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**Communication Evaluation and Measurement:  
Skills, Practices and Utilization in European Organizations**

Final Manuscript

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### **Introduction**

In today's competitive business environment, companies, non-profits and other organizations invest large amounts of financial and human resources to reach out and listen to stakeholders. The effectiveness of messaging strategies as well as the contribution of successful communication to overarching organizational goals has to be proven in the long run (Watson, 2012, p. 394). With rising budgets and an increasing number of communication channels, communication practitioners are gradually being pressured to provide "hard facts" instead of decisions to invest in communication based on intuition or experience (Watson, 2012, p. 394; Yin *et al.*, 2012, p. 42). Measurement and evaluation enables communication practitioners to demonstrate the value of their activities for their organizations (Stacks and Michaelson, 2014; Watson and Noble, 2014). However, in order to conduct sound measurement of communication effects, communication professionals must be equipped with a solid knowledge and training in empirical research techniques. The effective diffusion of robust methodological knowledge from academia to practice hence becomes a critical success factor.

A review of empirical studies into the implementation of evaluation and measurement practices suggests that for the most part, communication professionals lack the expertise to conduct valid and reliable evaluation, along with facing constraints of small budgets and sparse time (Wright *et al.*, 2009). Another key finding is that organizations have largely adopted methods for evaluating communication success on the level of specific media and channels, while scarcely

measuring effects on stakeholders and on organizational goals (Gregory and Watson, 2008, p. 345; Zerfass, 2010, p. 98).

Overall, previous findings indicate that the challenge to conduct reliable measurement is three-fold: firstly, communication professionals have to understand and develop skills how to conduct evaluation; secondly, they have to evaluate whether communication activities have reached those goals in practice; and finally, they have to use those insights to advance and manage their future activities.

To date, however, little is known about how advanced the method skills and experiences of practitioners across Europe are, which practices of measurement are applied in communication departments, and how organizations use measurement insights to support and improve communication management activities. The present study addresses this gap by exploring the state-of-the-art of evaluation and measurement in communication departments across Europe. It is based on a quantitative survey of 1,601 professionals working in communication departments of companies, non-profit and governmental organizations from 40 European countries. The study aims to provide answers to three research questions asking about prerequisites, implementation and benefits of communication measurement and compares practices across organizational types.

### **Literature review**

Empirical studies into the practice of evaluation and measurement of communication in organizational contexts have a considerable history, starting with first inquiries in the United States in the early 1980s (Volk, 2016; Likely and Watson, 2013). To date, insights into measurement practices are available for the United States (e.g. Lindenmann, 1990; Hon, 1997; Wright, 1998), Australia (e.g. Walker, 1994; Xavier *et al.*, 2006), Europe (e.g. Baskin *et al.*, 2010; Zerfass, 2010; Matilla and Marca, 2012), and recently Asia (e.g. Huang, 2012; Macnamara *et al.*, 2015). Researchers were attentive to study these practices across different types of organizations (Hon 1997, 1998; Walker 1994) with some reporting inter-sectorial differences, with e.g. non-governmental organizations doing less measurement than other sectors (Macnamara 2006; O'Neil 2013). In terms of methodological approaches, scholars have utilized both quantitative methods such as survey designs (e.g. Piekos and Einsiedel, 1990; Invernizzi and Romenti, 2009; Baskin *et al.*, 2010) and qualitative methods such as interviews (e.g. Hon, 1997; Place, 2015) to gain a deeper understanding of how professionals actually conduct evaluation and measurement. Few

scholars have relied on secondary data analysis to examine the state of the art within evaluation practice, for instance through analyzing entries for industry awards (e.g. Bissland, 1990; Gregory, 2001; Pieczka, 2000; Xavier *et al.*, 2005) or evaluation reports (e.g. O'Neil, 2013).

What remains under-explored so far by previous empirical studies, are questions concerning the necessary prerequisites for conducting reliable evaluation, the different effect levels where communication impact must be measured, and the benefits of using measurement insights to plan future communication activities.

### *Measurement skills of communication professionals*

The understanding of communication processes and the ability to conduct scientifically rigorous measurement is crucial for communication professionals, who aim to document how communication adds value to their organization. In fact, measurement skills have been named among the most important skills for future leaders by communication professionals (Berger and Meng, 2014, p. 298). However, little is known about the personal measurement competencies of communication professionals to date (Kiesenbauer and Zerfass, 2015), as most research is focused on the measurement methods in use or the communication instruments evaluated, generally suggesting that practitioners do not fully utilize the diversity of methods available (e.g. Gregory, 2001; Walker, 1994; Watson, 1997).

Early research into evaluation practices has been conducted in the tradition of role research, suggesting a separation of managerial and technical aspects of the practitioners' role (e.g. Dozier, 1984; Austin *et al.*, 2000; Tench *et al.*, 2013, p. 14). Evaluating communication success has typically been listed as a core skill of practitioners taking over a managerial role, along with planning and managing strategic communication activities. On the other hand, technical tasks have often included operational skills such as writing press releases or producing PR materials, but were unlikely to encompass any type of evaluation activity (Dozier, 1984; Austin *et al.*, 2000). As early as in the 1980s, Dozier forecasted that public relations practice would increasingly be depending on scientific evaluation techniques and professionals needed the skill to conduct what he termed "true" evaluation (Dozier, 1985).

Competencies required to perform reliable evaluation can be categorized into different categories: methods of social science research, methods to analyze processes, and value-oriented methods. The competency to utilize basic empirical social research methods includes for instance the

ability to perform content analysis, develop surveys, run focus groups or conduct pre/post tests (Pavlik, 1987). To date, many of these methods can be conducted online, and additional knowledge is needed to interpret Internet statistics, social media analytics and big data (Gandomi and Haider, 2015). Process analyses require the skill to use methods for compiling and interpreting data, deconstructing and analyzing budgets, or analyzing processes and workflows. Finally, professionals may link communication to organizational goals with value-oriented methods, which require skills like constructing scorecards or calculating reputation value or brand value. Wright *et al.* (2009) conducted a Global Survey of Communications Measurement, based on 520 respondents from multiple countries. A key finding was that the lack of expertise to conduct reliable evaluation and measurement is an important constraint alongside small budgets and sparse time (p. 23). Alarming, the overwhelming majority of respondents viewed measuring ROI (return on investment) on communication as an achievable goal, pointing towards the well-documented misconception in practice that it is possible to calculate the financial ROI attributable to communication (Wright *et al.*, 2009, p. 2; Watson and Zerfass, 2011). A few other surveys of communication professionals provide supporting evidence for a paucity of knowledge on how to utilize evaluation methods correctly (e.g. White and Blamphin, 1994; Walker, 1997; Watson and Simmons, 2004; Laborde and Pompper, 2006; Baskin *et al.*, 2010; Macnamara, 2015). The inability to document communication impact reliably has been problematized as a major barrier to the continuing professionalization of the field (e.g. Bissland, 1990; Laborde and Pompper, 2006) and the institutionalization of the communication function (e.g. Invernizzi and Romenti, 2009). Given the scarcity of empirical insights into the state-of-the-art of measurement competencies in communication departments across Europe today, the first research question is:

RQ1: How advanced are the measurement skills of communication professionals?

#### *Implementation of measurement practices and methods*

The second challenge for communication professionals is to evaluate whether their activities have reached previously defined goals. Many researchers and practitioners argue that the impact of communication has to be analyzed along the typical stages of communication processes – starting with the communication activities by an organization, passing different phases of media and stakeholder effects, and ending with the potential impact on the focal organization and its goals (Watson and Noble, 2014). Over time, a number of public relations evaluation models have

been offered (see Watson and Noble, 2014, pp. 55-72), mostly derived from program theory and program logic models and building on information processing and communication theories. Lindenmann (1993/2003) has introduced a popular approach to public relations evaluation, speaking of PR outputs, PR outtakes, PR outcomes and business outcomes. Other authors have modified this approach and introduced slightly different stages and different terminology (e.g. AMEC 2016/2011; PRIA, 2014; Macnamara, 2015).

Many studies across the world have shown that professionals often neglect the necessity of tracking communication processes from their initiation to their potential economic impact. Instead, organizations have largely adopted methods for evaluating communication results on the level of media and channels/platforms, while scarcely measuring effects on stakeholders and on organizational goals (Gregory and Watson, 2008, p. 345; Likely and Watson, 2013, p. 156).

To research how European professionals are conducting measurement and evaluation today, this study uses a theoretical framework developed by academics, management accountants and communication associations in Germany (DPRG/ICV 2011; Watson and Noble, 2014, pp. 170-181). The so-called *DPRG/ICV framework* conceptualizes evaluation and measurement activities in four clusters: inputs–outputs–outcomes–outflows. The term “outflows” is the equivalent to “impact”, “organizational outcomes”, or “business results” in other models. While all are important, demonstrating business value of communication activities is more transparent if done at the outcome and outflow levels, e.g. by describing the impact on reputation, brands, relationship qualities, or sales. As visualized in figure 1, the framework distinguishes several starting points of measurement:

- Insert Figure 1 here -

- *Input (What expenditures are being made for communication?)*: The resources employed include staff employment and the financial costs of communication. Both of these can be measured using cost categories or established methods of accountancy adapted to the requirements of communication processes.
- *Internal output (What is being achieved by the company itself?)*: This stage comprises process efficiency, which can be recorded using budget adherence, operating times or error rates, and the quality of internal workflows and activities provided by communication departments, i.e.

the satisfaction of (internal) clients. To gain insights on this level, measurement must once again fall back on accountancy but it must also employ its own empirical data.

- *External output (What means of contact are being developed?):* This stage refers to the range and contents of messages that are available to stakeholders or recipients. Indicators such as the number of clippings or favorable media coverage, visits to corporate websites, “share of voice” on social media platforms, or intranet use may be collected. The task of communication measurement is to provide social science research methods such as content analyses and online analyses for demonstrating communicative output.
- *Direct outcome (How are stakeholders’ perception and knowledge changed?):* As far as perception, utilization, and knowledge are concerned, the changes affecting the stakeholders themselves are involved. Awareness, online session length, number of readers per issue, recall, understanding of key messages, and recognition are typical parameters through which the success of communication can be shown. Here, just as at the next level, opinion polls and observations are used.
- *Indirect outcome (How strongly are opinions and intentions being influenced?):* This stage relates to the exertion of influence as the actual goal of all communication activities. Changes of opinions, attitudes, and emotions, as well as behavioral dispositions or actions of stakeholders can be depicted through several indicators, i.e. brand image, changes in reputation, employee commitment, and willingness to buy.
- *Outflow (Which business or organizational goals have been achieved?):* As a consequence of communication processes, strategic and/or financial objectives of corporate performance and/or intangible resources can be influenced. Indicators such as turnover, project closings, cost reduction, or reputation and brand values may be used. However, the link between communication strategies and organizational goals can only be represented by value links that need to be developed in a corporate-specific manner. For this purpose, communication professionals have to employ and adopt appropriate management systems such as scorecards or strategy maps (Fleisher and Mahaffy, 1997; Kaplan and Norton, 1996; Pfannenber, 2010; Zerfass, 2008).

Based on this framework, the second research question explores the current state of implementation of measurement activities:

RQ2: Which measurement practices and methods are implemented by communication departments along the stages of communication input, output, outcome and outflow?

### *Use of measurement insights*

Finally, the third challenge for practitioners relates to using previously gained measurement insights in a meaningful and strategic manner. Scholars have discussed different purposes for which measurement data may be utilized. Particularly in the early beginnings of research, evaluation has largely been considered as the final step within the communication management process: analysis, planning, execution, and evaluation (Smith, 2013). In this line of thinking, evaluation was commonly understood as a summative activity, assessing the final outcome of a specific communication message or campaign (Watson and Noble, 2014). Within this form of retrospective measurement, measurement insights are typically used to evaluate the success of communication activities or reflect upon the goals and directions of communication strategies.

The future-oriented dimension of evaluation was less frequently discussed in the early years of research, although a few scholars and practitioners had already acknowledged the relevance of formative evaluative research to inform planning processes (e.g. Stamm, 1977; Lesly, 1986; Broom and Dozier, 1990). Lerbinger (1977) mentioned the need of establishing monitoring or scanning systems to track critical changes in the environment and adjust strategies to environmental trends. In a similar line, Noble (1999) argued that evaluation should not be reduced to a backward-looking summative activity, but rather conceived as a proactive and forward-looking activity at the beginning that provides ongoing feedback to enhance communication management. Hence, when strategically integrated and purposefully used, insights generated through formative evaluation (monitoring, listening, etc.) can support planning upcoming communication activities, adjusting strategies, or leading communication teams (see e.g. Macnamara, 2014).

Ultimately, measurement insights may be utilized for documenting success and explaining the value of communication to top executives and (internal) clients. Bissland (1990) emphasized that evaluation is crucial for demonstrating accountability and achieving professional status within the organization. The ability to provide management with solid measurement data from communication activities minimizes the risks of budget cuts or reduced influence within the organization (Yin *et al.*, 2012, pp. 42-43).



In order to gain excellence, practitioners need to use measurement insights for managing strategic communication, e.g. to revise or plan future activities. However, to date, empirical research has seldom explored how measurement insights are integrated in communication practice. The third research question is hence phrased:

RQ3: How are measurement data and insights utilized in communication management?

## **Methods**

The present study explores the current state-of-the-art of evaluation and measurement practice in communication departments across Europe. The goal is to provide answers to the three research questions posed above, focusing on prerequisites (RQ1), implementation (RQ2), and benefits (RQ3) of communication measurement.

A quantitative methodology was applied to perform this research. A sample of 1,601 professionals from 40 European countries working on different hierarchical levels in communication departments of companies, non-profits and governmental organizations were surveyed as part of a larger transnational online survey (Zerfass *et al.*, 2015). A pre-test with 51 practitioners in 18 European countries was held before the English language survey was launched in March 2015 and was online for four weeks. A personal invitation was sent to more than 30,000 communication professionals throughout Europe via e-mail based on a database provided by the European Association of Communication Directors (EACD) and additional invitations were distributed through national branch associations and networks. 6,415 respondents started the survey and 2,391 of them completed it. Answers from participants who could not be clearly identified as part of the population of European communication managers were deleted from the dataset. The larger survey is then based on 2,253 fully completed replies by professionals working in communication departments and agencies; the data reported in this article is based on the replies of 1,601 communication professionals working in communication departments only. The instrument consisted of 33 questions arranged in 19 sections. Three questions were used in two different versions for respondents working in communication departments and agencies respectively. Six questions were only presented to professionals working in departments. All questions were based on research questions and hypotheses derived from previous research and literature.

Roughly six out of ten respondents worked in communication departments in companies, of which 35.2 per cent were employed in joint stock companies (called “public companies” in the

United States) and 24.6 per cent in private companies. Another 24.5 per cent of the communication professionals worked for governmental organizations and the remaining 15.6 per cent for non-profit organizations. 42.8 per cent of the respondents held a position as head of communication. 27.7 per cent of the respondents interviewed were responsible for a single communication discipline or were unit leaders and 22.5 per cent were team members.

The demographics showed that 61.1 per cent of the surveyed professionals were female and roughly two thirds (68.3%) were aged between 30 to 49 years. Six out of ten professionals had more than ten years of experience in communication management, while 25.5 per cent had between six and ten years of experience and a minority (14.7%) less than five years. A vast majority (95.2%) of the respondents had an academic degree ranging from a professional bachelor to a doctorate, with most of these respondents holding a master degree (61.1%).

The IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for data analysis. Results have been tested statistically with ANOVA/Scheffe post-hoc tests and Chi-square tests. Results are classified as significant ( $p \leq 0.05$ )\* or highly significant ( $p \leq 0.01$ )\*\* in this article.

## **Findings**

Communication professionals working in communication departments across Europe report moderate measurement skills, but they do not employ adequate methods to measure the entire communication process from input to outflow, and they do seldom use the insights for advancing and managing their activities.

### *Measurement skills of communication professionals (RQ1)*

Overall, results show that practitioners display rather moderate capabilities when it comes to their personal skills of evaluating and measuring communication effects. On a 5-point Likert scale (1 low experience – 5 high experience), the highest level of experience reported was for compiling and interpreting data ( $M=3.50$ ,  $SD=1.04$ ), which is a prerequisite for process analyses. Following close behind, professionals have moderate experiences for developing and managing surveys ( $M=3.41$ ,  $SD=1.06$ ), performing content analyses ( $M=3.40$ ,  $SD=1.12$ ), and running Internet and social media analytics ( $M=3.33$ ,  $SD=1.11$ ), which altogether belong to the set of basic social science research methods. Professionals report a slightly lower competency level when it comes to the experience with process-oriented methods, i.e. for deconstructing and analyzing

budgets ( $M=3.22$ ,  $SD=1.23$ ) or analyzing processes and workflows ( $M=3.19$ ,  $SD=1.16$ ). On the flip side, the weaker areas of the respondents' competencies were knowledge about running focus groups ( $M=2.78$ ,  $SD=1.27$ ) and more sophisticated value-oriented methods such as constructing communication scorecards ( $M=2.78$ ,  $SD=1.25$ ), and calculating reputation value or brand value ( $M=2.64$ ,  $SD=1.21$ ). All fall below the mean scores for capabilities, providing supportive evidence for the previous notion that professionals indeed lack the expertise to utilize robust valuation methods to document the value-adding contribution of communication.

As illustrated in table 1, highly significant differences were found regarding the skills of communication practitioners working in different types of organizations. Across the sample, professionals employed in companies generally report higher capabilities than their counterparts working in non-profit or governmental organizations. The only exception is the capability to run Internet and social media analytics, which is rated highest by professionals working in non-profit organizations ( $M=3.43$ ,  $SD=1.09$ ).

- Insert Table 1 here -

For deconstructing and analyzing budgets, respondents working in communication departments of joint stock companies ( $M=3.41$ ,  $SD=1.20$ ) or private companies ( $M=3.37$ ,  $SD=1.21$ ) are significantly more experienced than their peers working in non-profit organizations ( $M=3.09$ ,  $SD=1.22$ ) or governmental organizations ( $M=2.87$ ,  $SD=1.24$ ;  $F=16.324$ ,  $p \leq 0.01$ ).

Highly significant differences were also detected with regard to the use of value-oriented methods. Professionals working in joint stock companies report average experience with constructing communication scorecards ( $M=3.05$ ,  $SD=1.25$ ), while professionals from private companies estimate their capability below the scale center ( $M=2.79$ ,  $SD=1.21$ ), followed by professionals from non-profit organizations ( $M=2.53$ ,  $SD=1.30$ ) or governmental organizations ( $M=2.52$ ,  $SD=1.18$ ;  $F=16.789$ ,  $p \leq 0.01$ ). Experiences with calculating reputation value or brand value were particularly weak, which is an alarming finding regarding the crucial need for measuring communication effects at the outcome and the outflow level. Again, professionals working in companies assess their personal capability highly significant higher ( $M=2.78$ ,  $SD=1.21$ ;  $M=2.76$ ,  $SD=1.20$ ) than their counterparts in non-profit organizations ( $M=2.49$ ,  $SD=1.19$ ) or governmental organizations ( $M=2.42$ ,  $SD=1.20$ ;  $F=8.398$ ,  $p \leq 0.01$ ).

Overall, the results of this study emphasize that respondents do not possess high experiences and capabilities to conduct robust measurement in practice. Communication professionals particularly lack the ability to utilize valuation methods for reporting how communication contributes to organizational goals at the outcome and outflow level. For that reason it may be hard to defend, explain and legitimize investment into communication to top decision-makers.

### *Implementation of measurement practices (RQ2)*

The implementation of measurement methods was analyzed in accordance with the theoretical framework described above, differentiating the levels of input, internal output, external output, direct outcome, indirect outcome, and outflow. Europe-wide, most communication departments focus on output measures, above all media clippings, but neglect both costs (input) and impact on organizational targets or resources (outflow).

At the initiation of communication processes (input), the surveyed organizations frequently measure financial costs for projects ( $M=3.90$ ,  $SD=1.25$ ), based on a 5-point Likert scale (1 never – 5 always). In contrast, personnel costs at the project level are less often collected ( $M=3.19$ ,  $SD=1.39$ ), pointing towards clear deficits in cost accounting.

When evaluating communication processes (output), attention is first focused on media exposure or on the reach of company-owned communication platforms: Across Europe, direct output measures like clippings and media responses ( $M=4.33$ ,  $SD=1.04$ ) are most prevalent in strategic communication, followed by measures of Internet or intranet usage ( $M=3.92$ ,  $SD=1.24$ ). At the level of internal output measures, the satisfaction of (internal) clients is evaluated more often ( $M=3.60$ ,  $SD=1.23$ ) than the process quality of internal workflows ( $M=3.05$ ,  $SD=1.27$ ).

For assessing direct communication outcome, the surveyed communication departments focus their attention on the success of communication with stakeholders through analyzing their understanding of key messages ( $M=3.43$ ,  $SD=1.27$ ). Indicators for exerting influence on stakeholder attitudes and stimulating behavior change – as the actual goal of any communication (indirect outcome) – are comparatively less frequently employed by communication departments ( $M=3.28$ ,  $SD=1.19$ ).

Measures that indicate the impact of communication at the outflow level are scarcely utilized by European communication departments. In fact, methods to evaluate the impact of communication on financial/strategic targets (i.e. with scorecards or strategy maps) ( $M=2.98$ ,

SD=1.40) or on intangible/tangible resources (i.e. economic brand value) (M=2.90, SD=1.31) are ranked last.

- Insert Figure 2 here -

This finding is extremely interesting and contradictory, considering that the major value-adding contribution of communication to organizational objectives is typically described as building intangible assets like brands, reputation, and organizational culture. The fact that implications for corporate goals, including the creation of intangible assets (outflow), are only tracked by a few of the respondents is alarming. Figure 2 illustrates that communication measurement is still heavily based on monitoring outputs, while the impact on organizational goals at the top of the pyramid receives less attention in practice.

Different types of organizations differ significantly regarding the implementation of evaluation measures, as visualized in table 2. In line with the previous observations presented in literature review, the overall implementation of communication effectiveness measures is higher in companies than in non-profit or governmental organizations. Considerable scale point differences between the mean values were detected for evaluating communication impact at the outflow level. Governmental organizations least frequently measured the impact of communication on intangible/tangible resources (M=2.57, SD=1.28), while joint stock companies showed an average implementation rate (M=3.22, SD=1.28;  $F=23.788$ ,  $p \leq 0.01$ ). Another noticeable difference was identified for calculating personnel costs for projects at the input level, which governmental organizations do much less often (2.88, SD=1.38) than for instance private companies (M=3.39, SD=1.35;  $F=8.923$ ,  $p \leq 0.01$ ).

- Insert Table 2 here -

As apparent in table 2, governmental organizations have a lower implementation rate of effect measures along all phases. This might be caused by the fact that leaders in the public sector exert less pressure to prove the success of communication activities, and that cultures of con-

tinuous improvement and management audits are less prevalent in this field. However, the overall trend towards more transparency will probably force governmental organizations to document communication effectiveness in a more advanced way in the future.

The overall results show that communication departments care less about the resources used to initiate communication processes, the stakeholders addressed by communication activities, and most importantly, any results this has for the achievement of organizational goals. The finding that measuring output is still the main activity in any type of organization across Europe in 2015 becomes even more remarkable, since obviously not much has changed in comparison to previous studies reporting a similar focus on only a small part of the overall process (e.g. Zerfass, 2010; Wright *et al.*, 2009). What is needed, instead, however is a more balanced view and the generation of measurement insights at every level of the communication process.

#### *Use of measurement insights (RQ3)*

On another note, results show that measurement and evaluation activities are mostly used in a traditional way without leveraging the power of data for managing communication. Across European organizations, communication departments most often use measurement insights for the reflective purpose of evaluating the success of their activities ( $M=3.82$ ,  $SD=1.13$ ), based on a 5-point Likert scale (1 never – 5 always). However, insights are also frequently utilized in a prospective manner for planning upcoming communication activities ( $M=3.72$ ,  $SD=1.16$ ) or for reflecting goals and directions of communication strategies ( $M=3.56$ ,  $SD=1.17$ ). A result worth reflecting is the low use of measuring data for leading communication teams or steering agencies and service providers ( $M=3.17$ ,  $SD=1.26$ ), suggesting that the value of formative evaluation for managing communication still seems to be overlooked.

Surprisingly, the need to explain actions through figures in large organizations is often neglected, as only a limited part of communication departments use measurement insights to explain the value of communication to top executives and internal clients ( $M=3.60$ ,  $SD=1.19$ ).

Last but not least, the study shows significant differences across different types of organizations regarding the integration of measurement insights into strategic communication management. Overall, joint stock companies showed the highest response rates, while governmental or-

ganizations underperformed. Interestingly, the study found no organizational differences regarding the inclusion of evaluation data for proving accountability and explaining the value of communication to management.

Table 3 demonstrates that organizations particularly differ significantly when it comes to using measurement insights for retrospective evaluation. Governmental organizations least often integrate insights to evaluate the success of communication activities ( $M=3.61$ ,  $SD=1.24$ ;  $F=8.216$ ,  $p \leq 0.01$ ). Also, they least frequently utilized measurement data to reflect goals and directions of communication strategies ( $M=3.35$ ,  $SD=1.22$ ;  $F=16.487$ ,  $p \leq 0.01$ ). Ultimately, significant differences between organization types were also identified for using measurement insights for leading communication teams and steering agencies/service providers. Joint stock companies most often used such insights strategically ( $M=3.45$ ,  $SD=1.18$ ), while governmental organizations again ranked last ( $M=2.91$ ,  $SD=1.30$ ;  $F=21.089$ ,  $p \leq 0.01$ ).

At large, the present study demonstrates that the value of data for managing strategic communication seems to be overlooked by many communication departments today. The premature use of measurement insights for prospective purposes such as strategy adjustment is alarming, as linking business strategy and communication strategy continues to be the most important issue for communication management in Europe (Zerfass et al., 2015, pp. 38-43).

- Insert Table 3 here -

## **Conclusion**

This research sheds light on the current state-of-the-art of evaluation and measurement practices in communication departments in Europe and contributes to studies that explore the professional field through cross-national empirical research. Overall results indicate that the practitioners surveyed in the sample do not possess the skills required to conduct robust evaluation. While respondents report moderate capabilities when it comes to using social science research methods, their knowledge of valuation methods to document the impact of communication on organizational targets is scarce. Communication professionals working in joint stock and private companies display higher experiences with value-oriented methods than professional employed in non-

profit or governmental organizations, but nevertheless, overall knowledge appears far from having reached a satisfying standard. This finding is in line with previous empirical investigations into the profession, suggesting that the lack of expertise indeed poses a major obstacle to evaluation and measurement practices.

This study proposes that a key requirement for successful evaluation in practice is to advance the personal measurement skills of communicators. For communication leaders, it will be indispensable to acquire a better comprehension of how the entirety of communication effects are interrelated, and additionally retain a good overview of the great number of measurement methods in order to make informed decisions regarding their target-oriented implementation. Communication leaders could benefit from additional training in finance, operations and management, in order to better comprehend business opportunities, provide strategic advice to management, and link communication strategies to organizational objectives (e.g. Yeo and Sriramesh, 2009). Furthermore, communication heads should ensure that their communication staff possesses robust training in social science research techniques, along with training on how to develop organization-specific measurement models and define adequate performance measures (see also Laborde and Pompper, 2006; Xavier *et al.*, 2005). Another key issue is for practitioners to acquire a good working knowledge in utilizing more sophisticated valuation methods.

Overall, the findings point out potential weaknesses regarding the diffusion of methodological knowledge from academic research into practice. A few studies have already problematized the flaws in current method education, particularly at the undergraduate level, calling upon educators to reconsider University curricula and devote more efforts into improving instruction in empirical research methods (Rancer *et al.*, 2013; Parks *et al.*, 2011). This research proposes that universities should play a decisive role in better equipping students enrolled in communication science with robust knowledge on the application of empirical research techniques, and thereby pave the way for advanced measurement skills of future communicators in the professional field. The critical challenge will be to teach students entering a professional career to reliably measure communication effects using basic and applicable – not necessarily advanced – research methods.

Results further demonstrate that communication departments of organizations in the sample do not employ adequate methods to measure communication processes. Measuring output



through media-related measures is still the main activity in any type of organization across Europe. Although most organizations evaluate some part of the communication process, data for different activities are only seldom linked to overall organizational financial targets or intangible resources. The study shows that value-based communication is still not feasible in most European companies, and that a systematic application and linking of well-known management concepts and evaluation methods remains a critical challenge in practice.

The significant focus on output measurement to the detriment of outcome and outflow measurement can partially be interpreted in light of the moderate measurement skills reported by professionals: they apparently do not have sophisticated knowledge how to utilize valuation methods for measuring communication impact. Future research should explore additional barriers that hinder successful evaluation practices, i.e. whether practitioners possibly do not know that they should conduct evaluation at the outflow level or whether they believe communication impact at the output level is equivalent to organizational success.

Finally, organizational communication departments in the sample often do not use insights from measurement for advancing and managing future communication activities. Evaluation is most frequently conducted for retrospective purposes and less often in a prospective manner. A key challenge for successful evaluation is to strategically integrate measurement data into communication management and comprehend evaluation as an ongoing future-oriented activity. A challenging issue for the profession is to meaningfully utilize insights generated through strategic monitoring and environmental listening, in order to adjust communication strategies and anticipate critical issues in the environment.

Taken together, the lack of measurement expertise of communication staff on the one hand, and the low implementation level of valuation methods on the other, may be a major part of an explanation on why documenting the value of communication has remained such an important issue for communication management over so many years. One solution to this problem is a simple one: to be able to demonstrate business value, you have to measure what you do (Watson, 2012). This is only possible by first defining value links visualizing how communication effects contribute to organizational goals along the entire communication process. Such value links must depict and link communication effects from the initiation of communication processes to the impact on financial targets and intangible resources, and be specific for every organization. Secondly, communication departments must measure the entirety of communication effects, from the input

(costs) to the outflow (material/immaterial) level. A combination of scorecards and traditional evaluation methods on the operational level (media monitoring, polls, process analyses, cost accounting) can be utilized to assess the performance of communication departments.

The high convergence with previous findings suggests that the present research project draws a realistic big picture of the current state of the art in evaluation and measurement in Europe. Future research into the theoretical foundations of communication processes and effect models is advocated, particularly at the edge of communication theory and business administration (accounting, auditing). The challenge is to adequately conceptualize how the entirety of communication effects are linked to overall organizational success from an interdisciplinary and integrative perspective. Comparative cross-national research into evaluation and measurement practices of the profession is needed to gain a deeper understanding of the current barriers to successful evaluation and identify both best practices and future challenges.

Overall, an increased exchange of knowledge between academy and industry appears vital for the continuing progress of evaluation and measurement research and practice (Watson, 2006). High priority should be given to jointly developing a consistent and comprehensive explanation of how communication adds value, particularly since current reporting and accounting practices still lack regulative standards on how to report the value of intangible assets. Industry bodies and education facilities could take a lead role in this area and foster a wider distribution of knowledge as well as of exemplars of innovative measurement approaches, thereby fortifying the professionalization of evaluation and measurement practice as well as gaining wider recognition from other management functions (Xavier *et al.*, 2006).

### **Limitations**

This study has several limitations. It is not representative for the studied population as the exact number of public relations professionals in Europe is not known, so a probability sampling is impossible. It is a purposive elite sample, because it was executed in English language (which is among non-native speaking populations more prevalent in higher strata) and because of the high number of practitioners at the top positions (in departments and agencies). Results are obtained through a survey, so self-reporting nature of results must be taken with caution. Then study also gives a cross-continental overview and is not sensitive to national differences – in the future, this study should be supplemented with comparative international and intercultural research.



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### **Figures to be inserted**

#### FIGURE 1.

The DPRG/ICV-Framework for Communication Controlling

(Source: DPRG/ICV, 2011, p. 13)

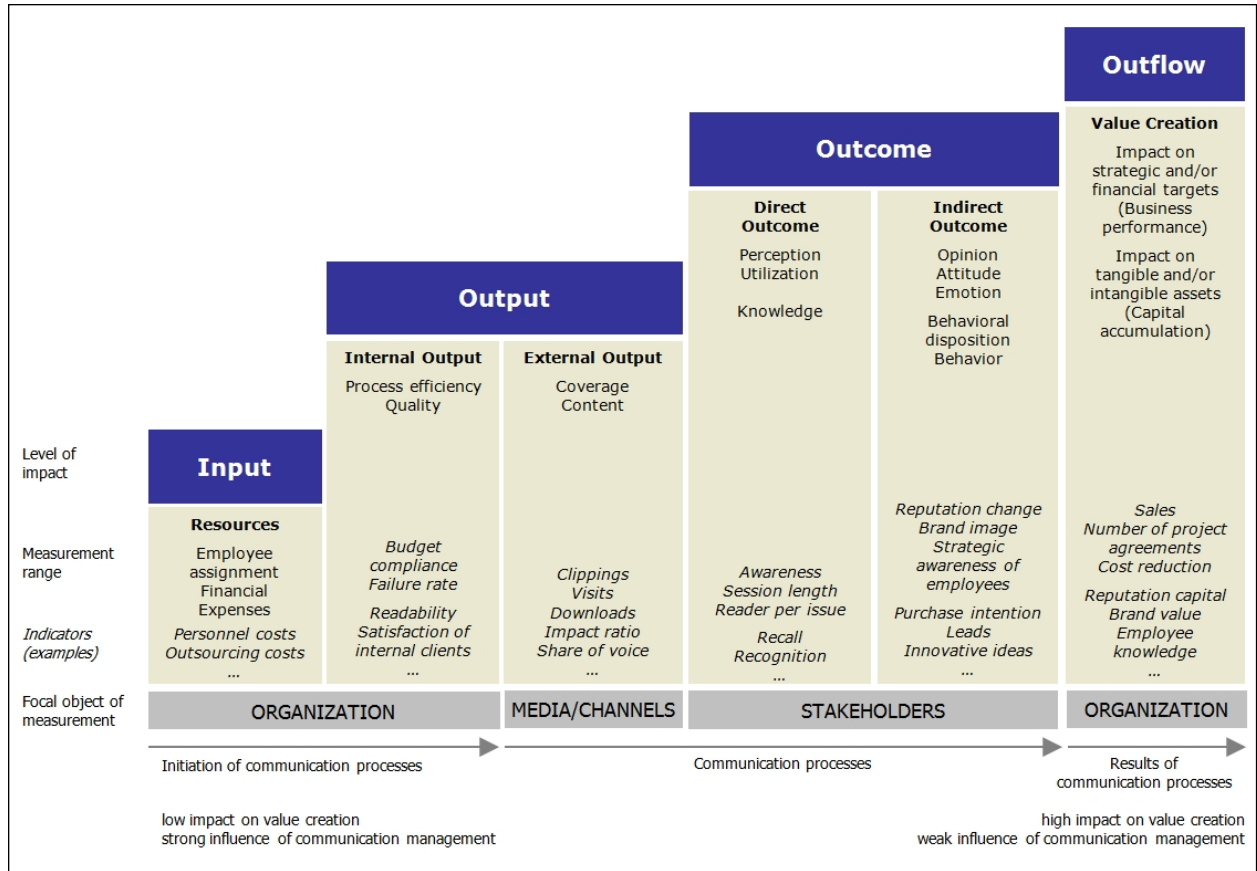
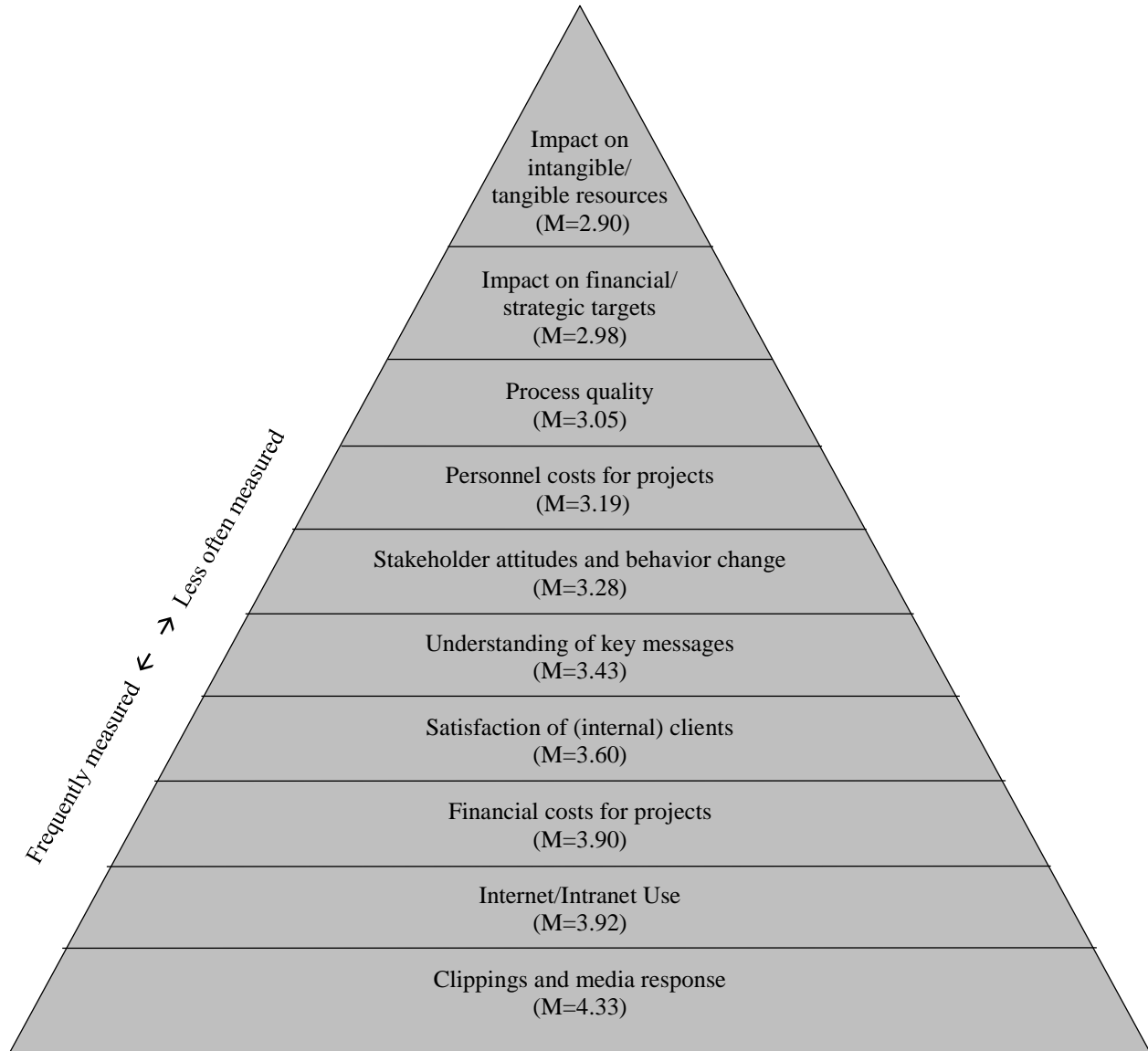


FIGURE 2.

Focus of measurement and evaluation in communication departments



Note.  $n_{\min} = 1,496$  communication professionals working in communication departments in Europe. Q: Which items are monitored or measured by your organization to assess the effectiveness of communication management / public relations? A: 1 never – 5 always (5-point Likert scale). Mean values for each statement.

**Tables to be inserted**

TABLE 1.

Evaluation skills of communication professionals in different types of organizations

	Joint stock companies		Private companies		Governmental organizations		Non-profit organizations		<i>F</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Compiling and interpreting data	3.53	1.06	3.54	1.02	3.47	1.04	3.38	1.03	-
Developing and managing surveys	3.44	1.05	3.45	1.04	3.34	1.10	3.36	1.05	-
Performing content analyses	3.45	1.10	3.36	1.16	3.45	1.12	3.27	1.12	-
Running internet and social media analytics	3.27	1.12	3.40	1.14	3.29	1.07	3.43	1.09	-
Deconstructing and analyzing budgets **	3.41	1.20	3.37	1.21	2.87	1.24	3.09	1.22	16.324
Analyzing processes and workflows	3.27	1.12	3.25	1.19	3.07	1.18	3.08	1.16	-
Constructing communication scorecards **	3.05	1.25	2.79	1.21	2.52	1.18	2.53	1.30	16.789
Running focus groups	2.86	1.27	2.69	1.24	2.80	1.29	2.69	1.28	-
Calculating reputation value / brand value **	2.78	1.21	2.76	1.20	2.42	1.20	2.49	1.19	8.398

*Note.* n = 1,430 communication professionals working in communication departments in Europe. Q: How would you rate your personal capabilities in the following areas? A: 1 low experience – 5 high experience (5-point Likert scale). Mean values for each statement. \*\* Highly significant differences. ANOVA/Scheffe post-hoc test,  $p \leq 0.01$ .

TABLE 2.  
Focus of communication measurement in different types of organizations

	Joint stock companies		Private companies		Governmental organizations		Non-profit organizations		<i>F</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Clippings and media response **	4.52	0.85	4.18	1.10	4.27	1.09	4.25	1.17	9.580
Financial costs for projects **	4.01	1.19	4.15	1.10	3.48	1.38	3.94	1.26	20.901
Satisfaction of (internal) clients **	3.75	1.15	3.72	1.24	3.33	1.27	3.49	1.25	10.715
Understanding of key messages **	3.65	1.19	3.47	1.28	3.12	1.32	3.33	1.24	13.211
Personnel costs for projects **	3.24	1.40	3.39	1.35	2.88	1.38	3.22	1.39	8.923
Internet/Intranet use	4.02	1.16	3.91	1.22	3.86	1.29	3.80	1.33	-
Stakeholder attitudes and behavior change *	3.41	1.21	3.26	1.17	3.14	1.20	3.26	1.18	3.717
Process quality (internal workflow) **	3.12	1.26	3.24	1.28	2.89	1.25	2.83	1.25	7.448
Impact on financial/strategic targets (i.e. with scorecards, strategy maps) **	3.22	1.40	3.18	1.34	2.57	1.34	2.77	1.39	21.188
Impact on intangible/ tangible resources (i.e. economic brand value) **	3.22	1.28	2.98	1.28	2.57	1.28	2.60	1.32	23.788

Note.  $n_{\min} = 1,496$  communication professionals working in communication departments in Europe. Q: Which items are monitored or measured by your organization to assess the effectiveness of communication management / public

relations? A: 1 never – 5 always (5-point Likert scale). \*\* Highly significant differences. ANOVA/Scheffe post-hoc test,  $p \leq 0.01$ . \* Highly significant differences. ANOVA/Scheffe post-hoc test,  $p \leq 0.05$ .

TABLE 3.

Use of measurement insights differentiated by types of organizations

	Joint stock companies		Private companies		Governmental organizations		Non-profit organizations		<i>F</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Evaluating the success of communication activities **	3.9	1.0	3.8	1.0	3.61	1.24	3.83	1.1	8.216
Planning upcoming communication activities	3.8	1.1	3.7	1.1	3.61	1.22	3.68	1.1	-
Explaining the value of communication to top executives and (internal) clients	3.6	1.1	3.5	1.2	3.53	1.19	3.61	1.2	-
Reflecting goals and directions of communication strategies **	3.7	1.1	3.5	1.0	3.35	1.22	3.49	1.2	16.487
Leading communication teams and steering agencies/service providers **	3.4	1.1	3.1	1.2	2.91	1.30	3.02	1.3	21.089

*Note.* n = 1,601 communication professionals working in communication departments in Europe. Q: How are insights from communication measurement used in your organization? A: 1 never – 5 always (5-point Likert scale). Mean values for each statement. \*\* Highly significant differences. ANOVA/Scheffe post-hoc test,  $p \leq 0.01$ .

