation of corporates - allowing the most junior employee to quiz the CEO or a customer or politician to publicly challenge its policies.

The function is now multi-disciplined, with responsibilities that can range from community relations to corporate responsibility, internal communications to government relations and brand management to NGO engagement. But as the role has evolved, so too has the skills set of the in-house communicator. The basics remain constant - such as the ability to build relationships - but job descriptions today often list a range of capabilities, such as influencer marketing and behavioural insights, that were virtually unheard of as recently as five years ago.

For example, it is no longer enough to know how to tweet from the corporate account, job descriptions for all in-house functions now specifically state digital skills. And as digital natives enter the workplace in greater numbers, this requirement will only gain traction. Many media relations functions have already up-skilled in this area, with team members trained to produce web quality video on phone cameras - allowing them to conduct 'off the cuff' interviews at any time - and to slice content so that it can work across various digital platforms. But as an industry, we're playing catch up. Simply recruiting one digital expert and expecting them to manage that aspect of communications is no longer enough.

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## The age of digital

Artificial intelligence is expected to touch almost every aspect of corporate life. By 2030, consultancy PwC predicts AI will contribute US\$15.7 trillion to the global economy - when you consider that the combined gross domestic product of emerging and developed Asia was just US\$19 trillion last year, it puts the impact of this phenomena into context.

AI has already entered the home through smart hubs, while consumers regularly interact with chat bots or accept

AI-generated recommendations on e-commerce sites. It will affect business strategy and, in turn, communications strategies. But, as of today, humans remain more intelligent. Many researchers expect AI systems to be only one-tenth as smart as humans until 2035, which probably explains why I have yet to receive a job brief asking for someone with experience in artificial intelligence. However, that does not mean that the trend should be ignored, rather, as UK-based futurist Matt O'Neill advises: 'Focus on what machines find difficult and what is innately human.' Nobody would leave a robot to manage crisis comms, but a robot may well create the crisis that requires a human touch!

For a communications professional looking to stand out from the crowd, data visualisation may be the way forward.

Digital media throws up reams of data. As an industry, communicators have welcomed this - finally, there are metrics that can quantify the value of their output. The trouble is that there is too much data. Corporate Boards may love numbers, but the numbers have to tell a story. Data visualisation is regarded as the modern equivalent of visual communications. It displays data in either pictures, charts or graphics, making it easier to understand trends or identify blips. This is an area in which corporate communications could lead.

## Content still rules

Social media and content go hand-in-hand. The term 'content' was king last year, and this shows no signs of abating. Every APAC head is developing their content capability as a top priority. It is not hard to understand why.

Corporates are becoming publishers. The rise of the digital newsroom, which allows major companies to tell their stories their way to stakeholders, is feeding part of this demand. Sharing a story from the factory floor, say, brings the company to life - not just to an external audience but also to an internal one. An employee sitting in the accounts department of a mining company may not be able to conceive the scale of its operations in a remote outpost. Telling stories brings organisations. Having a digital newsroom also allows companies to correct misconceptions, or add more context to a story in the media. During the financial crisis, GE became frustrated at the inaccuracies being reported - it created GE Reports, a blog designed to tell the real story to employees and investors. Today, the online platform receives 2.2 million visitors a year and is used to break news stories, publish opinions and report on new innovations and trends in science. It is also used as a source for major news organisations. GE may be leading the charge, but other companies are looking to follow its example.

Yet, here's the rub. Not every communicator is a born writer. Similarly, the skills needed to write a news story can differ from those required for an opinion piece or thought leadership report. In some cases, companies are looking to recruit communicators with a background in writing. New roles are also springing up, such as speechwriter or thought leadership director. Other organisations are looking to outsource content creation in order to focus on the day job. This is a trend that is not going away; this year alone, we have seen a 33pc rise in requests for comms professionals with writing skills. Communications functions need to address this issue.

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But sharing their news stories and opinion pieces is only one part of the puzzle. Against a backdrop of rising populism, mistrust of business and political instability, companies need to articulate not just 'what' they do but 'why' they do it. They need to justify their reason for being. It is no longer enough to simply generate profits for investors. Other stakeholders, such as local communities, regulators, customers and employees, need to see evidence that the company has earned its licence to operate.

### **Purpose provides direction**

For some companies, their corporate purpose has been the northern star that has guided business strategy from the outset. But others may have lost sight of their original purpose or simply realise that it is not appropriate in today's world. Communicators can play a valuable role in helping companies to understand and articulate their corporate purpose, embedding this across the organisation and then using it as the lodestar against which business decisions are made. It may lead to a reappraisal of a company's CSR strategy, discontinuing initiatives that have little relevance to the business, or its sponsorship policy, which may alienate certain customer segments. Successful initiatives are ones that have a direct link with a company's 'why', such as banks supporting financial literacy initiatives or coffee shops looking to tackle recycling and waste.

This is an area in which comms professionals can flex their strategic input. Recycling and the issue of plastic, in particular, is a hot topic. Companies that are seen to be part of the solution rather than the problem should experience a halo effect. Surveys suggest millennials want to work for companies with a corporate purpose. Consumers now take into account purpose when making purchasing decisions. Even investors consider such factors.

Communicators often describe themselves as the conscious of the business. In the past, such a description could be seen as woolly. Corporate purpose provides an opportunity for communicators to offer input and advice, driving business strategy and prove that having a 'conscious' does not preclude making money. For those in-house communicators looking to 'future proof' their careers, and be well positioned for the changing demands of the role, these are three areas to consider. Nobody is expected to be a jack of all trades, but specialising in one of these - data visualisation and digital, content or corporate purpose, with the ability to embed such a strategy across a business - should set you out from the crowd, and ensure that your career goes from strength to strength.



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Emma joins Andrews Partnership after 11 years at Haymarket Media & Euromoney, working on titles such as FinanceAsia. Emma built strong relationships in PR/Communications across all industries throughout APAC, ensuring an in-depth understanding of the PR industry & individual role requirements. Since joining Andrews Partnership Emma has worked on senior assignments in Hong Kong, Singapore, Dubai, China and Malaysia.