

Leading a new era of communications



A look at the transformation of a function.

BY GIZEM WEGGEMANS

Once heralded as the seat held by the best storyteller in the company, corporate communications is no longer about amplifying what an organisation wants to say. Social media and vanishing boundaries have exploded the old model. Instead, communications today has a very different focus: to manage the dynamic, two-way conversation between an organisation and its stakeholders. It is all about how best to influence and orchestrate this continuous dialogue, positively shaping perceptions to enhance reputation.

The World Economic Forum estimates that up to 25 per cent of a company's market value is determined by the strength of its reputation. Unsurprisingly, in a Deloitte survey, almost 90 per cent of business leaders suggested that reputation is the single most important risk that faces a business today. And as a result, boards and executives across the world are increasingly realising the value of appointing well-rounded and truly skilled professionals to define and oversee reputation management.

In fact, we are seeing an increasing number of corporate affairs directors being elevated to senior leadership. Across the Financial Times 500, in the UK, 45 per cent of corporate affairs directors sit on the executive committee of their company. The figure is similar in the US and we expect the trend to continue globally over the coming years. As a result, employers are no longer just looking for functional skills, but strategic capabilities that can allow these individuals to play a part in wider discussions.

Corporate affairs directors are no longer being called into the room only once a decision has been made so that they can help communicate it. Instead, leading companies want them in the room during the decision making process to ensure all outcomes take stakeholder implications and reputational considerations into account. They look for directors who can be proactive, carefully evaluating how each business decision will be received and perceived by a rather complex ecosystem, from the media to policy makers. Leading companies can no longer manage the stakeholder landscape

through stand-alone engagement efforts. Reputation management today requires a fully integrated communications approach, with a consistent strategy across all communication channels and all areas of the business. This means that corporate affairs directors need to have the skill-set to match. Businesses are looking for candidates who have spent time holding the entire corporate affairs mandate: from media to public policy, from corporate social responsibility to investor relations.

The requirements of a new role

Communications directors are not 'sole traders' – they have increasingly wide and varied teams working with them, requiring true leaders occupying the number one seat. When progressive organisations are assessing their corpo-



GIZEM WEGGEMANS
Global Head, Chief Communications/Public Affairs Practice,
Egon Zehnder

Gizem Weggemans leads Egon Zehnder's communications and public affairs officers practice globally, and is a core member of the consumer, hospitality and HR practices. Prior to joining Egon Zehnder, Gizem was a senior director at the Corporate Executive Board, an advisory firm based in London. Previously, she was a management consultant with A.T. Kearney, where she was part of the Global Business Policy Council in Washington, DC. She started her career at the World Bank.

rate affairs directors, they are no longer just focusing on functional excellence. Businesses are looking for natural leaders, who can manage change and inspire their colleagues to work towards a particular vision. As such, what is required of the successful leaders of any function today and tomorrow is also required from the corporate affairs leader.

Firstly, these leaders must be able to master complexity, integrating the perspectives of multiple stakeholders (whether they be internal or external) to help drive necessary change. It is especially vital for a corporate affairs director to be able to distil the implications of an ever-changing landscape and drive simplicity.

Secondly, these leaders also need to be able to orchestrate creativity, encour-

aging a culture of ideas, innovation and problem-solving from all levels of the business.

The third requirement for tomorrow's successful leaders is to define the broader purpose for which the organisation stands. Without the ability to anchor the business in society, going forward, organisations will be unable to obtain and retain their license to operate. Corporate social responsibility is seen as an increasingly important element of business strategy and owning this agenda further augments the importance of the corporate affairs director in the C-suite.

Another critical feature of business leadership that has implications for the function is the requirement to nurture and develop future talent in order to give the business strength and depth in its talent pool. This is even more critical at a time when the function is transforming itself, so the appetite and ability to invest in proper succession planning is key.

The fifth and final skill needed is the ability to leverage emotion to drive change. Establishing and driving engagement have never been so vital in a leader. In an increasingly digitalised and automated world, corporate communications has an advantage in that it relies on the ability to understand how people speak, think and feel – a unique spike in corporate affairs directors and one which they need to cultivate consistently. Just as the chief financial officers are relied

upon to ensure the financial health of a business, corporate affairs directors are often called upon to act as the ethical conscience of a company. However, empathy is

not only a necessity for decision making. Businesses want to recruit people they will be comfortable working with; the ability to work effectively with colleagues in a highly challenging macro environment is critical. These leaders need to

show they have a personality which can inspire and motivate an entire organisation.

In a world where corporate reputations can be built or destroyed in seconds, the value of effective communications has never been so highly regarded. This presents a unique opportunity but also responsibility for communications executives. Corporate affairs professionals need to be empathetic, strategic and adaptable, whilst also showing their ability to lead. Indeed, no longer a mouthpiece, the new corporate affairs director is the most exciting, multifaceted profile to emerge within the C-suite in a long time, and investing in oneself beyond the day to day to fill and expand that seat has never been more critical. ●

5 FUTURE SKILLS

- Tomorrow's communications leaders must be able to master complexity, integrating the perspectives of multiple stakeholders to help drive change.
 - These leaders also need to orchestrate creativity, encouraging a culture of ideas, innovation and problem-solving from all levels of the business.
 - Communicators will define the broader purpose for which the organisation stands.
 - Another requirement is to nurture and develop future talent in order to strengthen the business.
 - The final skill is to leverage emotion to drive change.
-

**“Businesses
are looking for
natural leaders.”**