

**PR NEWS**



INSTITUTE FOR  
PUBLIC RELATIONS

# **THE EVOLVING COMMUNICATION FUNCTION**

A Comprehensive Look at the Perceptions,  
Roles, Structures, and Future of Communication

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# INTRODUCTION

Dear Reader,

When defining the 'best' structure of a communication function, there is not a clear answer or a one-size-fits-all approach. Our research indicates that while structure is important, other components are arguably more so, such as the operations, relationships, and resources within and among the other organizational functions. For example, some communication leaders argued that marketing should be a part of the communication function, while others said it was more effective as a separate function. What works best structurally depends on each organization.

Regardless of structure, communicators should focus on being valued and invested in by top leadership. In addition, it is important to build and strong relationships with other functions to avoid redundancies, inconsistencies, and silos.

Resources are critically important to the effectiveness of the communication function. Companies that add responsibilities to the communication function without increasing budgets, headcounts, or other needed resources decrease the potential of communication at a time when this function is vital to organizational success, internally and externally.

Communication leaders should investigate what they can do to increase the satisfaction of the structure that is within their control. This includes clarifying roles, decreasing silos, understanding staff expertise, upskilling current staff, and building collaboration and alignment, within and outside the function. Ideally, communication leaders work with their organization's leadership to determine how to be more proactive (rather than task receivers) and to manage the responsibilities strategically to increase effectiveness and avoid employee burnout. It's clear that some functions may have challenges post-pandemic, but communication has never been as important and valued within organizations as it is today.

*Tina McCorkindale, Ph.D., APR*

**President and CEO  
Institute for Public Relations**

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The Institute for Public Relations and *PRNEWS* conducted a study of 318 public relations professionals to find out how companies organize and evolve their communication function, including headcounts, reporting lines, strategic choices around structure and function, and areas of improvement. This study also assessed the efficacy and challenges of the structure of the communication function.

Overall, public relations professionals said their responsibilities increased during the past two years, and they anticipated that growth would continue. However, respondents also said their budgets and headcounts would not change over the next couple of years. Forty percent of respondents said their function wasn't large enough to handle the responsibilities given. These resource constraints can stretch the communication function too thin, decrease its efficacy, and contribute to employee burnout and poor mental health.

The top three responsibilities of communication included media relations, social media, and crisis communication. Most frequently, the communication function was combined with marketing. Regarding *satisfaction* with the structure with their communication function, fewer than half of respondents said they were *satisfied*, while more than half said it was effective given the structure. There is always room for improvement, though. In addition to limited resources, respondents said their structure needed work, specifically their reporting lines or the responsibilities attributed to the communication function.

In terms of relationships with other functions, the communication function has the best relationships with marketing and public affairs, but respondents ranked their relationships with finance and IT the lowest. Interestingly, those who were more satisfied with the structure of their function had better relationships with other inter-organizational functions. However, the data suggested no clear indication of what makes public relations professionals satisfied (or not) in terms of the structure. This varied depending on the type of organization.

Lack of resources, budget, and headcount were the most frequently mentioned challenges for the communication function over the next two years. Other noted areas included digital disruption, growth, reorganizations, silos, and the need for more qualified people leading and working in the communication function.

When asked what they would change in terms of structure, nearly half said they needed more resources, such as headcount, budget, or experience. Others said they needed better collaboration and fewer silos. Role clarification was also noted. A few respondents reported that their leadership did not value the communication function as much as it should. Others said there were too many layers of management or, conversely, not enough. Some also noted that the function lacked a line to the CEO. Findings indicated that those who have a reporting line to the CEO were more likely to agree that the CEO valued their function compared to those who did not.

# WHY THIS RESEARCH IS IMPORTANT

Little research has been conducted recently about the responsibilities of the communication function<sup>1</sup> within organizations. This line of research was most prominent in the 1990s and early 2000s, more than 20 years ago. In fact, more than 25 years have passed since the publication of *The Excellence Study*. With the growth of communication as a strategic function and the advent of social media, the function has changed significantly. This report aimed to understand the roles, responsibilities, relationships, and evolution of the communication function.

Only a handful of studies in the past seven to 10 years have explored the perceived value of the communication function to the CEO. Zerfass et al. (2014) found that CEOs highly value corporate communication and its contribution to overall goals; however, there is still work to be done. The researchers that noted there is still a traditional mindset among some CEOs who are failing to integrate the function to its fullest potential. Instead, they relegate communication leaders to the roles of channel producers, servicers, or technicians (Zerfass & Volk, 2018).

The Page Society (2019) conducted research with chief communication officers (CCOs) to determine the effect of the “new business landscape” and its implications. Eight-in-10 CCOs said they worked more closely with their CEO on corporate brand or corporate societal value. Ninety-two percent of CCOs said they worked more closely with chief human resource officers on corporate culture. CCOs noted they worked less frequently with chief marketing officers (CMOs), except as it relates to the corporate brand. However, the Page Society research did not assess the quality of the relationships or perceived effectiveness of the function. Understanding the relationships among organizational functions helps measure the significance of the role of communication and how well leadership views it as an integration function.

Reporting lines also make a difference. According to McDermott (2020), “CCOs are trusted strategic advisers to CEOs and have insight across the whole business, positioning them as an untapped commercial resource.” A Korn Ferry study from 2015 found that 37% of the top communication executives typically reported to the CEO, 12% reported to the CMO, and 9% to the chief human resources officer.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the Institute for Public Relations conducted studies with Peppercomm, The Harris Poll, and Leger. Findings indicated the role of the communication function was highly valued by CEOs and the company overall, both internally and externally. Understanding how companies anticipate changes in the next couple of years is important, especially as COVID-19 influences headcounts and budgets.

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<sup>1</sup> We refer to the communication department or area as the communication function throughout this paper.

# KEY FINDINGS

**1. Fewer than half of communication leaders said they were satisfied with the structure of their function. Though, respondents were more likely to agree that their function is effective.**

Only 46% of respondents said they were satisfied with the structure of their communication function, while 63% said the structure of their function was effective. In addition, 51% of respondents agreed that their department is “well structured” compared to other functions within the organization.

**2. The number of responsibilities of the communication function will continue to increase, but most expect their headcount to remain the same.**

Eighty-one percent of communication leaders said their number of responsibilities have increased in the past two years, and 71% said they anticipate their number of responsibilities will continue to increase in the next two years. Forty-two percent of respondents said their department “is large enough to handle the responsibilities it’s given.” However, 53% said their headcount would remain the same over the next two years, and only 12% expected their headcount to decrease over the next two years.

**3. Communication leaders expect resource changes, technology, and growth to challenge the communication function in the future.**

Respondents anticipated numerous challenges to their communication function in the future: increased responsibilities but not enough headcount, budget, or resources to meet demand (48%); an increased reliance on digital and changes to the technological landscape (9%); and acquisitions, new markets, an expansion of service offerings, or significant growth in a short period of time (9%). Other predicted challenges included the rapid pace of change; diversity, equity, and inclusion; sustainability; the economy; and the perceived value of communication.

**4. The communication function often reports to the top leader of the organization.**

Thirty-three percent of respondents said they report to the CEO, Executive Director, or President of the organization. Twenty-one percent report to the Chief Communications Officer (CCO) or another communication leader, and 17% report to the Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) or another marketing leader.

**5. Most communication leaders said their CEO values the communication function.**

More than three-quarters of respondents (78%) said their CEO values the communication function. However, 10% disagreed with this statement. Those who reported to the CEO were significantly more likely to agree that their CEO values the communication function compared to those who reported to others within their organizations.



**6. The most frequently mentioned responsibilities of the communication function included media relations, social media, and crisis/risk communication.**

Frequently mentioned communication function responsibilities included media relations (86%), social media (80%), and crisis/risk communication (75%). Other often-mentioned responsibilities included employee communication (69%), brand building (69%), executive communication (64%), and community relations (58%).

**7. The communication function is commonly combined with marketing, followed by public affairs, and advertising.**

Of the communication functions that were combined with other functions, marketing (69%) was the most frequently named function. Communication leaders also said public affairs (45%) and advertising (44%) were part of the communication function. Respondents had differing opinions about the extent to which the communication function should be combined with other functions and which functions. For instance, while some were in favor of communication as a function of human resources, others were not (11% of respondents said their function was combined with HR). Regardless of the structure, respondents said synergy and a strong relationship were needed to eliminate silos and increase trust.

**8. Communication leaders said the communication function has closer relationships with some departments than others.**

Most respondents (89%) said the communication function collaborates well with other functions within the organization. Overall, communication leaders reported higher-quality relationships with marketing and public affairs and lower-quality relationships with finance and information technology (IT).

**9. Moving forward, communication leaders expressed a need for more resources, structure changes, role clarification, and better collaboration with other departments.**

When asked what they would change about the communication function, leaders identified the need for additional resources (46%), changes to the structure of the function (18%), clarification of roles (7%), and better collaboration, coordination, and alignment with other departments (7%). Twelve percent of respondents said no changes were needed.

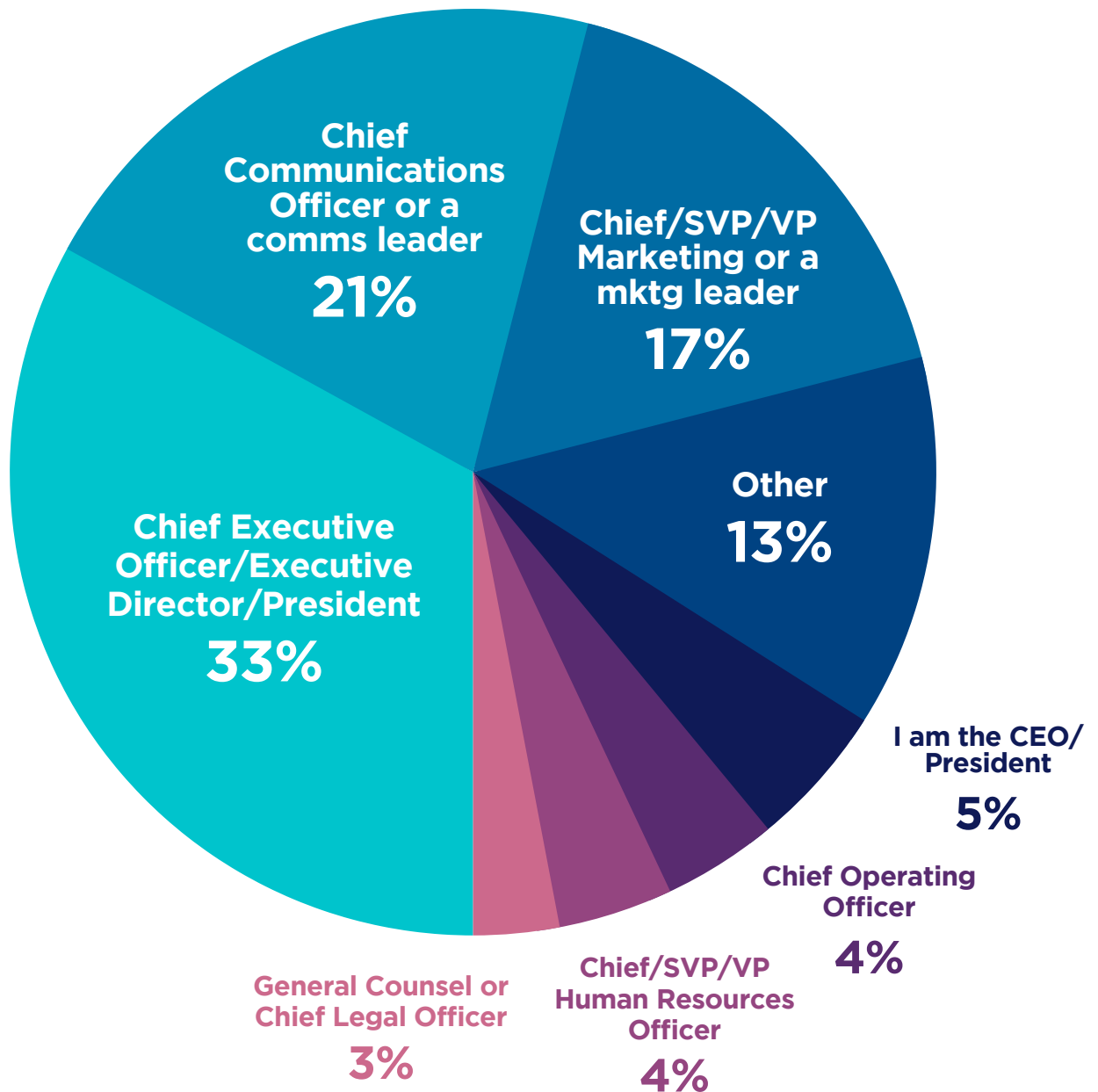


# REPORTING LINES

## Who Communication Function Reports To

Most often, respondents (33%) reported to the CEO or Executive Director of their organization. Twenty-one percent reported to someone in the communication function or the CCO. Seventeen percent reported to the CMO or someone within the marketing function. Five percent said they were the CEO or President of the organization. The other 14% reported to other leaders within the organization.

## Whom Do You Report to in the Organization?



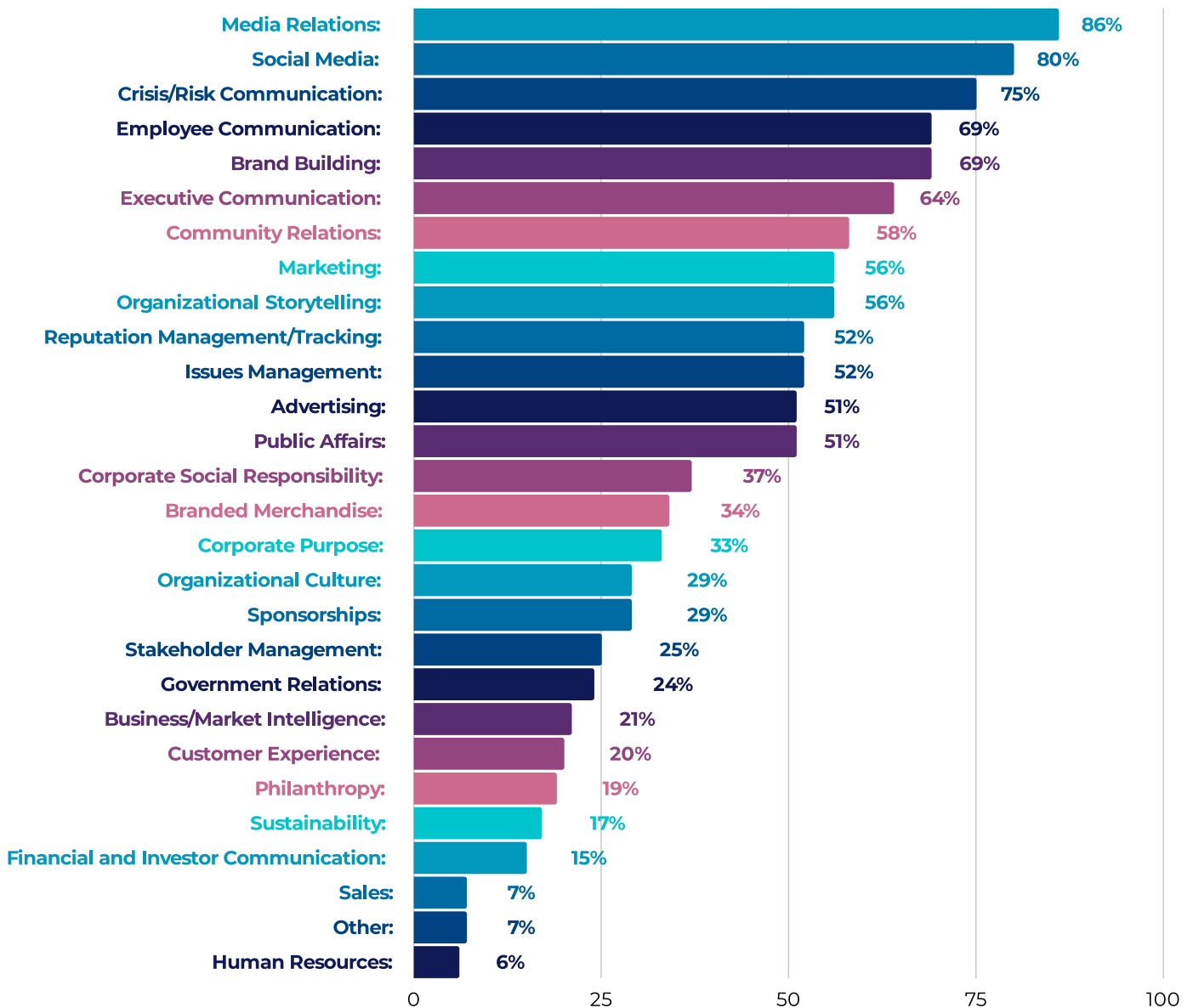


# RESPONSIBILITIES

## Areas of Responsibility

The communication function was most responsible for media relations, social media, and crisis/risk communication, according to at least three-quarters of respondents. Other frequently mentioned responsibilities included employee communication (69%), brand building (69%), executive communication (64%), and community relations (58%).

## Areas of Responsibility



# Growth of Function Responsibilities

Respondents were asked how the number of responsibilities of their communication function changed over the past two years and whether they expected it to change over the next two years. More than 80% of respondents said responsibilities increased, with 15% saying they remained the same. Only 4% said their responsibilities had decreased.

In the *past two years*, has the number of responsibilities in your communication function:



In the *next two years*, do you anticipate the number of responsibilities in your communication function will:



# STRUCTURE

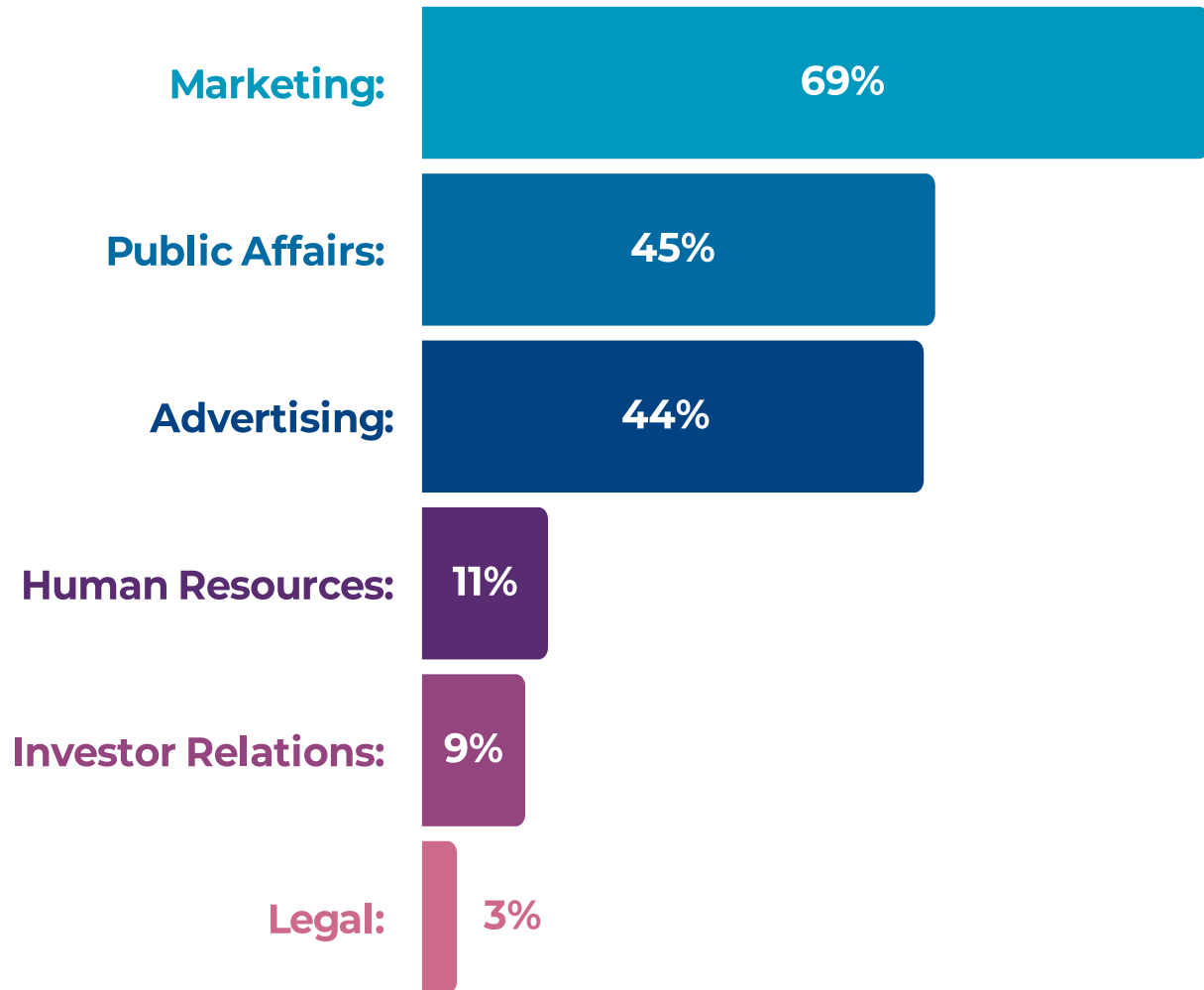
## Structure

### Is the communication function combined with other functions within the organization?

**Marketing (69%)** was the most often named function combined with the communication function. Fewer respondents said **public affairs (45%)** and **advertising (44%)** were within their communication function. Some respondents talked about other functions and how they sit in relation to communication. Comments included the following:

- “Employee communication should be a function of human resources or at least led by HR and not a function of marketing.”
- “Communication needs a realignment and to be pulled out from under HR.”
- “The department falls within one business area, while we support more than one business area.”
- “Being in marketing is a plus because the line in communication that separates internal vs. external is eroding. That said, we get pulled into a lot of brand activation activities that compete with crucial messaging needed for associate engagement, strategy communication, and executive brand building.”
- “Fully integrate communication functions across the organization.”
- “Reporting to marketing is a conflict with building trust and reputation. The purpose of marketing is to sell/drive revenue. The purpose of communication is to build trust and relay important information to a variety of stakeholders, not just those who can make a purchasing decision for your company. By combining the two, the following happens: (a) you water down the purpose of marketing and further delay the digital evolution they should be leading with consumers/customers. By sending mixed messages regarding what marketing 'is', it becomes everything and nothing. Hence the turn-over in CMOs, the creation of Chief Customer Officers, etc. (b) corporate affairs/communication become a political pawn to the insatiable budget appetite of marketing, which is always fighting for internal resources/budget, and the CEO loses the fire-power of a fully-independent viewpoint across all stakeholders — internal and external.”
- “Stronger relationship with governmental/public affairs to eliminate turf battles.”

## Other Functions the Communication Function is Combined With:



# Satisfaction with the Structure

Respondents' perceptions were mixed as to whether the communication function had sufficient resources and structure to be effective. Fewer than half (46%) said they were satisfied with the structure of their function, while 39% were not. In terms of effectiveness, 63% said the structure of their function was effective, while nearly one-quarter (24%) said it was not.

Compared to other functions, 51% of respondents agreed to some extent that their function was well structured, while 27% disagreed.

However, the data suggested no clear indicators of what makes people satisfied (or not) in terms of the structure. This varied for each organization.

## I am satisfied with the structure of my department



## My department is well structured compared to other departments in my organization



## The structure of my department is effective



*Note: Due to rounding, percentages may not equal 100%.*

# What Communication Leaders Would Change About the Structure

An open-ended question asked communication leaders what they would change about the structure of their function. Responses were bucketed into categories identified in the responses. Recommended changes included:

## What Communication Leaders Would Change

**Increasing Resources (46%):** Headcount and budget were most frequently cited. Others suggested more investments in technology and the need for employees with better skills. One respondent suggested, "Imploding the whole thing and starting over. [The function is] heavily politicized, which prevents the team from doing their work."

**Changing the Structure (18%):** Respondents had a wide range of recommendations for changing the structure of their function, including improving alignment and consolidation. Changing reporting lines was mentioned several times. For example, a couple of respondents complained about having to report to Human Resources and suggested they should be reporting to the CEO. Respondents also suggested moving the communication function out of its current location or becoming an independent function. For example, a few recommended moving communication out of marketing. Others suggested spinning off parts of it. This also included decreasing silos and making communication more integrated.

*One respondent said, "[The reporting structure] is like a game of 'telephone.' The way the structure is now is not efficient. [I] do not feel I can perform my job well as a result, and our organization is not communicating with stakeholders as effectively as we could/should be."*

**No changes needed (12%)**

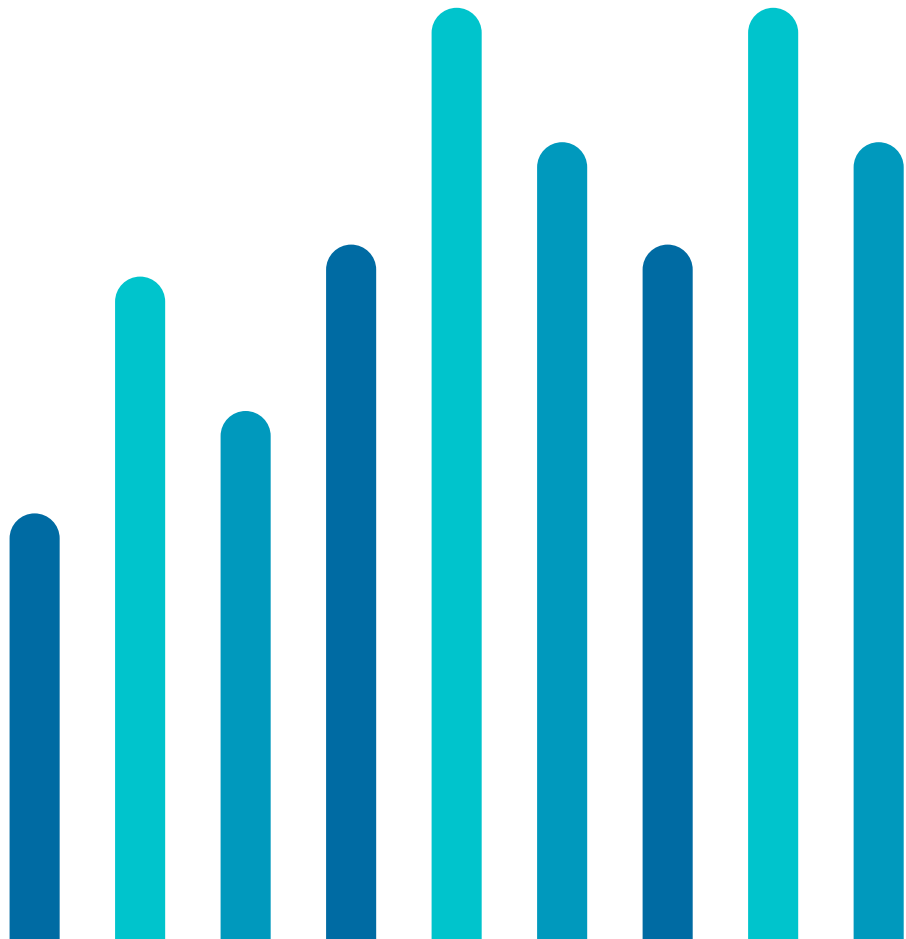
**Clarifying roles (7%):** Respondents mentioned the need for: developing better definitions of responsibilities to decrease overlap, establish clear lines of authority, and increase accountability. They also recommended taking better advantage of staff expertise to ensure they are in the best role possible.

**Better collaboration, coordination, and alignment with other depts. (7%):** Respondents said that better collaboration, alignment, and coordination with other functions, as well as working harder to improve relationships, was necessary. A couple of respondents said their organization experienced "turf battles."

**Reducing or increasing management (5%):** Respondents in this category either said there were too many managers or management layers or not enough.

**Improving the perceived value or perception of the function (3%):** Fewer than 10 people mentioned their function needed to be better regarded within their organizations, especially at the executive level. Respondents also mentioned they wished their contributions were appreciated more.

*One respondent said, “It would help to be brought in earlier in the communication process for most things. Often, we are called only after a plan has been approved, and we are asked to communicate it internally and externally.”*



# PERCEIVED VALUE AND INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

## Value to the CEO

Overall, more than three-quarters of respondents (78%) said their CEO values the communication function. Ten percent disagreed with this to some extent. Those who reported to the CEO were more likely to agree that their CEO valued the communication function compared to those who reported to others within the organization (Mean = 4.41 for those who reported to the CEO vs. Mean = 4.07 for those who reported to other functions)\*.

## Relationship with Other Functions

From an inter-organizational perspective, 89% of respondents agreed that their function collaborates well with other functions in their organization. Fewer than 5% disagreed. Of those who work in a standalone communication function (does not report to another function), respondents evaluated their relationship with other functions within the organization using a 1 to 5 scale (1 = poor; 5 = excellent). The communication function had the best relationships with marketing (Mean = 4.23) and public affairs (Mean = 4.16). The lowest-ranked relationships were with finance (Mean = 3.70) and information technology (IT) (Mean = 3.67).

Means of the Quality of Relationships with Other Non-Communication Functions\*\*



\*Means are on a 1 to 5 scale with 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree

\*\*Quality of relationships was assessed with a 1 to 5 scale, 1 = poor and 5 = excellent.



Additionally, those who said they were *more satisfied* with the structure of their communication function had significantly better relationships with other functions compared to those who said they were *less satisfied* with their communication function. Specifically, these functions included:

Human Resources (Mean = 3.99 vs. Mean = 3.74)

Sales (Mean = 4.01 vs. Mean = 3.62)

Advertising (Mean = 4.27 vs. Mean = 3.84)

Operations Management (Mean = 3.98 vs. Mean = 3.69)

Finance (Mean = 3.83 vs. Mean = 3.59)



# HEADCOUNTS

## Number of Employees

Sixty-eight percent of respondents had 10 or fewer people employed in their communication function. Only 12% had more than 25 people in their communication function. Fewer than 5% had more than 100. The mean size of the communication function was 19 employees, and the median was six employees. The number of employees in the communication function ranged from 1 to 500.

## Number of Employees

Overall, employee headcount has increased over the past two years, according to 39% of respondents. A similar percentage (37%) of respondents said headcount has remained the same, with fewer than one-quarter (23%) saying it has decreased.

### In the past two years, has the headcount in your communication function:



But for the next two years, more than half (53%) said the headcount will remain the same. Slightly more than one-third (35%) said it will increase, with only 12% expecting a decline in headcount.

### In the next two years, do you anticipate the headcount in your communication function will:



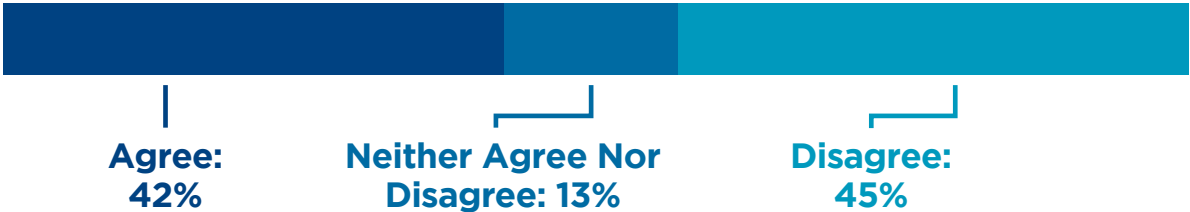
Of those who said they anticipate headcount will increase during the next couple of years, 42% said they expected it to increase by less than 1%, while 45% said headcount will increase 10 to 25% . The remaining 13% said their headcount would increase by more than 26%.

This is concerning as most people (53%) said they will not see headcount changes during the next few years. However, 71% said their responsibilities will increase. Therefore, communication functions will have to do more with less.

## Function Effectiveness Based on Size

Respondents' perceptions were mixed as to whether their size was large enough to fulfill their duties. While 42% agreed that their function is large enough to handle the responsibilities, 45% disagreed.

### My department is large enough to handle the responsibilities it's given:



# BUDGET

## Budget

Half of the respondents said their function's budget was less than \$500,000. Sixteen percent said it was between \$500,000 and \$1 million, while 15% said it was between \$1 million and nearly \$3 million. The remaining 20% had budgets higher than \$3 million.

### Budget of the Communication Function

< \$500,000	50%
\$500,000 - \$1 mil	16%
\$1 mil - \$2.99 mil	15%
\$3 mil - \$9.99 mil	11%
\$10 mil - \$19.99 mil	3%
\$20 mil - \$49.99 mil	2%
> \$50 mil	4%

*Note: Due to rounding, percentages may not equal 100%*

## Budget Trends

Most often, respondents (43%) said their budgets in the last two years stayed about the same. Nearly equal amounts said their budgets increased or decreased. Twenty-three percent said their budgets increased "somewhat," while 20% said they decreased "somewhat."

### How has the budget of your function changed in the last two years?

Increased dramatically	3%
Increased somewhat	23%
Stayed about the same	43%
Decreased somewhat	20%
Decreased dramatically	10%

*Note: Due to rounding, percentages may not equal 100%*

# FUTURE CHALLENGES

## Future Challenges

We asked communication leaders to discuss the challenges they anticipate their function facing in the next two to three years. Responses were coded into themes, and notable quotes are included in each section.

### Challenges Over the Next Two Years

**Resource Changes (48%):** Most respondents said they anticipate increased responsibilities but not enough headcount, budget, or resources to meet demand. Many said they believe their team's performance will suffer. Notable quotes included:

- “Too much work, not enough bodies.”
- “Demand is outpacing our team's capacity.”
- “We're becoming increasingly strapped for time... too many responsibilities and not enough staff to perform to the level I expect.”
- “Continued business expansion without staff expansion, meaning we cannot get to a place where we excel in marketing or communication. Also, increasing project loads without an increasing budget.”
- “With COVID-19, work has increased, but the hiring freezes don't let us fill positions, and the work continues to increase.”

**Other (16%):** In this catch-all category, respondents talked about the following challenges: the rapid pace of change, diversity, equity, and inclusion, sustainability, the economy, the perception or value of communication, and executive changes. None of these individual categories earned more than 4% of the responses.

**Technology/Digital (9%):** Respondents noted the increased reliance on digital, digital disruption, and changes to the technological landscape.

**Scale/Growth/Acquisitions (9%):** Respondents said they were anticipating acquisitions, entering new markets, expanding service offerings, or expecting significant growth in a short period of time.

**Reorganizations/Restructuring (8%):** Changes to the structure of the organization or reorganizations were noted. Some expressed concerns about attrition or downsizing. Notable quotes included:

- “We are absorbing government relations, which is a very poorly run area. We are also poised to absorb two other agencies which, if it happens, will be awful.”
- “There has been a lot of realignment without making big structural changes at the top (movement of reporting lines to managers, but nothing higher up than that). I think this has created confusion without really changing anything.”
- “C-suite often realigns organizational charts, sometimes without explaining reasons for the realignment.”
- “I anticipate that corporate communication (my department) will split away from the marketing function. We'll need to hire additional junior-level staff to support a growing work program. Likewise, we're facing a change in C-level leadership that could shake up our approach to communicating.”

**Fewer Silos and Better Alignment (6%):** Respondents said they needed to become less siloed, work better as a team and with other inter-organizational functions, or align better to their business. Notable quotes included:

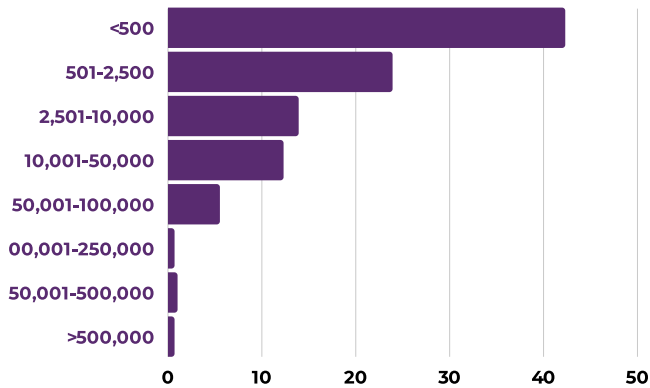
- “As we grow larger, the challenge will be to continue to work together tightly as a team.... sharing information and avoiding duplication. Staying aligned.”
- “Silos stopping work collaboration and flow within the department.”

**Lack of Experience or Talent (4%):** Respondents discussed leadership and talent lacking communication experience. Notable quotes included:

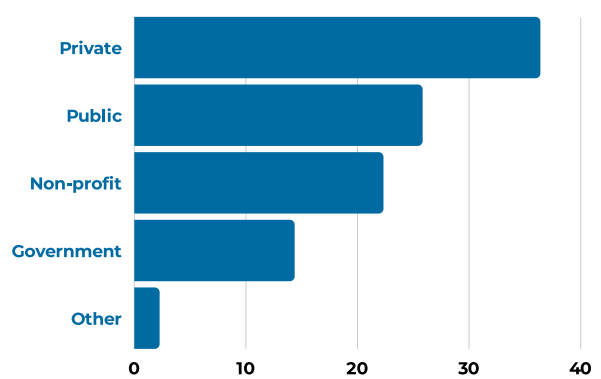
- “Lack of competencies considering the emerging disciplines in our industry.”
- “Increased demands for expertise and services that the team does not have, nor can access through vendor expenditures.”

# DEMOGRAPHICS

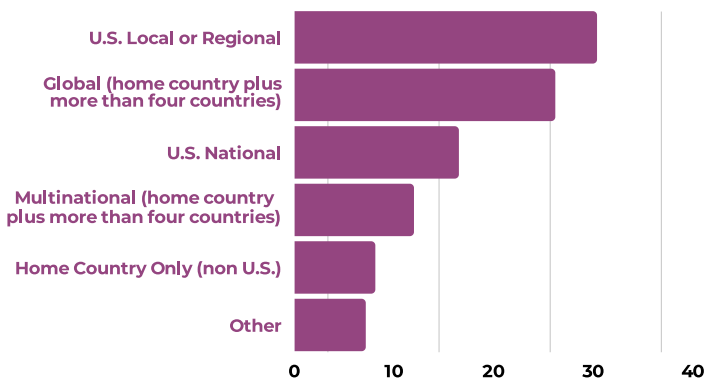
How many employees work in your overall company?



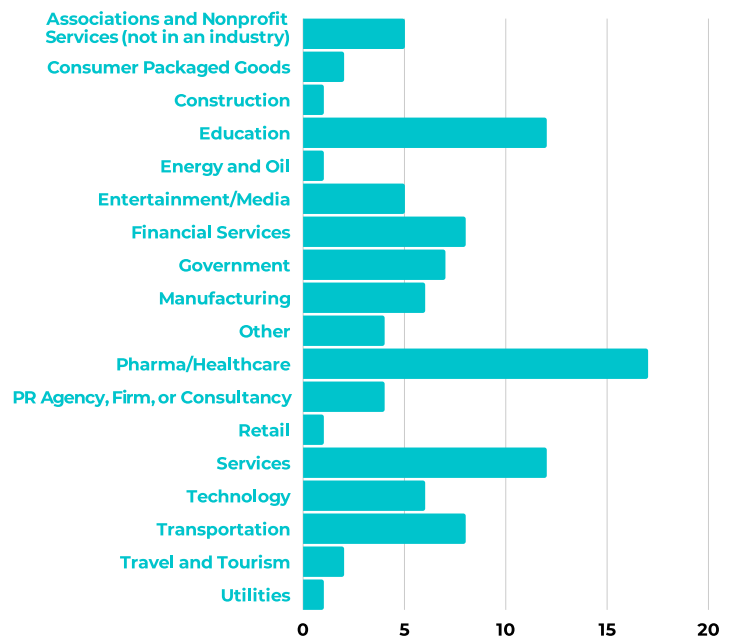
How would you describe your organization?



How would you describe your organization?



How would you describe your organization?



## Methodology

The Institute for Public Relations and *PRNEWS* conducted an online survey of 318 public relations professionals to understand the roles, responsibilities, relationships, and evolution of the communication function. The study was conducted from November 2019 to March 2021. A thematic analysis was conducted of the two qualitative responses. We also requested organizational charts.

# ABOUT PRNEWS

# PR NEWS

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