Today´s and tomorrow´s challenges in public relations: comparing the
views of chief communication officers and next generation leaders

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This is the accepted, refereed and final manuscript to the article published in

Publisher's version available at http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2015.05.013

Today's and tomorrow's challenges in public relations:

Comparing the views of chief communication officers and next generation leaders

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Abstract

Most public relations research is focused on communication processes and the instruments, strategies and objectives in use. Less is known about the men and women who are and will be responsible for managing strategic communication in organizations today and tomorrow. Their understanding of strategic communication is crucial for the perception of the profession by different stakeholders and substantially influences the economic success and social acceptance of companies. This study takes a close look at leaders shaping the professional field now and in the future. Qualitative interviews with 20 chief communication officers and 20 future leaders (Generation Y) in the same companies were conducted. Comparing the views, experiences and expectations of the two age groups helps to identify cognitive patterns, routes of development in practice as well as new areas for research.

Introduction

The field of public relations has undergone continuous differentiation, expansion and upgrading in recent decades. Communication is not seen as an end in itself anymore, but is accepted as a tool for positioning and legitimizing business in society. An analysis of the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics even showed that public relations (PR) are outpacing journalism, in both number of jobs and salary growth (Williams, 2014). However, most research is focused on communication processes and the instruments, strategies and objectives in use. Less is known about the men and women who are and will be responsible for managing strategic communication in organizations today and tomorrow.

The history of public relations has researched the influence of pioneers like Arthur W. Page (AT&T) in the United States, Albert Oeckl (BASF) in Germany and Lucien Matrat (Elf) in France (Bentele, 2005; Russell, 2014; Xifra, 2012). The experiences and visions of these pioneers strongly affected the institutionalization of the professional field. Their ideas are often quoted, and serve as popular subjects for teaching in university and further education. By contrast, current communication leaders are less well known – although their influence on the economic success and social acceptance of companies is substantially higher than that of communication leaders in the times of the pioneers mentioned above. The understanding of strategic communication of these current leaders is crucial for the perception of the profession by top management, internal business partners and other stakeholders. In addition, they are role models for employees and trainees in communication departments.

This article takes a closer look at those communication leaders. First, a literature review will support the idea that the dynamics of an expanding field like public relations can partly be analyzed by understanding today's and tomorrow's leaders and their perceptions of the profession. On the basis of this assumption, a qualitative interview study was conducted to explore the views of 20 chief communication officers as well as 20 future communication leaders in the same companies. These individuals manage communications for prominent brands like Bayer, BASF, Bosch, BP, DHL, Microsoft, Pfizer, Puma, and Siemens. Comparing the views, experiences and expectations of the two age groups helps to identify routes of development in practice as well as new areas for research.

Literature review: Researching leadership and leaders

While the general importance of leaders for the development of professional fields is well known in many different fields, leadership research in the field of public relations and corporate communications has only recently begun (Berger & Meng, 2014, pp. 3, 16). Leaders are generally defined as "the people who engage in leadership" (Northouse, 2007, p. 3), and the special case of leadership in PR is defined as:

> A dynamic process that encompasses a complex mix of individual skills and personal attributes, values, and behaviors that consistently produce ethical and effective communication practice. Such practice fuels and guides successful communication teams, helps organizations achieve their goals, and legitimizes organizations in society (Berger & Meng, 2010, p. 427).

While there are different approaches to analyzing leadership, a major stream in the literature explores the mindsets and activities of chief communication officers (CCOs) and the ways in which these individuals manage the communication function (Röttger, Zerfass, Kiesenbauer, & Stahl, 2013, p. 5). This research tradition provides information about the leadership style of PR practitioners in the United States and in Europe (Werder & Holtzhausen, 2009; Zerfass, Verhoeven, Tench, Moreno, & Verčič, 2011), important issues affecting leadership today and strategies to manage these issues (Berger & Meng, 2014), excellent leadership and the required competencies of communication leaders (Jin, 2010; Meng, 2009), ethical aspects of leadership (Lee & Cheng, 2011), similarities and differences of leadership in communication management and other corporate functions (Meng, Berger, Gower, & Heyman, 2012) and gender-specific perceptions (Aldoory & Toth, 2004). Until now, the most comprehensive study in the field has been the global study of leadership in public relations and communication management (Berger & Meng, 2014). This shows that "the potential power of individual leaders and of professional and educational systems to affect practice should not be underestimated or marginalized" (Berger & Meng, 2014, p. 301). In-depth interviews in 23 countries revealed that individual leaders can have a dramatic positive impact on what the profession does and on how it is viewed or supported in an organization. On the other hand, some respondents complained about a lack of great leaders across the profession in their countries and an absence of role models (Berger & Meng, 2014, pp. 301-302).

Addressing the leadership topic is all the more important because corporate communication is a practice characterized by rather weak regulations and standards. Acting in this professional field is not shaped by a consistent model but is subject to multiple negotiations between different

groups inside and outside the organization (Cloos, 2014, p. 146). In other words, communication management is not characterized by a fixed set of tasks, by clear career paths, or by hierarchies. Therefore, individual professionals and the profession (as a collective actor) are supposed to demonstrate their capacities and performance in order to differentiate themselves from those in other positions and thereby create and expand their scope of action. In addition to organizational structures and processes, the identity negotiations and cognitive structures of the relevant actors are highly important. According to social construction theory by Berger and Luckmann (1969, p. 151-152) public relations practitioners produce their identity by an interaction of their organism, individual consciousness and social structure. Their objectively tangible world is based on role-specific knowledge which is among other things acquired through vocational training and professional activity. The varying understanding amongst practitioners of the same field is caused by different individual experiences. Applying social construction theory to the field of public relations (Tsetsura, 2010) leads to the idea to identify changes in the professional field over time by studying discourses of professionals. In terms of new sociological institutionalism (Frandsen & Johansen, 2013; Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin, & Suddaby, 2008), based inter alia on the above mentioned social construction theory, cultural-cognitive institutions comprise common scripts and shared beliefs that constitute social reality. Factors such as the basic understanding of concepts (e.g., communication) and expectations of an organizational function (e.g., corporate communications) are typically not limited to single organizations, but are part of shared visions in peer groups. While it is difficult to identify all influencing factors, sociologists have been able to show remarkable and consistent patterns in the mindsets of top managers (see, for example, Pohlmann, Liebold, Bär, Schanne, & Schmidt, 2015).

Following this line, researchers in general management and some areas of public communication have used interview studies to explore the cognitive mindsets of leaders. Chief executive officers in the United States were portrayed by scholars from Harvard Business School (Wetlaufer & Magretta, 2000). Later, the idea was taken up for the executive levels in Germany (Nolte & Heidtmann, 2009) in order to give us an idea of the role enactments, worldviews and visions of general managers. In Germany there are also publications portraying professionals in the media industry (Sjurts, 2014), journalism (Pörksen, 2005; Rippler, 2007) and social media (Beyer & Rolke, 2013).

However, leaders in corporate communications and public relations have barely been studied so far. One of the first attempts to find out about the perceptions and experiences of leaders in the field was initiated by The Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations, in 2007 (http://plankcenter.ua.edu/resources/leaders). In an anthology called *Legacies from legends in public relations*, well-known US professionals were asked to share their views and observations with students (Berger, 2007; Gower, 2009). Their statements focus mainly on how to become a leader in the field and on important competencies for a professional career. This publication made an important contribution to the development of PR practice and education, but it has not been used for identifying role concepts or for developing scenarios on the future of the field. Another study commissioned by the Plank Center goes beyond storytelling. Berger (2008) profiled 20 emerging leaders with diverse backgrounds, and provided a descriptive analysis of common patterns and themes such as leadership skills considered important by the majority of the respondents. The interviewees point out the necessity of maintaining the relevance of PR by understanding the trends affecting the field and by sharpening one's own competency profile.

Moreover, it is shown that having and being a good role model, as well as learning from mentors, is an important prerequisite for personal development (Berger, 2008, pp. 173-189). In Europe, several surveys about communication managers in executive positions have been conducted (Marshall & Dedrijvere, 2014; Verčič, Zerfass, & Wiesenberg, 2014). Moreover, an observation study of CCOs provides insights into their daily working life (Nothhaft, 2011), and a series of portraits reveals career pathways (Spiller & Scheurer, 2010). Globally, only a very few research projects have conducted interviews with PR leaders as part of a mixed-method design (e.g., Berger & Meng, 2014; Tench et al., 2013, pp. 64-79). Nevertheless those studies did not go far beyond publishing selected quotes or cases.

In summary, a portrait study of communication leaders that uses qualitative statements to identify common patterns is still missing. Moreover, the literature review shows that it is useful to compare perceptions of current leaders with those of the next generation. On the one hand, these people are going to shape the practice of the profession in the future. On the other hand, their self-image, as well as the interactions, similarities and differences between the present and future generations of leaders, will have an impact on the further institutionalization of corporate communications.

Research questions

Given the limited status of theoretical and empirical research comparing the understandings and experiences of CCOs and future leaders in PR, research questions were derived from key results of previous studies. Naturally, the project reported here cannot include all possible units of

analysis. We had to focus on those topics that can be seen as especially relevant for the cognitive structures of the leading actors in the professional field.

RQ1: How do (future) communication leaders conceptualize strategic communication and its contribution to organizational goals?

The understanding of corporate communications has changed during recent decades (Cornelissen, 2014). The move of corporate communications closer to the top management increases the requirement to outline the contribution to the value of the company and its intangible assets (Watson & Noble, 2014). This is also reflected in the ongoing debate about strategic communication, which is defined by a clear alignment towards overarching organizational goals (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015).

Empirical evidence about possible factors for excellence in communication management can be found in a variety of studies that form part of the body of knowledge about corporate communications. One of the most recent additions has been the European Communication Monitor 2014, which identified several statistically significant drivers: strong alignment with top management, particular organizational structures (the CCO being part of the executive board or reporting directly to the CEO), established routines for linking business strategy and communication, and a strong involvement in CEO positioning (Zerfass, Tench, Verčič, Verhoeven, & Moreno, 2014b, p. 133).

RQ2: How do (future) communication leaders understand leadership, and what are the most relevant individual skills for being a good leader in corporate communications?

When it comes to the question of how to characterize a communication leader, we need to keep in mind that leaders are often conceptualized as top managers who have to oversee a bundle of different activities. They design structures, processes and strategies on the one hand, and they manage human resources, as well as the activities of co-workers and subordinates, on the other hand (Böhmer, 2013, p. 33; Wunderer, 2011, pp. 4-5). Both areas have received attention in previous research. Questions such as how the structures and processes of corporate communications should be designed so as to create an attractive environment for employees, as the most important resource of this function (Klewes & Zerfaß, 2011), show that structural and individual components are closely linked to each other. Recommended measures for leading a communication department include: introducing transparent career paths, performance standards and feedback schemes; offering internal and external training opportunities (if necessary with an international perspective); and creating a clear team structure supporting flexibility and permeability (Klewes & Zerfaß, 2011, p. 53). Early leadership surveys in the United States showed that the management of communication departments is especially characterized by a transformational leadership style (defining a vision and appealing to followers' ideals and standards), a transactional style (drawing on authority and reminding followers of common standards) or an inclusive leadership style (naming challenges and involving followers in shared decision making), with the transformational leadership style being considered ideal (Aldoory & Toth, 2004; Grunig, 1992; Werder & Holtzhausen, 2009). In Europe, nearly every second respondent (46.6 percent) in a survey conducted among 2,249 PR professionals in 43 countries stated that the inclusive leadership style is predominant in their department, with the

transformational (34.9 percent) and transactional (18.5 percent) approaches following (Zerfass et al., 2011, p. 39). The study, furthermore, discovered that an inclusive style of leadership is positively correlated with the job satisfaction of the PR practitioners. Reciprocally, this satisfaction provides the framework for inclusive practices of leaders (Zerfass, Tench, Verhoeven, Verčič, & Moreno, 2010, p. 54).

Past surveys focusing on CCOs showed that they are today taking on expanded and highly strategic roles that go well beyond the traditional responsibilities of media relations, internal communications, crisis management, and executive communications. They are increasingly involved with corporate advertising and/or branding, corporate reputation and, more recently, social media, while "an important component of their roles is to ensure operational excellence as part of the senior leadership arsenal of talent and strategic skill sets" (Marshall & Dedrijvere, 2014, pp. 2-3).

An empirical study comparing the CCO's understanding of his or her own role with the board member's understanding of the CCO role identified significant differences (Zerfass, Bentele, Schwalbach, & Sherzada, 2014a). On the one hand, 48.7 percent of CEOs and top executives perceive the CCO as a personal adviser. On the other hand, the CCO is perceived almost as frequently as a spokesperson for the company (43.0 percent), and more frequently as an intermediary between the company and the public (64.6 percent). The adviser role is mentioned significantly more often if there are stronger structural links and more intense contacts between CEO and CCO (Zerfass et al., 2014a, pp. 72-73).

Crucial individual characteristics of excellent leaders, identified by Berger (2008, pp. 179-189), are: creativity, integrity, passion, motivation, fundamental skills and a diverse background. A qualitative survey of European CCOs about those characteristics that have become more important to them gained strongest support for topics like business acumen (73 percent), the ability to make complex decisions (51 percent) and character and ethics (47 percent) (Marshall & Dedrijvere, 2014, p. 6). Even though an accurate definition of the main terms like characteristics and skills is missing from this study, some interesting statements were collected. One CCO, for example, stated that "distinct skill sets for which leaders were hired in the past, although still important, take second place to the managerial maturity required to build and run a business function tasked with handling many of the more confusing items on the CEO's to-do list" (Marshall & Dedrijvere, 2014, p. 5). Furthermore, the study showed that CCOs share important characteristics with other C-level executives such as chief marketing officers (CMOs), chief financial officers (CFOs), and chief human resources officers (CHROs). From the perspective of a CEO, it does not seem to matter whether strategic input comes from a CCO, a CMO, or another senior executive: "More important is the person's ability to provide a 360-degree perspective of the landscape, an attitude and skill set that uniquely positions the savvy CCO within the leadership circle – acting more like a chief collaboration officer" (Marshall & Dedrijvere, 2014, p. 6).

A slightly different angle was offered by the global study of leadership in public relations and communication management (Berger & Meng, 2014). The respondents did not see much difference between leadership in PR and leadership in other occupations. Furthermore, they rated communication skills to be slightly more important than leadership skills for the job (Erzikova &

Petersone, 2014, p. 130). When asked to name the most important skills for future leaders, respondents supported often-heard answers (e.g., digital media and measurement skills), but also pointed out the importance of the so-called "soft people skills" (e.g., better listening, cultural sensitivity or emotional intelligence) in an uncertain future (Berger & Meng, 2014, p. 298). The prototypical profile of the future PR leader included the following core characteristics: female, multidisciplinary academic education, regular professional training, data-based decision making, strong internal and team focus, global view, working experience abroad, inclusive leadership style, role model, ethically branded (Berger & Meng, 2014, pp. 303-304).

RQ3: Which are the most relevant measures supporting a management career from the point of view of (future) communication leaders?

Study results, and reports provided by experienced recruitment companies, show that the multiple and highly complex demands made of CCOs raise a talent challenge (Marshall & Dedrijvere, 2014, pp. 9-12). On the one hand, the task portfolio of communicators has been expanded continuously during recent years by topics such as social media, community relations and corporate social responsibility. On the other hand, young people having the necessary knowledge about these new topics lack in-depth leadership experience. This observation leads directly to the question of how to become a good leader in the professional field. A large-scale study among communication professionals in Europe revealed that the most important factor for career development and for obtaining one's current position was networking among peers and colleagues (Zerfass et al., 2014b, p. 46). This supports previous claims that "having extended personalized networks of influence is an asset for a career conscious PR practitioner" (Valentini, 2010, p. 156). Networks seem to be helpful for building one's own career path, on the one hand,

and for the achievement of the business and communication goals of the organization on the other. They are relevant in formal manifestations (e.g., professional body membership, or structured events) and informally too (e.g., serendipity, or irregular meetings) (Ghosh & Reio, 2013, p. 107; Zerfass et al., 2014b, p. 61).

In the study mentioned above, further education (on or off the job), moving to a new employer, academic education prior to the job, mentoring by senior colleagues, job rotation or new assignments in the same organization, and internships prior to taking the position were all seen as important for career development (Zerfass et al., 2014b, p. 46). Comparing different age groups shows that for young employees the most significant factor was having work experience or an internship prior to the job (agreed to by 74.1 percent) while for the mid-career, middle aged employees (aged 30-39 and 40-49) the most significant career booster is a change in employer (74.4 and 72.1 percent respectively) (Zerfass et al., 2014b, p. 46). Both the youngest and the oldest practitioners cite mentoring as one of the top three aspects of career development. This is not surprising, given that a mentoring relationship has the potential to enhance the career development and the psychosocial development of both participants – the experienced mentor and his or her young mentee (Kram, 1983, p. 613). A very recent investigation of formal mentoring programs in the PR field has shown that it is not only the mentee but also the mentor who benefits from internal or cross-company mentoring schemes (Kiesenbauer, Burkert, & Zerfass, 2015). In the global study on leadership in public relations and communication management, 68.1 percent of the respondents reported that they learned more about excellent leadership in communications from role models or mentors on the job than from university education or management development programs (Berger & Meng, 2014, p. 128). The

importance of mentors and role models for shaping young professionals was also a recurring theme in the study conducted by Berger (2008). Both mentors and role models are seen as important supporters, providing guidance for professional development and helping to enhance key qualities: "For new professionals to become excellent leaders in public relations, excellent examples of leadership must be visible to them. They are able to find a set of role models of excellent leadership and pattern their profession decisions and actions while taking into consideration the example their mentors have set." (Berger, 2008, pp. 175-177). Mentors and role models cited in the interviews ranged from parents to professors to professionals.

RQ4: What trends in corporate communications are relevant from the point of view of (future) communication leaders?

Asked about the most important strategic issues in the professional field for future years, most respondents in the largest survey on strategic communication worldwide (n = 2,777) mentioned the challenge of linking business and communication strategies (Zerfass et al., 2014b, p. 83). Only one third of the professionals interviewed believed that coping with the digital revolution and the social web is one of the top challenges. A longitudinal analysis shows that this issue has become less important. It was the number one topic in 2010-2012, but went down to second in 2013 and third in 2014. Another topic that fell in importance was sustainable development and social responsibility, ranked second in 2008 and ninth in 2014, while the importance of building and maintaining trust seems to have increased (it was ranked fourth in 2008, and second in 2014) (Zerfass et al., 2014b, p. 87). This comparison shows that professionals have either learned how to deal with certain challenges, or that normative exaggerations have now been replaced.

Regarding the importance of various communication channels, the same study shows that online communication is clearly the leader here. Traditional press relations that interact with print media face a dramatic loss of importance. Only 41.8 percent of the respondents believe that such activities will be important in 2017, which is far fewer than believe they are important today (76.3 percent), and a great decline since 2011 and 2008, when this was the most important of all instruments (Zerfass et al., 2014b, pp. 83-91). Similar findings can be found in the global study on leadership in public relations and communication management. The three issues rated most important for PR leaders were: addressing the speed and volume of information flow, dealing with crises, and managing social media and the digital revolution (Berger & Meng, 2014, p. 298).

Methods

In order to address the issues at hand, a qualitative approach was applied. This research aims to derive idiographic rather than nomothetic statements, and differs from hypothetico-deductive research models that focus on testing hypotheses and finding generalizable causal relationships (Kuckartz, 2012, p. 75). Within qualitative research, generalizable conclusions do "... not mean to identify general time and place independent laws, but the formulation of a theory about which mechanism produces certain results." (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2010, p. 317). Data collection in qualitative research can be done in many different ways, such as by conducting interviews, experiments or observations. The topic of the present study is embedded in a dynamic context and has rarely been investigated. Thus we opted for an exploratory and inductive approach (Froschauer & Lueger, 2003, p. 11). We assumed that the required information can be verbalized by actors in the field, and therefore chose to conduct interviews,

which are usually chosen for exploratory research. In this way, we aimed to examine factors of social change as soon as they were created (Bogner & Menz, 2005, p. 37).

The study was conducted in Germany, the largest country in Europe and one of the most powerful economies in the world. As the total number of corporate communication professionals working in this country is unknown, we performed selective sampling. In the first step, we identified a group of companies that represent various industries and have a high level of communication expertise. These companies are members of the Academic Society for Corporate Management and Communication, which had 30 corporate members at the time of the survey (www.akademische-gesellschaft.com). All members were invited to join the study. Twenty of them decided to participate (see Table 1). The response rate (66.7 percent) was very satisfactory.

In each company both the CCO and an emerging communication leader (named by the CCO) were interviewed. All CCOs report directly to the CEO of their company. They are responsible for annual budgets of several million Euros, and manage up to several hundred employees in communication departments either nationally or internationally. The next-generation communicators are members of Generation Y, are 35 years old on average and have several years of working experience. Out of the 40 interviewees, five CCOs and nine next-generation leaders were female and 15, respectively 11, were male. Each of them held a graduate degree; six of the CCOs and two in the younger group had a doctorate.

All interviews were conducted by phone and lasted up to 60 minutes. The interviews were non-standardized, which means that neither questions nor answers were necessarily exactly the same

for each interview (Gläser & Laudel, 2010, p. 41). The research questions were operationalized using guidelines with 15 sets of questions to guide the interviewer. The guidelines had been pretested with former CCOs and younger communicators who were not part of the sample. During the course of the telephone conversation, the interviewer was free to deviate from the interview guidelines to deepen his or her knowledge about topics with a particular importance for the target person.

Tab 1. Corporations represented in the study

Company	Sector
BASF	Chemical/Pharmaceutical/Healthcare
Bayer	Chemical/Pharmaceutical/Healthcare
BMW	Industrial/Manufacturing
Boehringer Ingelheim	Chemical/Pharmaceutical/Healthcare
Robert Bosch	Industrial/Manufacturing
BP Europe	Energy/Utilities
B. Braun Melsungen	Industrial/Healthcare
Celesio	Wholesale/Retail/Healthcare
Clariant	Chemical/Pharmaceutical/Healthcare
Deutsche Bahn	Transport/Logistics
Deutsche Post DHL	Logistics/Mail
GIZ	International Cooperation
Hochtief	Construction
Ing-Diba	Banking/Financial Services

Microsoft Germany	Software/Consumer
Nord Stream	Energy/Utilities
Otto Group	Consumer/Retail
Pfizer Germany	Chemical/Pharmaceutical/Healthcare
Puma	Consumer/Retail
Siemens Energy	Energy/Utilities

After transcribing the audio material according to uniform rules, and generating a personal portrait for each respondent, we conducted an extensive qualitative content analysis. This was used to identify overlapping perceptions, differences between the generations, and commonly stated challenges for the future of corporate communications. In contrast to classical content analysis, which is limited to the manifest content of a text, human understanding and interpretation played an essential role in our case (Kuckartz, 2012, p. 39). Ambiguity and the meaning of the words analyzed were not ignored, and intersubjective validation was performed by jointly discussing interpretations in a team. This procedure helps to avoid an over-identification with the interviewee, or tunnel vision. On the one hand, the qualitative survey is able to delve deeply into the views of today's and tomorrow's leaders. On the other hand, we need to keep in mind that the essence of the interpreted material is reconstructed rather than being clearly identifiable. This limitation on the qualitative content analysis method derives from the ambiguity of language and epistemological boundaries (Froschauer & Lueger, 2003, p. 82).

Findings

Conceptualization of corporate communications and value contribution (RQ1)

The basic understanding of corporate communications has changed during recent decades. The CCOs in the sample are well aware of that. They look at communication as a strategic variable that supports the goals and visions of the company, controls its reputation and helps to build acceptance, and is carried out especially by managing stakeholder relationships:

> *From my perspective, it is the task of strategic communications to establish and maintain an ongoing dialogue between a company and its internal and external stakeholders. (CCO)*

Although internal communication was often emphasized in the past as an important success factor (Ruck & Welch, 2012; Tkalac Verčič, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2012), only one quarter of the CCOs surveyed mentioned its function as a key performance driver. From the responses to the question of what makes communication strategic, a uniform understanding of the term could not be identified. A quarter of the interviewees emphasized the need for analysis and clear objective definitions. Two interviewees explained that the ultimate purpose of strategic communication is to anticipate stakeholders' needs rather than to persuade target groups. Attributes assigned to strategic communication include being honest, authentic and continuous. This result confirms the observation that the term "strategic communication" is highly complex and has until now been understood in diverse ways (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015).

In contrast to this rather fuzzy picture given by today's leaders, the next generation presents a much sharper – but rather narrow – vision of the communication function. From their point of view, reputation management is the primary task of communication departments. Half of the emergent leaders state that corporate communication adds value by presenting a credible, consistent image of the company in the perception of different target groups and promoting dialogue, as well as by building and protecting the brand. Only a few interviewees name internal communication goals, reflect the relationship between corporate communications and acceptance in society (legitimacy), or see advising the top management as a goal of the communication function.

> *One of our main goals is to preserve and increase the good reputation of our company. Without reputation, our products would not sell as well. (Emerging communication leader)*

Different opinions were expressed about the measurability of communication. Some CCOs are confident of being able to quantify the value proposition of communication. Others are more reluctant, and state that the appreciation of the communication function is reflected by the standing of the department at board level and by how it is involved in strategic decision making by other top managers:

> *I am also a firm believer that we can measure the success of a communicator as well as the success of an engineer or sales representative; maybe not exactly*

quantifiable in Euros or Dollars, but at least in a reasonable way if asked for that.

(CCO)

The importance of communication is measured today by asking how far you are

part of the corporate strategy and whether communication is taken into

consideration in all the company does. But that means that we too have to connect

to the aims and methods of other departments in the company. (CCO)

Leadership in corporate communications (RQ2)

When it comes to the question of how to lead a communication department, more than one way

is mentioned. About half of the CCOs interviewed support the idea that employees should be

made capable of performing their tasks independently:

We should provide the overall framework of action and empower our employees to

make decisions and act more independently within their area of responsibility.

(CCO)

I am constantly working on eliminating my own position. That must be my real

goal. (CCO)

What makes a good leader in the eyes of younger communicators? Different ideas have been

expressed, but an inclusive, non-authoritarian approach by leaders is expected by the clear

majority of the younger communication managers. From their perspective, executives should,

above all, have an open ear for employees' ideas. They should be able to make decisions and involve employees in their decision making. A quarter of the interviewees ask for leaders to serve as a role model and to give them guidance and impetus for their daily work. They demand that leaders should support their employees. Empathy and trust in employees are characteristics that were often mentioned. Some interviewees pointed out that a CCO should provide his employees with enough freedom, and accept criticism:

> *I think a successful leader must have a very clear inner compass. Also, the ability to listen is fundamental because a manager's success is based on the feedback and input of his own employees. (Emerging communication leader)*

> *A successful executive is characterized by the fact that he always has an open ear for the team and is receptive to suggestions and criticism. (Emerging communication leader)*

Almost all emerging leaders report on an "open door policy" in their communication departments, which means that decision makers are open to the ideas of younger employees and allow these employees to contribute their own perspectives and suggestions. One respondent pointed out that the ideas of the younger generation are often ignored when it comes to the final decision, because a basic understanding of the overall change in the culture of society is still missing. The reason for this is, however, not just a lack of understanding of today's decision makers. Another issue is that the members of the younger generation cannot completely overlook

the implications of the cultural change and therefore are sometimes not able to convince their superiors of new ideas for change.

The daily work of CCOs consists of many tasks, and their job profiles differ widely according to the specific company and industry. Nevertheless, similarities can be identified. For almost half of the communication leaders, CEO communication is one of the most important tasks, especially coaching for public events and advising the CEO or the top management group on strategic decisions. Human resource management (the individual dimension of leadership), and the organizational development of the communications department (the structural dimension) follow closely on the agenda. Beyond the above-mentioned management tasks, CCOs often focus on the development of the communication strategy and its key messages:

> *Based on the corporate strategy we develop a communications strategy. We derive*
>
> *key messages from it and define appropriate implementing measures which we*
>
> *finally spread in our master plan over the year. (CCO)*

> *I set the strategy and always have one foot in the outside world in order to pick up*
>
> *trends proactively. Further primary tasks of a CCO are personnel development and*
>
> *human resource management. In addition, the advice to the top management,*
>
> *preferably at board level, is an essential part of my job. (CCO)*

Young professionals do see the need for CCOs to delegate tasks and work on a strategic level. However, some interviewees appreciate a CCO who is close to the base:

I like to have a boss who does not hover somewhere above my head and who is just

a position in the hierarchy for me. It is important that he goes into the depths of my

work, that he knows where I stand and gives impetus. (Emerging communication

leader)

Hardly any of the CCOs understand themselves primarily as the foremost representatives or mouthpieces of their organizations, or report doing operational tasks such as answering press requests. Accompanying change processes and ensuring a high degree of transparency is also mentioned rather sporadically in the interviews. One quarter of interviewees reports on the challenge of preventing damage to the company and avoiding negative media coverage.

Asking the question of whether leadership in the field of communication differs from that in other fields revealed a mixed picture. Some CCOs mentioned specific characteristics of the communication department that have an impact on leadership style, such as a high diversity in the teams, an extraordinary spread of competency levels, high time pressure or a strong outward orientation of communication activities. Other interviewees see no difference at all to other areas:

How to lead employees in a communication department does not differ from

leading other departments. I think that my peers lead as I do: at eye level, with

plenty of room for maneuver and with a lot of openness for different and

controversial discussions that move things forward. (CCO)

Career paths leading into the corporate communication profession can be as diverse as the starting point, which might have been a degree in business administration, communication science, or another academic discipline. When asked about their individual development, the CCOs repeatedly reported on their journalistic skills. One third of today's communication leaders consider the journalistic skills and knowledge they developed earlier in their career to be essential for the quality of their work today. Half of the young communicators thought about entering journalism at the start of their careers, too. But the proportion of those who have actually collected experience in this field is clearly much smaller in the younger group than in the generation of today's leaders. A quarter of the emerging leaders indicated that they were interested in journalism as a teenager or did journalistic work in secondary school. The main reasons for the changing mindset from pursuing a career in journalism to entering corporate communications were either poor prospects of success in the media industry or the desire to work in a commercial enterprise and contribute to the success of a company. Positive experiences in internships were crucial for the career choice in almost half of the cases. A quarter of the interviewees indicated that concrete development opportunities from the present employer determined the course of their career.

> *I faced the decision of which academic career I wanted to pursue: traditional*
>
> *journalism studies or the other pathway via business administration studies. I opted*
>
> *for the latter, because I had the feeling of being in a better position with economics.*
>
> *(Emergent communication leader)*

A look at the curricula of today's corporate communications and public relations education in Germany shows that it barely includes any content that deals with journalistic practice – probably due to the decreasing importance of traditional media work. On the other hand, editorial work is still an important tool of corporate communications. It will be important to reflect about which specific forms of journalistic competencies are part of the portfolio of communication managers and which ones are superfluous in the future.

Key measures for leadership development in corporate communications (RQ3)

Experience shows that positive internship experiences help to bind young professionals as loyal employees to a company. Along this line, the CCOs particularly emphasize the usefulness of internal staff development and high-quality trainee programs, out of which talents can quickly be passed on to another positions.

> *After they have studied various subjects, we offer young professionals the*
> *opportunity to gain experience in the different fields of the communication*
> *department within our company. During their traineeship they go through all*
> *necessary stations for a sound basic education. (CCO)*

> *I believe that a leader must develop a sense for assessing the potential of individual*
> *employees. An employee must have good general management skills, for example*
> *the ability to motivate people. If he furthermore has a broad range of professional*
> *skills and has proven himself in different communication disciplines, he is a*
> *potential leadership candidate in my eyes. Those who specialized in one part of the*

field of communication only will not be able to manage a communication

department. (CCO)

This insight is also supported by the next-generation leaders:

When I think back to the end of my studies and the first professional years, I had the

opportunity to work closely with colleagues from various areas of the

communication department. I had a lot to do with strategic communication issues

and got insight into many topics from the beginning. (Emerging communication

leader)

When promoting young talent, it is not only hierarchical advancement but also the development of basic competencies that seem to play a crucial role. The competency cited most often in interviews was teamwork:

According to our understanding, a career does not necessarily go up, but also in

the width of the company. Career does not mean to have more and more stripes on

the sleeves, but also to do many different things. Our communication managers

rotate between teams or between our different locations. We take great care that no

one is working too long in the same function. (CCO)

I need employees who can work in a team and not individual fighters who smash

my crew. (CCO)

One quarter of CCOs emphasize the quality and size of personal networks as well as many years of knowledge and experience in their own company and in their industry as important factors for their success. When asked about the importance of internal networking, three-quarters of the interviewees explain that it is mainly useful in exchanges with other departments, as a mood barometer or in order to learn of developments in other parts of the company at an early stage, for example. Internal networking happens either at formal occasions, such as meetings and conferences, or informally at lunch or fireside chats. One third of interviewees especially associate with this topic a consistent networking with the board of management. From their experience, this is a clever approach, because it helps to accelerate coordination processes and facilitate task performance:

> *Of course, I am also closely linked with other top management colleagues. We are regularly exchanging thoughts about current topics. I also keep in contact with my communication colleagues in other countries and constantly exchange with colleagues in the different areas of our company to keep a holistic view. Communication is not just any department but covers all the information that is exchanged in our company between employees. (CCO)*

For the younger generation, external networking mainly takes place during events run by professional communication associations, and through virtual platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn or Xing. This supports the quantitative results of a recent study among European communication professionals, which show that communication professionals in the under-40 age

group use LinkedIn, Xing and similar platforms most intensely and are the only age cohort who judge Facebook to be important for professional networking (Zerfass et al., 2014b, p. 71). Few interviewees in our qualitative study argued that everyday work leaves little time for external networks, and they still see potential for development in this area.

Internal networking is rated as very important by half of the emerging communication leaders. Knowing the right contacts is essential for the daily work of a corporate communication manager, because it helps him or her to respond to external enquiries quickly and competently and to act as an "early warning system" for the organization. According to half of the interviewees, internal networking takes place almost automatically at regular meetings. A quarter of the interviewees named the lunch break as an important informal occasion. Some companies offer events and projects for the purpose of networking:

> *It is crucial that the internal networking works both horizontally and vertically and that it is extending across various subject areas because this is the only way to get information relatively quickly. (Emerging communication leader)*

> *I am participating in various projects and therefore I have cross-departmental contacts. Naturally, I like to have lunch with those colleagues I want to exchange views privately with. (Emerging communication leader)*

Potential leaders are characterized by the search for higher positions and the motivation to evolve constantly. Half of the younger communications managers interviewed said they would like to

take more responsibility in future years – be it theme, budget or management responsibility. Four of the interviewees indicated that they wanted to specialize thematically by, for example, switching from internal to external communication, or the other way round. However, the majority are not pursuing a specific career strategy:

I have never had a master plan for my career. I am mainly guided by my interests. (Emerging communication leader)

I think it is a good idea to change job from time to time. However, it is not necessary to enter a new area as often as every two years. (Emerging communication leader)

When talking about career development, many interviewees talked about their role models. The statements made it clear that younger communicators closely follow the example of their current supervisors and CCOs. This is not surprising, given the fact that many of today's CCOs also say that they learned the essential elements of strategic communication from their former bosses in the first years of their professional careers. A quarter of those interviewed named former teachers, professors and colleagues as influential personalities. Interestingly, a quarter of the interviewees did not name a role model at all. This might be due to the dynamic growth of the profession and the comparatively low visibility of outstanding leaders. The results emphasize the need to produce portraits or comparable studies like this one in order to enhance transparency and enable reflection about leadership in corporate communications.

Asked about alternative jobs, one quarter of all emerging leaders could imagine working in the field of training and further education instead of working in communication management. Jobs in journalism, politics and strategic consultancy were mentioned by three interviewees.

Future trends in corporate communications (RQ4)

When asked about future challenges for the profession, CCOs and emerging communication leaders agreed on two points. In ten years' time, the main tasks and content of corporate communications will be no different from today. However, both groups are expecting fundamental changes in the instruments and channels of communication, as well as in communication activities in growth markets such as Asia. Depending on the company and industry, different developments are highlighted. The predictions range from increasingly individualistic consumer behavior to a progressive internationalization or digitalization and "hyper-transparency":

> *Organizing communication between the company and its various stakeholders will*
>
> *still be the core task of a PR director. Now as well as in the future, it is all about*
>
> *telling stories, placing messages and communicating strategically to increase the*
>
> *value of the company. (CCO)*

> *Even in 20 years' time, we will still read newspapers, but certainly the*
>
> *digitalization is making progress. (CCO)*

Due to the time difference and distance it is quite a challenge to manage a risk

situation or crises in such areas (like Asia). (CCO)

Some CCOs state that they are planning to react to these developments by paying more attention to internal communication, increasing corporate publishing or enhancing the flexibility of departmental structures. But which long-term tasks are connected with these trends? One third of the interviewees admitted that the importance of selecting and developing talent is going to increase in the future. Others emphasized the great need to improve the international communications of the company. In addition, some CCOs identified the ever-increasing expectations of politics and the media environment as a difficult problem:

As a corporate communicator you will never meet all external expectations 100 percent

today. (CCO)

Workload and securing a work-life balance is a topic of particular interest to the younger generation. For example, the majority of young professionals agree with their bosses that balancing work and leisure time is each person's own responsibility. This statement can be linked to the results of a quantitative study that shows that nearly half of all communication managers in Europe work at least a quarter more hours than are formally required of them (Zerfass et al., 2014b, p. 19). Those who are not able to cope with much work are judged not to be suitable for a communications job:

I believe that we will never have a nine-to-five job in communications. You did not choose the right profession, if that is your main goal. (Emerging communication leader)

Again, this attitude fits the results of quantitative research that the work-life balance is the weakest driver for job satisfaction for communication managers – in contrast to task diversity, great career opportunities and appreciation from superiors and internal clients (Zerfass et al., 2014b, pp. 33-45). Occasionally, young communicators interviewed in our study expressed the wish that their bosses would demonstrate a better approach towards managing their high workload, which shows that the work-life balance is an important consideration for some professionals.

In the wake of the much-discussed internationalization of communication activities (Ingenhoff, 2013), emergent leaders were asked whether traditional, stationary work in the corporate headquarters would remain the norm in the future or would be obsolete because of increasing mobility needs. Three-quarters of young communicators expressed the opinion that communication departments should continue to have their key office in the home market to serve the local needs of the stakeholders. One quarter emphasized the relevance of the physical proximity of communication managers to the board of management, for strategic reasons. The same number of interviewees argued that the relevance of an office workplace at the headquarters would be less for an individual communicator who would increasingly operate "between the markets". Numerous devices such as smartphones, laptops, tablets and cloud computing already offer the opportunity to work at any time and from anywhere today. "Always

on the road and always available" – this seems to be the credo of mobile workers. First, suggested solutions to increase the flexibility of communication departments are the introduction of transnational 24/7 shift work, home office working and retrofitting with mobile devices. Furthermore, almost all interviewees indicated that they could imagine themselves working abroad:

> *The call for permanent availability rules our communication profession. Basically,*
>
> *we have to be available 24/7. (Emerging communication leader)*

> *I think that people will work more flexibly and independently of location in 20*
>
> *years. (Emerging communication leader)*

In addition to these structural topics, further trends put forward by the emerging leaders can be attributed to technical progress. One quarter of the interviewees said that a tailored approach and openness to dialogue were key challenges for future stakeholder management. In addition, the interviewees predicted an increasing importance of intercultural aspects in their work. They foresaw a challenge in identifying new opinion makers and in placing messages in the flood of information in modern-day society, where the competition for stakeholders' attention has already become considerably more intense. In their opinion, the areas of employer branding and reputation management would be even more prominent in the future. Some interviewees saw the need for communicators to expand their technical knowledge further and to enter into closer dialogue with top management. Young communicators can only guess at the development of corporate communications over the next ten years, but one thing seems certain: factors such as

authenticity, trust, listening and dialogue remain fundamental principles for the communication success of companies. While the majority of communicators in Europe today think that social media have a major impact on a company's public reputation (Zerfass, Moreno, Tench, Verčič, & Verhoeven, 2013, p. 25), some emerging leaders believe that the issue will not be as relevant in ten years' time:

> *In my opinion, Social Media will be not so much discussed in ten years anymore*
>
> *because other issues will arise that are not yet foreseeable. (Emerging*
>
> *communication leader)*

One of the last questions for the next-generation leaders was how they would change their work environment if they were a CCO for a day. Proposals for optimization ranged from measures for organizing the department (e.g., internal communications guidelines, innovation workshops, and interdepartmental cooperation) to actions for improving the public perception of the company (e.g., enhanced social media activities, image campaigns, storytelling strategies, and integrated communications). Emerging leaders receive their visions of modern communication management mainly from conversations with colleagues and by reading industry magazines and newsletters. Moreover, input from outside the communications field, as well as training events and conferences, were repeatedly mentioned as a source of inspiration.

Conclusion

A wealth of material has been collected in this qualitative study, which interviewed 40 chief communication officers and next generation leaders working in global companies. The study revealed a wide range of answers to questions that are crucial in professional life. One of the results is that there is no one single prototype of today's leader in public relations. Emerging communication leaders represent a more consistent mindset in some aspects, but they still comprise a broad range of personalities, career expectations, and visions. This shows that public relations is still a nascent field and is far from being institutionalized, in a sociological sense, by a collective identity, a set of shared cognitive interpretations of the profession and its role. It is also obvious that communication management is less advanced in practice than is suggested by many textbooks and self-portraits by organizations and professional associations.

Nevertheless, our research was able to identify a number of overlapping issues that were supported by both today's and tomorrow's communication leaders. These can be interpreted as cornerstones for developing a public relations function in practice, and might inspire future research. The propositions to be taken into account are:

- Give a clear picture of (leadership in) strategic communication

- Establish talent management in communication departments

- Reassess the relevance of journalistic skills in the digital age

- Strengthen internal networks and mentoring across generations

- Establish new work routines to balance 24/7 reachability and personal lifestyles

- Shape joint visions for the profession

This study can be read as an insight into the professional field, as a forecast of its development and, between the lines, as a critical analysis of the status quo. Examining the statements of leaders in different age groups provides a change of perspective. However, the results presented here are not to be understood as an exact description of today's practice, because of the limitations linked to the sampling procedure. We consider this kind of qualitative in-depth research essential. On the one hand, it provides a better understanding of development in the field for researchers, and, on the other, it supports the critical self-reassurance of professionals.

Acknowledgements

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