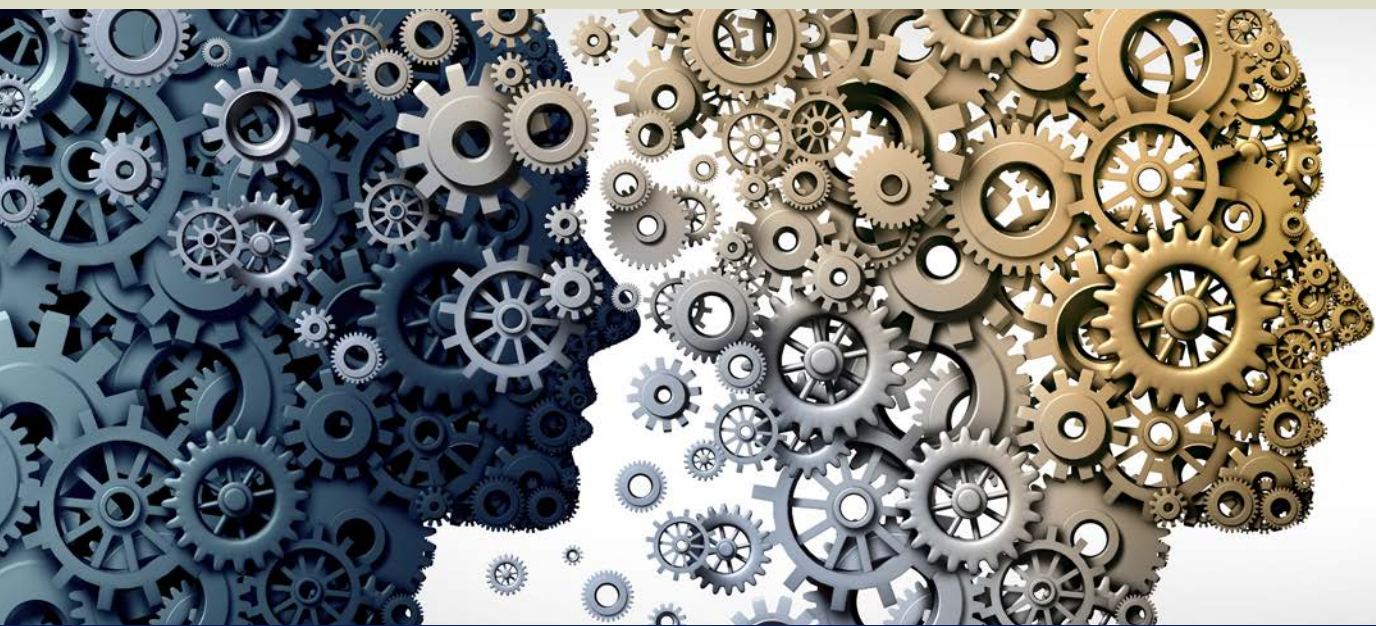


The New Career Playbook for Corporate Affairs

Talent pathways in a transformed profession
after the pandemic



Introduction

Over the last quarter of a century, we have witnessed a complete transformation in the corporate affairs function. An often undervalued and misunderstood profession at the turn of the millennium, it has since undergone the most dramatic metamorphosis to develop into the executive function we see today.

First, of course, the internet, social and smartphone revolutions of the late 1990s and 2000s changed the whole business calculus for our industry, fundamentally altering how people interacted with institutions. Overnight, everyone in the world was a stakeholder, everyone had a voice – and everyone had a platform for their views, in their pocket, all of the time. Reputations could now be brought down in an instant, and became vastly more complex to manage.

In response, we suddenly saw corporate affairs leaders ascending to the boardrooms of the world's leading multinationals, tasked with bringing genuine professional management to the company's increasingly fragile and volatile reputation; charged with somehow getting a grip on all its dizzyingly complex levers. In many cases, they were rewarded with significantly increased scope and budgets to match, and the last decade has been defined by ground-breaking work in many parts of our industry to deliver on that confidence.

But that early promise was then severely tested in January 2020 – the second great, catalysing moment for our profession. For the once-in-a-century strategic storm of Covid-19 proved, from the outset, to be a heavily communications- and people-centred crisis. Corporate affairs didn't just have 'a seat at the executive table', it was often now the first item on the executive agenda – frequently

leading the response to the challenges of a displaced, anxious and potentially compromised workforce, massively disrupted operations, and the need to operationalise a whole new communications infrastructure overnight.

It has been the making of our profession. At Andrews Partnership, we believe the last 20 months has seen corporate affairs achieve a form of final maturation; not just a cementing of its stature in the world's boardrooms but a whole new form of career strength from the provable value it now knows it can deliver.

All of this revolutionary change has, in turn, transformed the fortunes, stature and purpose of those who have dedicated their careers to working in the field. This exclusive research report from Andrews Partnership explores those revolutionary career paths for our industry's most tenured professionals, and asks what we can learn from what they have learnt over decades of change – and how that could translate into career advice for those now making their way up the ladder.

It has been an extraordinary time for our profession. We hope you enjoy exploring the recollections of our interviewees as much as we have valued using their insights to begin building the foundations for the next stages of our industry's development.



About the research

We conducted in-depth interviews with 52 of the highest-performing corporate affairs directors working in the Asia-Pacific region (APAC). These wide-ranging conversations, conducted July-August 2021, centred on the following discussion areas:

- 01 What do you think are the traits of a successful corporate affairs leader today?
- 02 How does one build and protect the company's reputation?
- 03 What are your current business priorities?
- 04 What have you found to be the best path to promotion?
- 05 How have you best managed to achieve career transformations?
- 06 What are the most productive career risks you have taken?

From these discussions, we have distilled a series of recommendations – woven throughout – to help other corporate affairs professionals develop the skills and experience they need to achieve impact in their careers.

Data from 52 of the most senior Corporate Affairs Leaders across APAC



01 Personal Traits

The qualities that make successful Corporate Affairs leaders



Corporate affairs is such a wide-ranging discipline that it demands an extraordinary, swiss-army-knife set of skills from any senior practitioner.

You have to know all the unique levers for influencing every type of stakeholder; as adept at policy analysis with a CEO as you are at personal persuasion with a factory worker. You have to have an eye for content and a grip on the channel landscape, all while lifting yourself well above tactical concerns. You have to understand your area of the business instinctively – but also everyone else's too. And ultimately, you have to be able to manage the unmanageable – the dizzying constellation of inputs that shape a company's reputation.

As a result, clearly no single personal or professional trait can be said to underpin career success in corporate affairs. But there is a definable suite of core capabilities in any professional discipline. We therefore asked our interviewees –

open-ended – to list those qualities they thought were most essential to being effective in corporate affairs today. Their answers revealed that, despite the increasingly varied nature of the role, there remains a good deal of consensus about the core qualities that offer the best springboards to success, with some traits, indeed, viewed as almost non-negotiable pre-requisites for advancement.

What do you believe are the traits of a successful corporate affairs leader?



Performing at board-level

Three of the top four most commonly suggested traits represented a direct call for real executive capability in practitioners – boardroom credibility; business acumen; and the ability to provide strategic advice to executives.

"Understand the business very well — not just your own area, which is easy, but all areas, which is more difficult but is what will mark you out."

"Having a strong relationship with CEO – being a number one trusted advisor"

"Manage up – enabling market teams and working in service of their ambitions, yes. But you have to be able to have difficult conversations up".

"Business acumen – truly understand the role corporate affairs plays in the business strategy and the growth of the business"

Although our discussions with interviewees explicitly covered learnings from their whole careers, it is hard not to see some shadow of Covid-19 hanging over the answers they gave to this question. (As it should: Core capabilities always adapt to the current time.) When the pandemic hit, corporate affairs faced an expectation from around the board table that they had a plan and knew how to deliver on it. That long-desired yearning in our profession for stronger business capability – coveted because it would enable us to be heard and be taken seriously – has, in the space of 20 months, now become an absolute necessity. Without it, you simply will not be able to meet the expectations that have now been thrust upon the profession.

Interestingly, credibility was particularly often highlighted as the #1 trait by those working in financial services – half of all interviewees in the sector independently opted for that word. Corporate affairs has always struggled in banking, in particular, against perceptions of being a 'soft' discipline, subordinate to functions with more obvious direct links to the company's cashflow and profitability – the fabled 'Masters of the Universe'.

However, even here, we may be in the process of a transition: As a number of financial services companies continue to grapple with the pandemic, several have bulldozed into serious reputational crises from a perceived uncaring approach to staff, demonstrating the pitfalls of sustaining a culture that soft-pedals the value of engagement. Change may be slower in this alpha-industry, but it seems to be coming.

Ability to connect with people

Ours is a discipline founded on the powers of engagement and persuasion. What we bring to the table is our ability to shape people and guide them towards a desired goal.

"You need to be not just a spokesperson but have 'the power to convince'. You need to be able to sell your ideas to stakeholders."

But that capability has become so much harder to deliver in recent years, as corporate affairs has developed into an increasingly sprawling 'hub' profession, drawing in a bewildering multiplicity of influences, disciplines and stakeholders. Practitioners now need to have the broad-spectrum capabilities of a skilled politician, able to connect at very different levels with very different groups. As this universe has become more complex, the core qualities – to be able to work in partnership, make connections, and convince – has never been more essential.



"I'd say four inter-related traits: internal political acumen; advisory skills (get people 'with' you); diplomacy and team work"



"Being empathetic to multiple internal and external stakeholders"

"A good collaborator – there are so many moving parts in the job now, you have to be able to work across functions to get things done"

"Ability to build collaborative relationships throughout the entire business"

"I'd say four inter-related traits: internal political acumen; advisory skills (get people 'with' you); diplomacy and team work"

"Ability to create a network of relationships/ trust with government – and to nurture those relationships across the years, beyond the realm of business."

The 'ability to connect' has also become even more challenging as the corporate affairs role has risen in seniority, too. Being an 'insider' requires far more complex relationship management skills: You have to be able to push forward with advice, even resistance, all while not compromising your ongoing, informal position as a sounding board and functional support.

"Not to be a threat to C-Suite. You are a supporter, not a competitor, in terms of their careers. You need to provide counsel, and even challenge them robustly at times, but all while allowing them to reach out to you for help. It's a delicate balance."

There is one final element of this, unique to Asia. As the continent has matured commercially over the last decade, it has become much less willing to adopt established practices and processes – and even people – from elsewhere. Reliance has given way to self-confidence, to self-certainty, to assertive self-determination.

That has changed, forever, what your strengths at 'connecting with people' in APAC means. The old one-size-fits-all approach – with Asia 'fitting in' to the Western communications model – is over. Today in Asia, you have to be able to 'connect with people' at an incredibly local level, not least because there is an absolute expectation now that those in key positions will possess local language skills and be able to produce communications sensitive to multiple cultures and customs.





Crisis Communications

A final observation: Interestingly, despite the pandemic, crisis communications capability was rarely offered up by our interviewees as a core competency. Many told us that their organisations had had very robust pandemic-response plans in place for decades, ever since SARS, and which had then frequently been road-tested (e.g., during H5N1). In many ways, the Covid-19 pandemic had simply seen these very established protocols rolled out. For many multinationals in Asia, that part of the pandemic response went, by and large, like clockwork.

A quality that once was seen as a matter of great importance to ambitious corporate affairs professionals – driving forward the business's formal crisis planning – has therefore faded in relevance perhaps. The pandemic revealed that what matters, really, is how you, as an individual, are able to flex and react to the unique unknowables when a crisis happens – hence, in part, why qualities like resilience and agility featured much more prominently in our interviewees' top answers.



Top answers by industry

Among the four sectors with enough interviewees to offer reasonable statistical breakdowns, it's interesting to note how answers to this question differed:

Sector	Mentioned most	Mentioned often
Financial Services	Credibility	Resilience, Business acumen, Ability to connect with people
FMCG	Agility Ability to connect with people	Resilience, Curiosity, Business acumen, Talent leadership
Retail	Credibility	Resilience, diplomacy, forward-looking
Technology	Forward thinking	Crisis comms capability, Talent leadership

The reader can intuit why certain traits might be more valued (or deemed more necessary) in certain industries over others – it's no surprise, for example, that tech firms place a higher premium on visionary leadership in their corporate affairs leaders than other sectors do.

But could this also be a useful career assistance tool? If the best part of your skillset is your the ability to spin plates, make quick decisions and

keep up with constant change, it could indicate that a major consumer goods firm might make the best next career home for you? If it's your ability to 'see around corners', have you thought about a career in tech? Or if you're the sort of leader whose best quality is exuding a natural executive authority, you might find a leap from financial services to retail (or vice versa) would give you the diversity of experience you'd like have, while still being very much 'in your wheelhouse'.



02 Building and Protecting Corporate Reputation

How Corporate Affairs leaders add value

What is the single biggest thing you have done to directly impact your organisation's reputation?



A corporate affairs director is now expected, at core, to be the sentinel on permanent watch over the company's reputation – a clear and unambiguous remit over the last decade that has helped lift the discipline out of the tactical weeds and onto the strategic level. To deliver on that brief, he or she must influence how a range of stakeholders perceive the business, and, in consequence, how they behave towards it.

But in an ideal world, the corporate affairs director is now going much further than that. They are strategising how to actively enhance the company's reputation, anticipating opportunities that could favourably reflect upon the firm and then delivering a strategy to capitalise on it.

We therefore asked our interviewees: When was the moment you most managed to deliver that kind of lasting, positive impact to your organisation's reputation? How did that success come about, and

what does it tell us about how your peers can make the biggest career gains today?

Two areas of activity above all others stood out:

2.1 Strategic sustainability

Over the past couple of years, perhaps the issue occupying the workloads of corporate affairs directors more than any other – and seemingly regardless of sector – has been strategic sustainability.

Little wonder: As concerns around the environment have grown and the climate crisis has worsened, companies are being increasingly judged not just on how sustainably they operate, but – increasingly – what proactive, innovative moves they are taking to set completely new standards for global environmental reform.



At [pharma multinational], we did a lot of activity around pricing and affordability, particularly in developing countries. We put the company in patient-advocacy groups – a cross-sector collaboration to build cancer[1]treatment capability in lower- income areas. This wasn't an 'arse-covering thing': If you're developing life-saving meds and you're serious about affordability, you've got to be engaged with stakeholders at the start."

But the current vogue for 'strategic sustainability' reflects much more than by-the-numbers ESG policy. This is not about basic compliance; not just bolt-on media-friendly interventions; not even sustainability initiatives that can convincingly be tied back to the organisation's business strategy.

This is sustainability as business strategy, from companies that have recognised that the standard bromides of the past – donations to charities; wage increases for plantation workers; promises to reduce plastic waste – won't cut it any more. Consumer and investor expectations have risen to an entirely different level, and smart, progressive organisations have seen that the commercial spoils over the next decade await those who, today, are already building their brand around being revolutionaries for environmental reform.

"A core part of our brand is that we believe in food that is local – that it should be locally produced for local markets. But there was no real coffee farming in China when we started, so we sent experts to work shoulder-to-shoulder with local communities, showing people how to farm coffee. After 20+ years, the Mainland is now a very important coffee grower."

"I drove a project at our bank to provide non-profit financing for companies making PPE during the Covid crisis"

"At [our drinks company], it was sugar reduction and acceleration of our non-sugar portfolio. That was led by corporate affairs but it soon became just the business strategy."

Nor is it just consumers and investors who care. Sustainability has now become a critical talent issue: Increasingly at Andrews Partnership, we find that the firms with the strongest reputations for strategic sustainability are attracting much more business and finding it easier to hire top talent to their corporate affairs teams than their competitors. Top prospects are openly asking about the hiring company's environmental credentials – and accepting or rejecting their offers purely on that basis. Suddenly, it really does matter how forward-thinking your business is.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, a quarter of our interviewees cited strategic sustainability as the issue over the course of their careers that had had the strongest impact on their company's reputation:



"My previous employer had been seen as a bit of an 'environmental villain.' So when I joined, they had made a decision to actively commit to the environment and I was challenged with changing public perceptions of the company around the issue. By the end of my time there, we'd turned it around. NGOs were engaging, and journalists were taking us seriously. For a while, it had become taboo to buy from us. By the end, people were trading with us again."

2.2 Government Affairs

Successfully navigating the legislative environment and ensuring corporate interests are reflected in the law is integral to corporate affairs, ensuring that your business can operate effectively, maximise profitability and avoid punitive measures.

But nowhere is this more true than in Asia, where effective relationships with officials – central government, state and provincial – is about much more than simply getting the best tax breaks or lobbying over legislative small print. In many cases, building the right relationships with the right officials is what enables your company to operate in the region at all.

"I led the media and government affairs strategy that helped us get our licence to operate in China, which had been the key barrier to overcome for us to get into the Chinese market. As a result, in the first year, we added 14 million merchants, 16 new partnerships and tens of millions of purchases – a business coup that, overnight, established our reputation as a major new player in the market."

"When I joined, the company had some big compliance concerns in one of their plants that required close work with local government to solve. I took over this challenge myself and, within 100 days, I had worked through all the internal barriers, secured global approval, and got a successful result with local government."

The central importance of strong corporate-government relations in Asia is widely recognised. But what our interviews revealed is that, for many corporate affairs leaders, it's also one of the surest ways you can enhance your organisation's overall reputation with consumers, investors and the wider public too:

"When the pandemic started, we intervened with government to waive customs duty on PPE kits and oxygen concentrators. We were able to convince the government that, instead of paying duty, we could use that money to bring in more equipment. This had a significant, positive impact on our reputation, as we were able to deliver a genuine public good in return."

"Working with relevant government stakeholders, we were able to stave off legislation on e-commerce tax for five years. Those continual deferrals on implementation ended up saving the business millions of dollars, which in turn not only allowed us the time and breathing space to develop our own solutions but positively affected our reputation into the bargain – because, suddenly, we were seen as engaging with government to create real solutions, rather than pestering government to do us favours."





"I worked on our organisation's pivot towards APAC, which included moving the global HQ out of the UK. So I worked with government bodies to articulate why we wanted to be in Asia and it was those efforts that really helped to re-shape the narrative around the relocation, mitigating what was threatening to be a serious backlash in the UK media."

In APAC, it is worth noting, too, that all of this is having a serious impact on the talent market. The inexorable, incredible rise of China as the new global superpower, and the central importance of government relations in the region mean that, across all industries, there is now huge demand for

corporate affairs professionals who are Mandarin-speaking, or who have strong networks within the Chinese government. Although this is not necessarily good news for Western corporate affairs professionals, it underlines just how important government affairs has become to the strategic development of our profession in the region. It also provides a clear, new route map to continuing career success here: If you don't already have those skills or contacts, you are going to have to develop them fast if you're serious about getting ahead in the region over the next decade.



03 Focus on Business Priorities

How Corporate Affairs leaders deliver strategic value

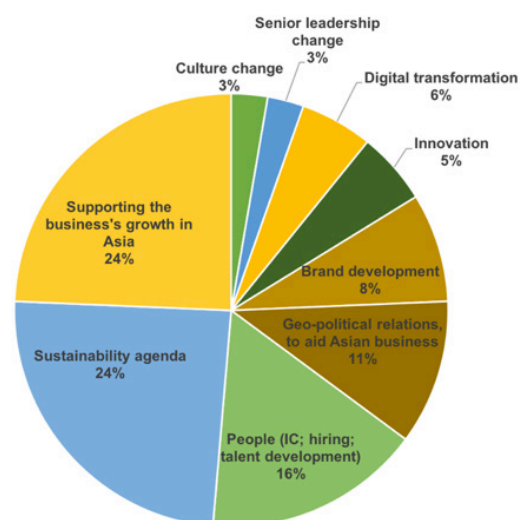


Nothing is more important on the resumé of a corporate affairs professional than being able to demonstrate strategic value. Gone are the days when a CV showreel of live events, multimedia extravaganzas and artful media placements could land you a top job. Today, if you can't demonstrate how you have actively supported your present and past companies towards their commercial goals – through solid strategy development, execution and metrics – then you will struggle to rise up the corporate hierarchy.

But commercial imperatives have also changed dramatically in recent years, and not just because of the pandemic.

Twenty years ago, corporate branding (and rebranding) was a major obsession across corporate affairs, communications and marketing. Ten years ago, it was the wild west potential of social media. Five years ago, it seemed that every business – and every corporate affairs team – was in the grip of an obsession with 'digital transformation.'

What is your business's current main priority ?



As those universal business priorities change, so does the value of what's on your CV. Given that we are now in another era of upheaval – post-pandemic, and amidst geopolitical storms – we wanted to know: What's the central strategic target in the crosshairs of your current business right now? And how is that affecting what you do?

The pivot to APAC: Supporting the business's growth in Asia

Not so long ago, multinationals saw Asia as a valuable production centre but as only a secondary, rather poor commercial market – far less important, certainly, than the US and Europe.

How times have changed. Over the last decade, those same companies have pivoted intensively – even aggressively – to focus on our region. Now, for many if not most of those corporations, expansion in Asia has become the single, central goal of the whole global organisation.

That was certainly the story until January 2020, when a pandemic intervened, and one might reasonably have guessed that the fallout and recovery from Covid-19 would still be occupying our interviewees' focus – building for the post-pandemic world; capitalising on the commercial disruptions; and protecting against its continuing exigencies.

Not at all. Fascinatingly, the major corporate strategic concern our interviewees cited time and again was not guardedness, sobriety or reserve. It was aggressive growth all over again.

Nearly a quarter of our interviewees said that full-blooded expansion of the company's APAC business – internally growing its base of operations, and externally growing its markets – was their company's current core priority. This seems to be true in particular in financial services and wealth-management firms, apparently responding once again to the monumental increases in personal wealth across the region over the last decade and the proliferation of ultra-high-net-worth individuals in almost every major capital city on the continent.

"The direction from our Chairman is strong and clear: We're focusing on 'the New World' – that is to say, on Asia."

"The main priority is growth, so that impacts everything we do. Our biggest comms function is in supply chain, where the challenges are huge – they have so many products, sourcing in such a diverse footprint – so with the challenges out there, they're under constant pressure to raise their game to be able to successfully communicate to their customers."

"The primary focus is growth – more specifically, growth in our customer base. So the priority for Corporate Affairs is to drive customer-centric communications in a meaningful way – how what we're doing affects both current and prospective customers, and work out how to communicate that in a way that drives serious uptake."

"Renewed emphasis on growth in Asia, and acceleration/expansion of the business in Asia. With that comes plenty of focus on M&A, joint ventures, etc. and so Corporate Affairs is working hand-in-hand with them to develop this out."

The challenges of East-West geopolitics

The Trump era was famously defined by open hostility towards China and the Biden administration has promised very little thawing of that East-West permafrost. Meanwhile relations between high-performing Asian countries and many nations in Australasia and Europe have rarely been as awkward.



All of this, of course, is underpinned by a commercial uncertainty in the West – even fear – as to how the shift in the power balance towards Asia will play out in the coming years, and this is having a clear impact on global business priorities. We heard through our interviews that a premium is now being put on finding staff with geopolitical expertise, to help companies successfully navigate these growing tensions and ensure they are able to do business in all geographies. Eleven percent of our interviewees cited geopolitical understanding and Mandarin-language skills among senior personnel as the top issues their firm cared about today.

"The business has had to evolve a lot due to US/China relations. It's brought trouble for supply chain and market access, and extreme commercial pressure all round. So our function has become more important than ever, and is now forced to be way more proactive in engagement internally and externally."

Sustainability

As we have already mentioned, a focus on sustainability dominates many companies' agendas. It is not only the right thing to do, but can also unlock a huge reputational dividend.

"For us in APAC, closely linked with our ESG focus is a determination to 'operate well' – and also a focus on expansion, which has to be done responsibly. Our firms are opening the door on our commercial agenda via co-investment with government. They want to make sure they are leading in any ESG areas that will affect the business, because ESG and reputation are now so integrally linked."

Building employee advocacy and the employer brand

Never have internal communication and employee engagement been higher up the corporate leadership agenda than during the pandemic. With staff welfare (especially of customer-facing colleagues) suddenly made so precarious by Covid-19, and with overnight directives across entire corporations to initiate radical work-from-home operating models, the umbilical cord between company and employee has never needed to be stronger, nor its strength subject to more scrutiny.

Ostensibly, therefore, it should come as no surprise that 17% of our corporate affairs directors named internal communication and employee engagement as the top issues currently concerning their firms.

"Internal comms is our key priority, taking up 70% of my time."

However, all is not as it seems: Almost all these interviewees were singing exactly the same, surprising tune when asked to explain their rationale. Usually, it was not, in fact, a by-product of the pandemic. It was about growth: Employee engagement was seen as the best, most direct route to great talent acquisition.

"Our priority is now to increase our focus on internal communications to drive the enterprise narrative."

"The business needs to promote our brand extensively to attract talent. My job is about defining and communicating the employee value proposition, talking to government, talking to communities, so that then our own people can speak for us."





EMPOWER

The fast pace of growth across APAC prompted a flurry of overseas hiring over the last few decades, but today the emphasis is on hiring local talent. Gone are the days of Western professionals being routinely parachuted in to run APAC Corporate Affairs. Now firms want senior people with detailed knowledge of Asian markets, politics and cultures, and who also speak regional languages. A major demographic shift in our talent base is underway.

But that requires not just a huge recruitment drive in the local talent markets in Asia, but also a completely new talent-acquisition strategy. Companies appear to have concluded that advocacy from local employees is the best route to building a solid employer-branding base.

It is also being seen as the optimal pathway to mitigating the reputational perils of a digital age: Internal communications as a way of helping to turn staff into active advocates for their company in the communities in which they live, to counter consumer antagonism:

"Employee engagement is the priority: Corporate reputation is fundamental to our business, but employee engagement is more important right now because the business is dealing with 'woke' consumers who are quick to criticise. Building up employees to be brand ambassadors for business is one of the most effective ways to get out a message in an authentic way."



04 The Path to Promotion

How Corporate Affairs leaders have made a name for themselves



In corporate affairs there is no single path to the top. Senior directors come from a range of backgrounds, and everyone brings to the table their own individual experiences. Whilst making your mark through a high-profile business coup or by masterminding a successful strategy will get you noticed by senior leaders, the real secret to long-term success is putting in a consistently strong performance over a sustained period.

Thirty-eight percent of interviewees put their promotions down to repetitively good performance over any single act that boosted their profile.

"My promotions have never been about one single act, but about showing value or driving results. I've always made sure my achievements are measurable to demonstrate meaningful impact."

"Single acts will get you more money and a higher rating, but my promotions have been a result of consistent high performance over time – plus organisational readiness and luck."

"Don't look at a career as a ladder but more like a dance, and the point is to enjoy it rather than finish it. It is about making it obvious that you are the best person for the job when it comes up. The best way to do that is to demonstrate business acumen."

As ever, it is crucial not just to do a good job — but also to be seen to be doing a good job. As communications professionals, we know how to tell a story, but when showcasing our professional successes, the key is to demonstrate how our work benefits a company's bottom line.

"It is important that you're able to explain the impact of your role in commercial terms. That's the ammunition you need to articulate how you've affected business outcomes."

Although consistent performance is the most important factor in getting promoted, many corporate affairs leaders also pointed to specific achievements that had raised their profile and helped them outshine the competition.



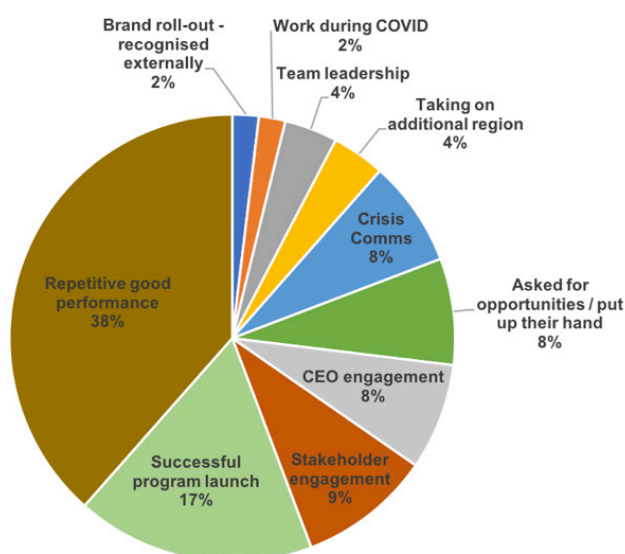
Seventeen percent, for example, linked promotions to running a successful programme; 9% thought that effective stakeholder engagement was key; 8% believed that crisis management was where the best talent really were able to shine; and 6% pushed the idea of volunteering yourself when there is a call for someone to take on extra responsibilities.

Running a successful programme

Running any highly visible programme successfully will obviously boost one's profile, but our conversations around this revealed an intriguing extra qualification: Most interviewees explained that they were not talking about executing strategy roll-outs or global change programmes – the bread-and-butter stuff of the profession. They were not stumbling across name-making initiatives by sheer luck.

Most were talking about programmes that they themselves had designed, initiated or engineered using their own initiative. Usually, they had identified an unrecognised business challenge and had independently developed and executed the solution themselves.

Actions that led to promotions



On average across the interviews, they had then received a promotion within 18 months or less.

"After a short time at a new firm, I realised there was no structure for the CEO's comms for the international business. I took the initiative and developed a comms plan for him, with regular comms, newsletters, messaging toolkits, and so on. I saw a gap, and came up with a plan to fill it. Promotion followed swiftly."

"I knew that we weren't nearly as advanced in sustainability as we could have been, so I basically told the CEO that we had to get serious about this issue, especially in China. It wasn't just a complaint: I put a proposal to him for how the strategy ought to look, including recommendations for the sort of programme we could run and the projected gains from it. He gave me the green light to go ahead and just do it, so I did. That was what eventually led to me being offered the role of Chief Sustainability Officer."

It's an active demonstration of the fact that the most ambitious people – and the most successful – don't wait. They make their own luck through initiative and acumen.

Of course, it can be daunting to propose a radically new approach and lift your head above the parapet, but how else are you going to raise your professional profile with senior leaders and get on the fast-track to more responsibility, budget and scope if you're not willing to back your own ideas and be admired for your courage in doing so?

Stakeholder engagement

Most corporate affairs roles turn on our ability to manage and influence others. It is, arguably, the



capability that defines our sector more than any other. But good stakeholder management is not just vital for getting the daily job done effectively; it's also critical for getting ahead in your career:

"Always think about whether you're building the right network, and if you're selling yourself well. As you travel along the path from country, to region, to global, think: 'Am I connecting with the right people and letting them know what I am?' It's not just about doing the job. If I'm only hitting my KPIs it's not enough. Marketing is a way of life."

"The only way you get promoted is via stakeholder management and networking. You have to be seen first if you want to be noticed."

One of the most important lessons is not to let stakeholder relationships slide once the programme or project for which you needed them is finished. Follow up; cement the rapport on a broader level; discuss wider ambitions and ideas for change. Remember that most senior promotions come about simply because you're the person front of mind when a new initiative or a new direction is first suggested – and that's usually because you've shown yourself, informally, to be someone with ideas and an ambition to execute on them.

Crisis communications

JFK famously said, "The Chinese use two brush strokes to write the word 'crisis.' One brush stroke stands for danger; the other for opportunity. In a crisis, be aware of the danger — but recognize the opportunity."

Of course, Kennedy wasn't quite right about the Chinese calligraphy here, but the point he made remains valid: By charting a safe path through

a perilous situation and turning it to corporate advantage, a crisis communications expert can really shine and promotion often follows swiftly.

"In one firm, we had a massive reputational risk involving the collapse of a hedge fund. I was working until 2am dealing with this crisis. At the end of it, the CEO of Americas poached me to be his head of comms because he'd been impressed by what he'd seen of me being part of all the discussions."

Never has this been more apparent than in the last 18 months. The unique crisis of Covid-19 has been the great testing ground for our industry. When the pandemic hit, corporate affairs directors suddenly became the centre of management attention almost overnight — and were often given huge, unprecedented powers to support it, inheriting key seats on steering committees; active roles in business continuity planning and strategic road-mapping; even taking on the leadership of global crisis-response committees.

At Andrews Partnership, we have witnessed the results of that first-hand among our client base over the last 20 months: Those who performed well in the blazing spotlight of the pandemic have consistently now gone on to more senior positions, wider responsibilities and bigger budgets, and have been able to get their own projects off the ground more regularly too. Everyone is more receptive to your ideas when they've witnessed, up close, the value your expertise can bring.

Remember that all crises are, at root, communications crises: These are your moments to shine.



Putting your hand up

Situations frequently arise where businesses require volunteers to take on particularly challenging or arduous assignments on top of the day job: Often, it is simply a request for someone to take on the responsibilities of a departed colleague. Sometimes it's a new idea suggested over the board table, but with nobody yet to lead it.

The professionals in our interviews offered first-hand testimony that by volunteering yourself for extra responsibility, often at a cost to one's time or personal life, you not only impress with your work ethic and belief in the company, but reap genuine career dividends later.

"You've got to be super open minded, quick to pivot, and never say no."

"I put my hand up to run the internal brand strategy and consulting function apart from main agency. It was very successful in Hong Kong, became regional, and the success in Asia got the attention of folks in Europe, who promoted me to run the separate business unit."

Of course, pushing yourself forward and actively asking to be rewarded for good work remains as important as ever.

"I've usually negotiated promotions on the back of projects, saying, 'If I do this then I'd better get promoted!'"



05 Career Transformations

How Corporate Affairs leaders add new strings to their bows



So broad is the strategic scope now given to corporate affairs that it must be intimately involved in almost every aspect of a business's operations – from research, strategy and planning through to management, HR, process management and even logistics. A successful corporate affairs professional must be plugged into all of these areas, even if there's no formal reporting line, and, crucially, must understand how they work and interact with one another. Only those prospective leaders who make the effort to gain this wide perspective will have the skills and knowledge required to manage the dizzyingly complex levers guiding the company's reputation.

More often than not, however, this diversity of experience cannot be found in a single company, geography, or even industry. Our research shows that most top-performing individuals have undertaken a significant career transformation of some sort, at least once in their career, to broaden their frame of reference.

Seventy percent of the corporate affairs directors we interviewed said that they had undergone a career transformation that pushed them beyond their comfort zone and exposed them to new ideas.

International moves

Moving internationally, either within a company, or with a new firm in a different country, proved to be one of the quickest and most effective ways our interviewees had expanded their capabilities in the role.

Twenty-two percent of those who were able to identify a specific transformation said that an international move had been the most significant catalyst in developing their careers – helping them connect with different stakeholders, attune to unfamiliar cultural sensitivities and ultimately increase their personal credibility – the number one trait of a successful corporate affairs leader.



"I was exposed to the work practices of international operations and that widened the horizons of my experience, and increased my comfort working in a multi-national and multi-cultural environment."

The benefits of shifting to a new geography are not limited to the skills picked up in the workplace. Living in a different country, often navigating

an unfamiliar culture and language, throws up challenges at every turn – working out how to do basic things, which at home are straightforward, but now seem daunting. Dealing with issues around accommodation, schooling, interactions with government, even finding your way around a city, can combine into a baptism of fire that can leave a legacy of new skills and increased confidence which directly translates into improved performance at work.

"The most significant personal transformation for me was my first move to Mainland China from Taiwan. I was also a single mom moving with a teenage son. It pushed me to come out of my comfort zone and re-establish new social, personal and professional judgement."

Changing corporate role or professions

Nineteen percent of those surveyed believed that moving to a new role within the communications or corporate affairs spectrum had the most positive impact on their careers.

"I transitioned from corporate communications to government affairs, working in roles which included direct federal and state lobbying, industry affairs, campaign development and policy engagement. It set me up for more executive-level corporate affairs roles because I have now built into my capabilities some real, hands-on policy and political-advocacy experience while working in a variety of mid- to senior-level roles."



"In terms of building blocks for great careers, I think it's critical to have these serious gear changes where you are inherently challenged. My move from [one major FMCG] to [another] was like that: In the previous company, my role was very focused on public affairs. Then when I moved, it was suddenly a much broader corporate affairs role – in a global leadership team for the first time, and as part of a business P&L leadership team for the first time. A very steep learning curve but that's where you learn and grow the quickest."

Several had even changed profession entirely, from one type of communications to another, and had found this to be the biggest developmental leap in their careers:

"Going from journalism to the PR side, then the comms industry, has really opened doors. It has given me the skills and the tools to be able to ride the next wave – to help me get to where I am today. What it gives you – learning to work at pace, with accuracy and integrity – have been key enablers for me."

These sorts of moves – not complete handbrake turns but clear changes of direction nonetheless – can be a way to tap into a new body of knowledge, connect to new stakeholders and get exposure to a different range of issues, providing the breadth of experience needed to succeed at a senior level.

Moving to a pre-IPO company

A significant number of interviewees (14%) cited the time they spent working in companies preparing for an IPO as the most significant step-change in their professional capabilities. Indeed, these people were often evangelical about the career-long skills this experience had provided, with many saying outright

that they would not have been in their current positions without it.

In contrast to the usually stable environments found at established public corporations, leaders in growing organisations gearing up for their most important transition ever will have to negotiate a perpetually fluid, frenetic, and sometimes chaotic landscape. It means hard work, long hours and fewer support mechanisms, and all without fully established systems and processes. You're building the bicycle as you ride it – and at full speed. But dealing with these challenges – the pace; learning how to deliver with rigour in unstructured environments – can transform a moderately competent mid-level corporate affairs professional into a top-performer ready for the most senior levels.

"Coming back to a listed company, was like getting into a warm bath, compared to the chaos of the pre-IPO organisation. But I'm really glad I had the experience, working in a fast-moving tech world, stepping outside of my comfort zone."



Moving to a start-up

A few of our interviewees had gained very similar skills by moving from the corporate world to a start-up company at a midpoint in their careers. One, who today is the APAC VP Corporate Affairs for a US\$15 billion multinational, told us that that move to a smaller company had been incredibly formative in landing him his current role:

"It was a major influence on who I am today. Because of that experience, I now instinctively know how to move things forward very fast and be very agile. Everyone has so much to do at a start-up and the terrain is so uncharted, that it means there's very little hierarchy, which is hugely empowering, and you learn how to be spontaneous and quick to execute – and those are foundational skills for any future exec."

Personal development

Most of our interviewees talked about these sorts of dramatic changes of environment as the catalysts for change in their skillsets and careers. But we also had a several individual responses from interviewees who felt that transformation had come when they had taken the initiative to develop themselves personally, ranging from doing an MBA to changing their own leadership style:

"I'm currently studying an Executive MBA and it certainly has been transformative, helping me to become a better manager and business partner as it's really built my understanding and knowledge, particularly of key functions like finance and investor relations."

"Going into this role three years ago, reporting into the Global Director of CR and the regional President in APAC, I was told I needed to 'hold more tension' in conversations. Basically, I was given permission to not get on with a few people. I thought about that a lot and made a conscious effort over the following months to interrogate my own leadership style and shift it in a different direction. That apparently small thing opened a lot of doors, actually: I'm now in conversations with my boss about exciting new steps – bigger, more strategic projects – and a lot of that comes from the way I've changed."

"The most important transformation for me was learning to honour my opinion with executives and tell the truth – no BS. It's fundamental to establishing your integrity and that will be recognised and pay off many times down the line. But it's also allowed me to become completely, dispassionately objective about things: I'm focused on what I actually think, rather than how I will dress it up."

While many of these major transformations – changes of role or industry; working in volatile environments; or investigating and trying to change your own inherent style – can seem daunting, facing big challenges and coming out on top is both hugely fulfilling for those courageous enough to take it on, and is the mark of a true leader.



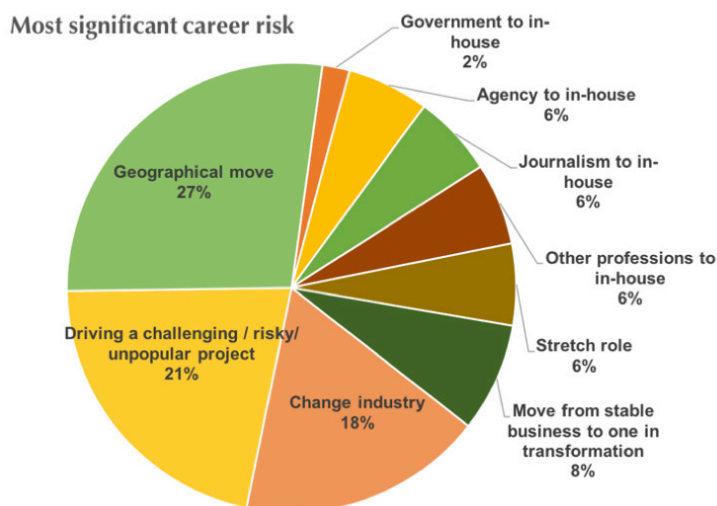
06 Taking Risks

How Corporate Affairs leaders provoke a step change in their career



As corporate affairs has matured, so it has become an increasingly competitive discipline. Today's practitioners have to do more to stand out, and so status quo careers are no longer an option. The balance of your skills – their breadth, range and unique particulars – is what will differentiate you from the rest.

But that can be testing. Building a unique constellation of qualities for high-profile success often means doing the unexpected with your career – taking on the unknown, perhaps; certainly eschewing the safe and steady career path. Interestingly, almost all the corporate affairs leaders we interviewed admitted that they had taken a significant risk with their careers at some point, and it was almost always seen as a key factor in their later successes.



Geographical move

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, given the demographics of corporate affairs in APAC, 27% of our interviewees cited an international relocation as the high-risk career decision that had most shaped their personal and professional growth.

"Leaving one country and moving to another country to set up a whole new corporate affairs function was a big risk — but, luckily, the outcome was that the function was successful and we grew the team."

Many in APAC corporate affairs will understand that sentiment. In our community, large numbers can draw on personal experience to champion the benefits of relocation in enriching one's personal and professional perspective. Some would even argue that making international moves never stops being valuable; that making several moves may, actually, be necessary. Many times, to progress in one's career, the risky option is staying put. Relocation is actually the safe bet.

"In 2021, I moved from London to Dubai and then, after a few years went on to Singapore. Without making these moves, I wouldn't have been able to promote to progressively more senior roles."

Driving a challenging agenda in the face of internal scepticism

Of course, risks are simply the nature of work at a senior level. Leadership means staking your reputation every day on your choices, and often the greatest career risk lies in how your peers regard the work you are pushing forward. Association with an unpopular project can affect your reputation

even when the quality of your efforts was high or everyone agreed that the underlying rationale was sound.

Twenty-one percent described leading a controversial project as the most significant risk they had taken with their career. However, as with other kinds of 'risks', it's a path that actually presents higher-than-average opportunities: If you back yourself and succeed, you subvert expectations and come out as a hero.

"The firm was receiving sustained negative media attention, which the CEO didn't wish to respond to. I was adamant we needed to have a voice and made a very strong case, lobbying the CEO until he agreed. I put him up for a studio appearance on a leading national news station. Luckily the first question that came up was one I'd prepped him on. The net result was a change in the narrative around the company and I took the credit."

Change of profession

Many of our interviewees – one in five – highlighted their decision to completely change profession and move into corporate affairs as, unsurprisingly, the risk that had most defined their success in the field.

Although a few had entered from quite unconventional backgrounds – from teaching; from R&D lab work; and from academia – the majority came from one of three familiar pathways: governments, agencies, or journalism. As the profession continues to develop in the coming years, and companies demand increasingly high-maturity business capabilities from corporate affairs leaders, it will be interesting to track whether these continue to be the most common entry routes into the field.



Move away from stability

Underlining the extent to which 'risk' is subjective, with often counter-intuitive benefits – more opportunity, in fact, than danger – a few of our interviewees described moments in which they had moved to an apparently less developed or transitional company/department precisely to move ahead:

"I moved from one consumer-focused multinational to another – but from an organisation that was very well established and where I had a much bigger team to a company that was significantly smaller, with a much less-developed corporate affairs function. So that looked risky on paper. But, for me, the opportunity to build something from scratch – and rather than inheriting a team, having the mandate to recruit my own – meant it was an opportunity for me to create and set my own vision. That's very hard when you inherit an established operation."

It's an illustrative example and one backed up by many of our interviewees. When considering a career move, the natural instinct is always to look for 'bigger and better'. But while the company name may look good on your CV, will you actually be developing your skills? More importantly, perhaps, will you be able to utilise your skills more than you can in your current role?

Conclusion

Risk can sometimes seem like a dirty word in career management. The goal of any career, surely, is to eliminate the unknown variables? To achieve increasing stability and certainty as the years go by, and ensure a safe cruise into retirement?

But while all career shake-ups, of course, have potential downsides, it's also important to remember that choosing a consistently safe path is also a very real risk of its own – that of never being noticed and never achieving real impact. Besides the fact that a certain level of courage is a vital part of every senior role, those who have stuck doggedly to the safe paths are often those who find themselves first names on the redundancy list at the very worst time – when they are too close to retirement to find another position.

To keep moving forward with your career, and secure it, it's essential to assess and then boldly take on managed risks. Our interviewees' stories prove that there are qualified risks you can take that present only a statistically small probability of jeopardy, but every chance that they will pay compound dividends for you further down the line.



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