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**Strengthening the Role of Communication Departments: A Framework for  
Positioning Communication Departments at the Top of and Throughout Organizations**

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**Citation**

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<https://doi.org/10.1108/CCIJ-02-2021-0021>

**Abstract**

**Purpose** – Corporate communications is often less successful when it is competing for influence with neighboring functions such as marketing or sales within organizations. This article addresses the internal positioning of communication departments by developing a conceptual framework which helps to understand, analyze and optimize their standing in organizations.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The research is based on a literature review across several disciplines (e.g., organizational communication, strategic management) and supported by 26 qualitative in-depth interviews with board members, executives, and communicators in a global industry company. By combining the theoretical and empirical insights, a framework for positioning communication departments within organizations was developed.

**Findings** – The framework depicts seven strategies (e.g., expectation and impression management, supporting ambassadors from other departments) and three spheres of influence (organizational integration, internal perceptions, and social capital) to strengthen the position of corporate communications.

**Research limitations/implications** – The conceptual framework has been supported by one case study so far, and future research may further develop and verify it by applying it to a larger number of companies in different industries.

**Practical implications** – Practitioners can use the framework as an analytical tool to reflect the current situation in their organization and identify opportunities for strengthening it.

**Originality/value** – This article introduces a novel view in the academic debate about the role and influence of corporate communications. It establishes a framework that helps to identify different drivers and strategies, and lays ground for future research.

**Keywords** Corporate communications, communication department, expectation management, impression management, positioning, perceptions, new institutionalism

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

The digital transformation and deep mediatization of society (Hepp, 2020) has, without any doubt, increased the relevance of communications for corporate success (Cornelissen, 2020, pp.37–54). The range of tasks and roles for professional communicators and their departments is constantly increasing. But this seldom leads to an increase in resources and influence. On the contrary, corporate communications is often less successful when competing with neighboring functions such as marketing or sales (Arthur W. Page Society, 2016). Earlier research shows that communications is often underrated because the services of communication departments and how they contribute to value creation are not fully understood by top management and co-workers (e.g., Zerfass *et al.*, 2014; Brønn, 2014; Falkheimer *et al.*, 2017). While the top management believes in the relevance of communication and supports a strategic orientation of the function, executives are still unclear of what roles communication practitioners have (Argenti, 2017; Falkheimer *et al.*, 2016). Co-workers mostly classify professional communicators as channel producers or creative technicians (Falkheimer *et al.*, 2017). Accordingly, the position of communication departments within organizations seems fragile. Discussions about the low profile of corporate communications have been recently revived due to COVID-19-related cutbacks of communication budgets in many industries.

While various role conceptions for communication professionals have been developed in the past (e.g., Broom and Smith, 1979; Dozier and Broom, 1995; Falkheimer *et al.*, 2016), there is consensus that the range of roles will grow in the future (Argenti 2016; Bolton *et al.*, 2018). For instance, coaching roles are gaining in importance as more and more employees become corporate ambassadors and speak about or on behalf of an organization (Andersson, 2019; Brockhaus *et al.*, 2020; Madsen and Verhoeven, 2019). In view of the variety of roles on the individual level, the need has arisen for communication departments to sharpen their self-understanding as value-creating units, reflect on their position within the organization, and strengthen it. Despite their practical relevance, the department's positioning and appropriate strategies for improvement have been barely analyzed in corporate communications research so far.

This article explores this research gap from a conceptual perspective, relying on a qualitative mixed-methods approach. The research comprises a literature review and in-depth interviews with 26 organizational members—the management board, heads of department,

business unit leaders, and communication managers—from a global industry corporation. The article contributes to the body of knowledge in corporate communications by shifting the focus from the overall organization and individual communicators to functional departments and their positioning within organizations. Furthermore, in applying new institutional theory we widen the perspective by analyzing the relevance of internal stakeholders and their perceptions and expectations for communication excellence.

In the following sections, we provide a conceptual background of positioning theory and new institutional theory and describe the methodology of our research. We then present the framework for positioning corporate communication departments as a result, and conclude with a discussion and implications for research. To overcome a fuzzy profile of communication departments in practice, this article suggests ways to reflect the actual positioning, and identifies different strategies for enhancing the position at the top of and throughout an organization.

## **Theoretical Background**

### *Positioning of Corporate Communication Departments*

The concept of *positioning* stems from competition theory in economic science. Management scholar Michael E. Porter (1980) used it to research the relative position of companies in their competitive environment. This matters because it defines how value will be created and thus influences performance and success. Not only corporations but also products or services can be positioned by using strategic management tools, such as the portfolio analysis or growth-share matrix. Along this line, *communicative positioning*, a concept discussed in marketing science and communication theory, aims at conveying strengths that distinguish an organization, product, or service from others (Ries and Trout, 1981). The *International Encyclopedia of Communication* emphasizes that the “process of positioning includes identifying, defining and managing the perception relevant audiences have of a particular organization, product, person or idea” (Zerfass, 2008, p.3822). Communicative positioning supports the strategic positioning of businesses (corporate positioning), brands (brand positioning), people (CEO positioning), or ideas (issue positioning) in the public sphere. The same logic applies for the organizational sphere. Ideas, people, or departments can be positioned in specific ways throughout an organization. This will impact how value is created, how performance is evaluated, and how success is recognized internally.

By *corporate communication departments* (short: communications), we refer to a specialized unit in a business organization that is responsible for the governance and management of functional communication activities in and by the corporation (Cornelissen, 2020, pp.27–34). This is done by professional communicators or communication managers, who may execute listening and messaging activities themselves, or who may support, enable, or commission others to do so (e.g., writing speeches for top managers, hiring agencies to run campaigns).

Surprisingly, the *internal positioning of corporate communication departments* has rarely been part of the academic debate. Some studies touch upon the topic by stating that soft power disciplines such as communications, marketing, and human resources (HR) struggle to win the favor of the management board (Falkheimer *et al.*, 2016), and compete with other groups or individuals for influence and power (Berger and Reber, 2013; O'Neil, 2003). In corporate communications, there are only a few studies focusing on the positioning of individuals (Zerfass *et al.*, 2016; Conte *et al.*, 2017; Nessmann, 2010; Van Gorp and Pauwels, 2007). Following the understanding of communicative positioning outlined by Ries and Trout (1981) and Zerfass (2008), the aim of internal positioning is to achieve a desired position throughout the organization that clearly distinguishes the communication department from other departments (e.g., marketing, sales) or external service providers (e.g., agencies, management consultancies for communications) from the perspective of the management board and other relevant decision-makers within the organization (e.g., heads of functional departments and business units). To achieve a desired position, communication departments need to identify, define and manage the perception internal stakeholders have of them.

### *New Institutionalism and Legitimacy*

In sociology, new institutional theory describes how social expectations and institutional pressures may influence organizational perceptions and behaviors (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Meyer and Rowan, 1977). To gain “legitimacy, resources, stability and enhanced survival prospects” (Meyer and Rowan, 1977, p.340), organizations are driven to adopt new practices and procedures expected of them. Organizations or other entities facing similar environmental constraints often look alike (become isomorphic) because they meet social expectations in order to be seen as legitimate. “Legitimacy is a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values,

beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p.574). Hence, new institutional theory helps to understand how organizational practices become established and recognized. “Organizations that incorporate societally legitimated rationalized elements in their formal structures maximize their legitimacy and increase their resources and survival capabilities.” (Meyer and Rowan, 1977, p.352) New institutional theory explains that organizations operate in institutional contexts having different, sometimes inconsistent, requirements and expectations. Therefore, it is difficult to manage a universally shared perception and assessment of an entity’s performance. As a result, so-called rationality myths function as a substitute to secure legitimacy – independent of efficiency criteria (Meyer and Rowan, 1977, p.341). Activities can be decoupled from formal structures and decisions to cope with inconsistent expectations, buffer demands and maintain the legitimacy facade (Meyer and Rowan, 1977, pp.356-357). An example of decoupling is the renaming of goals or activities that already exist in a similar way, e.g., talking of quality management instead of evaluation (Elšik, 1996, p.353). As a result, there might be gaps between talk and action.

How can this be applied to corporate communication departments? Organizational members must attribute legitimacy to the communication department for it to be perceived as an important unit that is involved in decision-making processes (Falkheimer *et al.*, 2017; Tench *et al.*, 2009). Accordingly, a communication department is internally considered legitimate and can rely on the support of other functions if it integrates the expectations of its internal stakeholders and thus gains trust (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Communication departments can use decoupling and ceremonial facades to meet stakeholders’ diverging expectations and to ensure its legitimacy. Internal legitimacy can lead to increased power and influence (Grandien and Johansson, 2012, pp.216-217) – which are interrelated concepts that have been intensively investigated within the field of corporate communications (e.g., Berger, 2005; Reber and Berger, 2006; Swerling, 2009; Verčič and Zerfass, 2016). Reber and Berger (2006) describe power as “the capacity or potential to get things done” (p.237) and influence as “the use, expression or realization of power” (p.237). Empirical research shows that communication departments have influence when senior management take their recommendations seriously (advisory influence) or invites them to senior-level meetings dealing with organizational strategic planning (executive influence) (Verčič and Zerfass, 2016, p.276). Being perceived and heard by key internal stakeholders requires a strong internal standing within the organization. Thus, we propose that internal legitimacy, power, and

influence are objectives of internal positioning processes and concurrently important factors influencing positioning.

From a new institutionalist perspective, the roles and the positioning of corporate communication departments in organizations are results of negotiation processes between competing functions, their leaders, and power structures that have evolved over time. Thus, the internal positioning of communication departments is primarily shaped by interactions with organizational members. We understand positioning as a continuous negotiation process, which depends on institutional contexts. Hence, the success of a communication department depends not only on its set-up, and competencies, but also on the perceptions and expectations of internal decision-makers or internal clients, such as the top management, other departments, and business units. Communications can flourish only if those decision-makers understand what corporate communications is about and how it contributes to organizational goals, and if they use the services provided by the communication department. Against this background, the aim of this article is to develop a conceptual framework that helps to understand, analyze, and optimize the internal positioning of communication departments in corporations:

*RQ1: Which factors influence the internal positioning of communication departments in organizations?*

*RQ2: What are appropriate strategies to enhance the internal positioning of communication departments in organizations?*

## **Methodology**

A qualitative mixed-methods approach was utilized to identify and systematize factors that influence the internal positioning of communication departments (RQ1) and strategies that strengthen their positioning at the top of and throughout organizations (RQ2).

### *Analytical Approach: Literature Review*

First, a literature review across the disciplines of corporate communications, communication management, organizational communication, business communication, strategic communication, public relations, marketing, and strategic management was conducted to identify and summarize existing insights from theory. A variety of search terms and combinations (e.g., “positioning”, “perception and communication department”, “communication management”, “corporate



communication”, etc.) was used, relying on electronic database searches (Business Source Complete, Communication Mass Media Complete, Web of Science), complemented by manual searches in leading academic journals, and cross-reference and citation tracking. Approximately 100 sources were identified, and key concepts extracted; the key insights were combined to build the conceptual framework shown below.

*Empirical Approach: Case Study*

Second, a case study (Yin, 2009) was conducted in a global business-to-business (B2B) technology company headquartered in Germany with production sites and sales offices in more than 30 countries, approximately 16,500 employees, and more than two billion euros in annual revenue in 2020. The goal was to examine the position of the corporate communication department as well as perceptions from different internal perspectives (management board; other central departments like strategy, HR, finance; business units; and the communication department itself), and to identify influencing factors and strategies for enhancing the positioning. Since there is scant research in positioning communication departments, a single case study allows an intensive and holistic examination (Daymon and Holloway, 2011).

The case company was chosen because its communication department is highly regarded in the industry; the company has received several national communication awards during the last years. This led us to the assumption that the communication department might be a model example – also in terms of its internal positioning. In the present case, communications is one out of 15 functional departments on the corporate level. The department has a direct reporting line to the CEO and employs 46 staff members, five of them working in national subsidiaries. In 2013, the company merged communications and marketing to one department. Main tasks are corporate communications (focusing on innovation and technology), internal communications, corporate social responsibility, events and trade fairs, as well as digital marketing and branding.

The aim was to carry out a complete survey of all organizational members at the management level representing the four perspectives mentioned above. Managers heading the company or the units and subunits at hand are usually able to provide a good overview of expectations within the organization, and they know about interfaces. Thirty-two managers were identified based on the organization chart of the company. All of them were approached after the CEO had approved the study. Not all were able to participate due to time restrictions. The final

sample included three out of four members of the top management board, including the CEO, nine department heads (Compliance, Finance, Human Resources, Information Technology, Market Development, Mergers & Acquisitions, Research & Development, Strategic Development and Technical Services), seven business unit leaders, and seven communication team leaders including the chief communication officer (CCO), for a total of 26 participants.

The interview guide was based on the literature review and organized into six topics: understanding of communication; communication activities and goals; influence of the communication department; image of the communication department; and cooperation with the communication department. Additionally, top managers and other department heads were asked about their expectations for the communication department, whereas the interview guide for communication leaders included additional questions about positioning strategies for the department. The interviews were conducted in December 2019 on-site and resulted in more than 700 minutes of transcribed audio material. Data analysis was conducted with the aid of the MAXQDA software program, designed specifically for qualitative in-depth analysis. Following Kuckartz (2018), elements of the interview transcripts were assigned to 12 core categories and 34 subcategories, developed through both a deductive and inductive approach. The empirical results were clustered, synthesized, and contrasted with the concepts discussed in previous research. By combining the theoretical and empirical findings, a conceptual framework was developed that illustrates influencing factors as well as strategies for positioning a communication department. A detailed overview of the findings as well as direct quotes cannot be disclosed due to confidentiality.

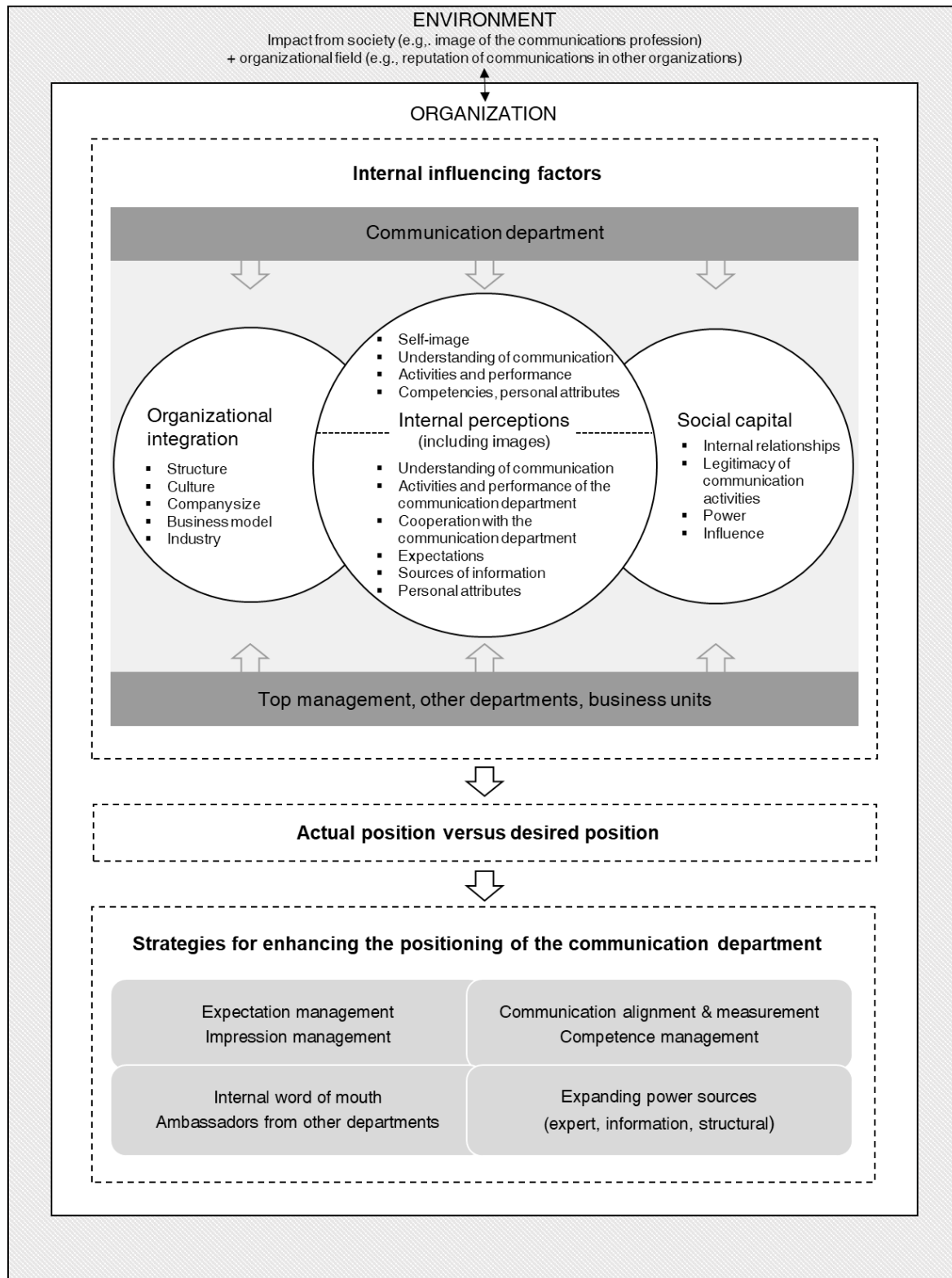
### **Towards a Framework for Positioning Communication Departments at the Top of and Throughout Organizations**

In the following, we present the findings from the literature review supported by the findings from the interviews, combined and structured in an analytical framework. It is based on the assumption that communications is considered institutionalized throughout a corporation when its members perceive it as an important organizational function. Against the background of new institutionalism, communications is understood as a boundary-spanning function between an organization and its environment (Tench *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, influences from society, e.g., the image of the communications profession, and from the organizational field, e.g., the

reputation of communications in other organizations, can also affect the internal perceptions and positioning of a communication department (Frandsen and Johansen, 2013; Grandien and Johansson, 2012; Gregory, 2020). The interrelation between the environment and the organization is indicated by an arrow in the framework (see Figure 1). An organization may inspire other organizations to imitate principles. For example, if a company notices that other businesses in its organizational field introduce chatbots for automating stakeholder communications (Syvänen and Valentini, 2020) and receive positive feedback, this may lead to imitation.

Focusing on the internal perspective and the internal position of the corporate communication department within an organization, we divided the framework into three parts: internal influencing factors; actual versus desired position; and strategies for enhancing the positioning.

Figure 1. *Framework for Positioning Communication Departments Within Organizations*



*Internal Influencing Factors*

Multiple members are interacting with each other in any organization. As the communication department is the research subject, it is depicted separately in the framework. Building upon the work of Grandien and Johansson (2012), who analyzed the institutionalization process of communication management, we propose three theoretical areas influencing the positioning of a communication department: *organizational integration*, *internal perceptions*, and *social capital*. These spheres of influence are interdependent.

The *organizational integration* reflects structural and contextual factors that shape the communication department's position within an organization. Organizational integration depends on structures, culture, company size, business model, and industry of the organization (Cornelissen and Thorpe, 2001; Grandien and Johansson, 2012; Gregory *et al.*, 2013). The corporate communication managers interviewed in our case study supported this finding from the literature. They emphasized that dimensions such as the business model and the industry are decisive for the internal positioning of the communication department. For example, one interviewee suggested that communication departments of business-to-consumer (B2C) companies certainly enjoy a higher prestige within the company than those in B2B companies, as their added value is more visible. Consumer communication contributes directly to sales, whereas thought leadership and innovation communication in a B2B environment has an indirect impact. One business unit leader also reported that internal stakeholders perceive communications generally as less important in technology companies. Organizational integration can be viewed from two sides: On the one hand, the organizational integration of other departments such as research and development or HR influences the integration of the communication department, and on the other hand, the integration of the communication department has in turn an impact on the integration of other departments.

*Internal perceptions* are factors that influence the internal position of the communication departments most directly in the daily life of organizations. Perceptual processes are interlaced with organizational integration and social capital alike. Factors identified as influencing internal perceptions within a communication department include its self-image (Brunton and Jeffrey, 2013; Falkheimer *et al.*, 2017; Goodman *et al.*, 2019; Jain and Bain, 2017), its understanding of communication (Grandien and Johansson, 2012), performance (Verčič and Zerfass, 2016), its own competencies (Brunton *et al.*, 2019; Johansson *et al.*, 2019; Verčič and Zerfass, 2016), and

personal attributes of the communication managers (Brunton *et al.*, 2019; Tench and Moreno, 2015).

One interviewee in the case study reported that the self-confidence of the corporate communication department has increased in recent years. In line with the literature review, the empirical data showed that being granted formal acceptance and authority is not sufficient. Instead, a high level of expertise is necessary to increase the positioning within the organization. For instance, one board member emphasized that he views the competence of communications as most important.

In comparison, factors that shape the perceptions of internal stakeholders are their understanding of communication (Zerfass *et al.*, 2014; Brønn, 2014; Falkheimer *et al.*, 2017; Johansson, Grandien and Strandh, 2019; Welch, 2012), the perception of the activities and performance of the communication department (Benson, 2019; Falkheimer *et al.*, 2017), their cooperation experiences with it (Zerfass *et al.*, 2014; Cornelissen and Thorpe, 2001; Feeney and Smith, 2008; Swerling *et al.*, 2013), their expectations (Madsen and Verhoeven, 2019; Olkkonen and Luoma-aho, 2019), their sources of information (Sterne, 2008; Madsen, 2017; Zagenczyk *et al.*, 2010), and their own competencies and personal attributes. Based on those perceptions, every organizational member creates an image of the communication department. Following Hatch and Schultz (1977) and transferring the concept of organizational image to an internal department's image within the organization, the latter can be defined as “a holistic and vivid impression held by an individual or a particular group towards” (p.359) the communication department. Even if internal decision-makers perceive communication as crucial for corporations, there might be a gap between their understanding of communication and the activities or the advancement of professional communication departments (Zerfass *et al.*, 2014). The interviewees in the case study reported that their perceptions are strongly marked by the chief communication officer's abilities, engagement, and performance—which supports findings from previous research (Argenti, 2017; Brønn, 2014). Moreover, the interviews with internal stakeholders showed that they have different and sometimes contradictory expectations for the communication department. What does this mean? According to new institutionalism, structures and activities can be designed to meet the expectations of internal clients in order to secure their legitimacy, even if it seems irrational from an economic point of view. For instance, the communication department can provide a contact person for each business unit in response to their expectations, even if this

buffers activity from efficiency criteria and produces ineffectiveness. Perceptions can also be decoupled from *actual* experiences. In the interviews, one head of department mentioned that he recognizes the value of the communication department's activities, building on his *former* experience gained when working for another company in previous years. This example illustrates that stakeholders' perceptions of communications can also be transferred from other companies – detached from the current employer's communication department.

*Social capital* will also influence the positioning of communication departments. “Social capital is the goodwill available to individuals or groups. Its source lies in the structure and content of the actor's social relations. Its effects flow from the information, influence, and solidarity it makes available to the actor.” (Adler and Kwon, 2002, p.23). Grandien and Johansson (2012) describe social capital in the context of organizational communication as an “overarching concept, incorporating theories concerning legitimacy, power, and influence” (p.216). Following this definition, we propose that the social capital of a communication department can be manifested through internal relationships, legitimacy of communication activities, influence, and power. Therefore, this sphere is marked by internal relationships between organizational members (Holtzhausen, 2012; Lauzen, 1995; White *et al.*, 2010), legitimacy of communication activities (Falkheimer *et al.*, 2017; Johansson and Ottestig, 2011), and influence (Arthur W. Page Society, 2017; Murray and White, 2005; Verčič and Zerfass, 2016) and power of the communication department (Berger and Reber, 2013; Gregory *et al.*, 2013; Swerling and Sen, 2009). Once again, our interviews confirmed the findings from literature: informal meetings play an important role when distributing responsibilities and budgets (Berger, 2005). Furthermore, all interviewed board members agreed that the strategic influence of the communication department is relevant. However, they rated the prevailing influence of the communication department within the company quite differently. Some attribute a high level of strategic influence, others a rather low level. This shows that perceptions differ from individual to individual and are based on distinct expectations and experiences. Since social capital can improve but also deteriorate over time, the constant maintenance of social relationships as well as the attribution of legitimacy, influence, and power are important for strengthening the role of communication departments. For instance, good personal relationships with powerful executives can mitigate threats when communication departments come under fire.

As with other spheres of influence, the social capital of corporate communication departments and its key internal stakeholders influences each other reciprocally. Not only the influence and power of the communication department are relevant for its internal positioning, but so are the influence and power of the top management, other departments, and business units.

#### *Actual Position Versus Desired Position*

Communication departments have a particular role within organizations as their objectives and activities touch nearly all business functions, including core processes and supporting processes on all hierarchical levels. This results in an essential need to cooperate with other departments and decision-makers. Key internal stakeholders should have a clear understanding of the roles, tasks and responsibilities of the communication department (Falkheimer *et al.*, 2017, p.100). Hence, there is a great need for communication departments to position themselves. Positioning can sharpen the self-image of the communication department on the one hand and guide the perceptions of organizational members at the same time.

Internal positioning begins with analyzing the current role and standing within the organization, which might have emerged over time, or it can be a result of previous positioning activities (Dibb and Simkin, 1993; Ries and Trout, 1981). Based on such an evaluation of the communication department's *actual position* in the internal competition, the *desired position* needs to be defined. There are different strategies for reaching this position, which range from change processes within the department to managing the perceptions of internal decision-makers. Whether such positioning activities succeed is influenced by many factors and is ultimately the result of negotiation processes.

#### *Strategies for Enhancing the Positioning of Communication Departments*

To overcome the internal positioning problem, it is necessary to reflect holistically on the increasing range of tasks and services of corporate communication departments, their various professional roles, and to define a suitable position within the organization. We identified different strategies in the literature and in the interviews that address the influencing factors mentioned above. They are intertwined and can be used in parallel. Table I outlines those strategies.



Table I. *Strategies for Enhancing the Positioning of Communication Departments*

Strategy	Description of strategy	Literature/Interviews
Expectation management	Understanding, mapping, and managing expectations can help communication departments respond to the needs of organizational members and provide clarity on the scope of competencies and responsibilities.	Coye, 2004; Olkkonen & Luoma-aho, 2014, 2019
Impression management	The aim of impression management is to influence how others perceive the communication department by using techniques such as self-promotion, ingratiation, and exemplification.	Bolino et al., 2008; Jones & Pittman, 1982 Interviews
Internal word of mouth	Internal word of mouth includes informal conversations and recommendations of organizational members regarding the communication department.	Interviews
Ambassadors from other departments	Engaging other organizational members in communication activities for or about the communication department may lead to a greater understanding of communication practices and to increased cooperation.	Interviews
Communication alignment and measurement	Linking communication to organizational goals and evaluating communication activities enable communication departments to show how they contribute to their organizations' success.	Buhmann & Likely, 2018; Macnamara, 2020 Interviews
Competence management	The aim of competence management for the communication department is to optimize the ability, willingness, and entitlement of the employees to communicate professionally to increase the added value of corporate communications.	Jain & Bain, 2017; Kiesenbauer, 2018; Tench & Moreno, 2015
Power sources (expert, information, structural)	Communication departments can tap power sources (expert, information, structural) to exert influence on strategic decision-making processes, expand the area of responsibility, or to resist attempts by other key internal stakeholders to exert influence.	French & Raven, 1959; Mintzberg, 1983

While *expectation management*, *impression management*, *internal word of mouth*, and *ambassadors from other departments* focus mainly on internal stakeholders and managing their perceptions, *communication alignment and measurement*, *competence management*, and *power sources* relate to the activities and employees of the communication department itself. The latter is about managing and coaching the communicators themselves. Which strategy or combination

of strategies is suitable in a specific organization has to be decided after matching the actual position with the desired position.

Regarding the positioning strategies, the case study revealed a heterogeneous picture among the interviewed leaders of communication teams. Some are already taking measures to strengthen the department's position within the company, while others tend to be skeptical. For example, one interviewee expressed concerns about becoming too prominent within the company and raising expectations unrealistically high when trying to strengthen her position. Department-driven measures were mainly reduced to communication activities via existing internal communication channels, to some extent similar to impression management. Not all strategies derived from the literature were consciously used by the communication leaders in the case study. However, they mentioned two other strategies that they rely on: supporting internal word of mouth to influence informal peer-to-peer networks within the company, and winning ambassadors from other departments as trusted partners. Overall, the interviewees stated that positioning the communication department is very relevant in today's organizations. As the cooperation with other departments becomes more important to ensure professional communication of the company, it is inevitable that they know about and make use of communications' activities and services.

Communicative techniques such as storytelling (e.g., Barker and Gower, 2010), persuasion (e.g., King, 2010), showing the impact of communication based on key performance indicators (e.g., Buhmann and Likely, 2018), and updating communication skills in the communication department (e.g., Reinsch, 1996) can help as well. They are intertwined with different strategies. For example, concepts like the Communication Value Circle (Zerfass and Viertmann, 2017), which helps to demonstrate core values and impact generated by communications may be used for pursuing communication alignment as well as impression management. The interviewed communicators reported that to position their department they use communication channels, e.g., the intranet or an employee magazine, for presenting best practices or announcing awards. In doing so, they try to attract attention within the organization for communication activities and their own success. In general, they saw challenges in proving how the communication department contributes to value creation (Wang and Huang, 2020). Shimizu (2017) also argues that the relationship between the perceived communication and the effectiveness of strategy

implementation is mainly moderated by the type of communication and the medium of communication.

When positioning corporate communication departments, several risks have to be taken into account. There is always a risk that mistakes made by individual communicators will be attributed to the entire communication department. Moreover, conflicting interests and goals of individuals can eclipse a department's positioning strategy: "Whom do practitioners serve? Their own career interests? The organization? The profession? The interests of others in the margins?" (Berger, 2005, p.23). There is no guarantee that communication leaders can or will do the "right thing" for the department; they may strive only to position themselves within the inner management circle. Personal misconduct as well as the failure of communication departments in important projects can undermine any positioning strategy.

### **Discussion**

The proposed framework suggests a complex and balanced view on positioning communication departments and handling the variety of communication needs within an organization. It differs from one-size-fits-all solutions proposed as well as from normative proposals for gaining communication excellence by developing specific characteristics of communication departments (Grunig *et al.*, 2002). The findings of this study reveal that there is little knowledge in theory and practice about the positioning of communication departments and how this can be improved. It is therefore not very surprising that key internal stakeholders continue to struggle to recognize the broad range of activities and services of communication departments, and how these contribute to value creation in organizations. Positioning the corporate communication department at the top of and throughout an organization is gaining in importance and was perceived as highly relevant by the interviewees. However, positioning strategies were not deliberately used. The measures mentioned by the communication managers in the case study appeared intuitive and pragmatic and did not follow an explicit strategy.

In addition, this study draws attention to several factors influencing the positioning of communication departments and proposes how these might be addressed to overcome further the internal positioning problem. Thus, this study offers strategies for enhancing the position of a communication department and fostering its legitimacy. For instance, the study indicates that key stakeholders may have different expectations regarding communicative needs. From the

perspective of new institutionalism, communication departments can use decoupling and ceremonial facades to manage diverging expectations.

### **Practical Implications**

The framework provides many possibilities for practical application. It helps corporate communication departments to understand, analyze, and optimize their positioning within the organization. Communication practitioners can identify organizational situations in which they are embedded and analyze them more effectively. First, communication leaders and their teams can use the framework as an analytical tool to identify the internal position of the department by reflecting on the different spheres of influence, and to carry out a self-assessment. On the one hand, it helps to reflect on the self-image, find a common understanding of communication, align activities, and further develop competencies and personal attributes. On the other hand, it helps to assess expectations and the image of the communication department among key internal stakeholders such as the management board, department heads, or business unit leaders. Thus, perception and expectation gaps can be identified. Second, the framework may help practitioners to identify opportunities for strengthening their function at any time. Based on the analysis, communication leaders can develop and execute a positioning strategy to achieve its desired position in the organization. Enhancing the position of the communication department may also strengthen the collaboration with key internal stakeholders.

### **Conclusion, Limitations and Future Research**

The findings of the present study contribute to our understanding of how corporate communications and communication departments in particular can deal with having rather low status within organizations. We argue that the position of communication departments within organizations depends on perceptual processes and negotiations with key internal stakeholders. An analytical approach based on a literature review and a case study was used to build a framework for positioning communication departments at the top of and throughout organizations. The framework illustrates influencing factors (RQ1) and strategies to strengthen the positioning of a communication department (RQ2). The numerous influencing factors were clustered into *organizational integration* (e.g., structure, culture, business model), *internal perceptions* (e.g., understanding of communication, expectations, cooperation, competencies),

and *social capital* (e.g., internal relationships, legitimacy of communication activities). In addition to the internal influencing factors, however, the environment, including the organizational field and society, can also have an impact on the department's positioning. After analyzing the actual position, communication departments are encouraged to define a desired position within the organization. The research suggests seven strategies to enhance the positioning of communication departments and to achieve the desired position: a) *expectation management* and *impression management*, b) supporting *internal word of mouth* and *ambassadors from other departments*, c) *communication alignment and measurement* and *competence management*, and d) *expanding power sources* (expert, information, structural).

Like any study, this research is marked by limitations. The framework outlines the concept and provides guidance for strengthening the role of communication departments. While the literature review was comprehensive, the empirical study is limited to one single case. As the internal positioning of communications depends on several influencing factors (e.g., the business model of the organization) as outlined above, the presented case only illustrates one example and thus strives not for generalizability. Therefore, the suggested framework was abstracted and is generic in nature so that it can be applied to any type of organization. Clearly, it is necessary to test the applicability and usefulness of the framework.

Future research is needed to prove the framework's capacity to illustrate influencing factors and strategies for enhancing the positioning of a communication department. For this next step, we propose qualitative case studies across different types of organizations, industries, and countries. Such case studies can help to verify or modify the presented framework for positioning communication departments. Further research may also focus on specific positioning strategies, as all of them deserve more detailed investigation. When exploring positioning strategies, it would also be interesting to reveal conflicting logics, such as individual versus departmental positioning strategies. In addition, the framework can help to determine the current realities in communication departments and contrast the self-image of communication departments with perceptions and expectations of key internal stakeholders in order to identify perception and expectation gaps. This study also establishes the groundwork for quantitative research identifying the utilization of strategies for strengthening the positioning of communication departments. Beyond that, scholars may also explore the image of the communications profession in general in comparison to neighboring functions like marketing and sales. Nevertheless, the findings

presented here advance the existing literature in several ways and contribute to the professionalization of communication departments in both theory and practice.

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