

# The boundary spanner

Which tasks are performed by communication executives? A new management tool reflects the many facets of the role.

BY ANSGAR ZERFASS AND SOPHIA CHARLOTTE VOLK

Communication leaders have manifold responsibilities, ranging from reputation management, to steering communication teams and counselling top managers in decision-making processes. This can be observed in the changing success profiles of chief communication officers (CCOs) and closer links to the C-suite. Yet, research into the many new roles of CCOs has been lagging behind. In order to bridge this gap, we analysed existing role conceptions in public relations and communication literature and have also spoken with global heads of communication about their multi-faceted responsibilities in daily practice. The newly developed Communication Manager Roles Grid depicts the role diversity of today's communication executives in eight dimensions. It can be used for assessing individual competencies or setting personal targets.

Research into professional roles has been a popular topic in communication and management sciences for decades. The origins of roles research in the field of communication in the late 1970s were marked by a strong focus on diverging gender roles and related salary gaps. Today, research investigates diverse aspects such as leadership or competency development. Over the years, many different role concepts have been suggested. Some are based on theoretical conceptualisations, some on normative ideas, others on surveys among professionals in different countries. Most studies have indicated that practitioners perform between two up to six different roles during their daily work.

## PR managers and PR technicians

In 1979, the US-based pioneers of PR roles research, G.M. Broom and G.D. Smith, proposed a four-role typology:

1. The *communication facilitator* acts as an information broker, liaison, and mediator between the organisation and its publics.

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2. The *expert prescriber* works on public relations problems and offers solutions.
3. The *problem-solving process facilitator* collaborates with line management and helps to apply a rational problem-solving process.
4. The *communication technician* is responsible for producing communication materials for the public relations effort.

Over time, the four-role concept was simplified and reduced to only two role dimensions: the *PR technician* and the *PR manager*. In this widely known typology, technicians produce and disseminate materials, whereas managers develop communication strategies based on research and analysis and play an important role in decision-making processes. Despite further developments, the two-role typology still remains popular especially in North American research. Studies from South Africa have built upon this and added a third role to the manager-technician dichotomy – the *PR strategist* – arguing that a more concise separation between strategic and operational roles is necessary.

## Reflective and educational roles

In addition to the widely used two-role concept from North America, European researchers have suggested that communication practitioners have two additional roles: a reflective and an educational role. According to large-scale surveys of European practitioners, the *reflective communication professional* analyses changing standards, values and standpoints in society, and discusses these with the members of the organisation. The *educational communication professional* helps the members of the organisation to communicate professionally. Empirical studies of chief communication officers and their work routines support these concepts and configure them in various ways.

## Management and leadership roles

Because the management discipline has a long tradition in researching role concepts, a look at the management literature can provide some interesting insights. According to these findings, managers typically perform a large number of different roles. Still popular today are, for example, the 10 managerial roles outlined by the Canadian management scholar Henry Mintzberg in 1973. He differentiated between Figurehead, Leader, Liaison, Monitor, Disseminator, Spokesperson, Entrepreneur, Disturbance Handler, Resource Allocator, and Negotiator.

Another well-known concept focuses on the role of leaders in the organisation and the question of how to steer teams efficiently and effectively. In 1958, R. Tannenbaum and W.H. Schmidt proposed a *leadership continuum* that shows the relationship between the different levels of freedom that a manager chooses to give a team. The model suggests seven different leadership styles on a continuum, ranging from highly manager-oriented to highly team-oriented. Choosing

the best fitting leadership style for each situation and team characteristics is critical for organisational performance. Developing leadership competencies is also highly relevant for today's communication managers who increasingly steer global communication teams with employees from different cultures, ethnicities, generations and with different norms and expectations. Communication leaders therefore need to acquire skills in team and conflict management and cross-cultural communication, and need to adjust their leadership behaviour to the varying demands of different employees.

## Changing job profiles: from PR manager to CCO

The rapidly changing job profile of today's communication executives can be observed in the ongoing development of job titles over the years: from PR manager to head of communications to chief communication officer. Today's CCOs are more than a press officer or an event manager. They provide

### CCO TARGETS AGREEMENT

An example from the CCO target agreement in a leading international pharmaceutical company:

- + 15% net-positive impact of the corporate reputation
- + 40% user engagement in social media (Twitter, Facebook, Weibo)
- + 3% employee engagement score across the company

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information for corporate management decisions by observing public opinion trends in traditional and social media and anticipating societal needs. In many companies, they act as a personal and trusted advisor of top management and co-design corporate strategy. In their role as department head, CCOs have managerial responsibility for the performance and set-up of the communication department. They head teams of up to several hundred specialists, steer agencies and service providers around the world, and handle budgets of up to several million Euros. The transition from being an executor to a consultant, and from a producer of communication materials to a business supporter, is manifested in the personal objectives for communication leaders. Today's success profiles are increasingly built upon clear, figure-based and measurable annual targets, often linked to corporate targets.

## The different roles of communicators in the value creation process

Although a variety of role concepts exist, our literature review revealed that they are not universally applicable and that the distinctions remain fuzzy. That is why

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Communication Manager Roles Grid (CRG) systematises the multi-faceted tasks of today's communication executives in eight dimensions and helps to better understand the different strategic and operational roles performed. The tool can be used to reflect on individual performance. It supports leadership when used to define success profiles or set personal targets.
- A wide range of managerial competencies are needed to fulfil the many responsibilities of communication leaders. A solid comprehension of popular management concepts and tools is important. Moreover, a good understanding of the organisation is relevant to be able to provide consultation to top managers.
- Communication executives can benefit from better demonstrating their personal contributions to corporate success. In particular, they can emphasise their strategic roles as ambassadors of corporate strategy and advisors of top management.

## The Communication Manager Roles Grid: a new management tool

The following exemplary quotes are abstracted from our qualitative interviews. They illustrate the typical tasks associated with each role.

### Ambassador

"I act as a visionary and convey the corporate strategy to key stakeholders to ensure our corporation's legitimacy. Through my unique contact points with important customers, investors, or politicians, I detect trends in the external environment proactively and inform top management about critical issues. In change processes, I create vision, promote change, and lead the way as a strategic pioneer of new ideas."

In this role, the Chief Communication Officer (CCO) is legitimised by other organisational members to act as an official ambassador on behalf of the organisation. Thus, the ambassador provides direction to turn strategic issues into action. The ambassador or 'visionary' is a popular concept which is commonly used in management research.

### Communication strategist

"I define overarching communication goals that are aligned with our corporate strategy and mission statement. In other words, I carry entrepreneurial responsibility that communication targets contribute to the long-term success of the company, for instance a professional reputation management or a unique brand positioning."

The main tasks of this role include deriving a communication strategy and linking it to corporate strategy. The communication strategist must have a good understanding of the company's strategy to be able to break it down into concrete communication targets.

### Strategic manager

"I am responsible for the long-term success of the communication department and its future contribution to organisational performance. My responsibilities include creating development programs for the communication staff and improving the department's competencies in digital communication."

The strategic manager has to manage the communication department effectively. He should be able to identify potentials for innovation for the department in order to support the long-term growth of the organisation. For fulfilling managerial positions, communicators should know popular management tools and concepts. They need leadership competencies for steering communication staff and external agencies

### Advisor

"I see myself as a key policy and strategy advisor for future corporate development. Whenever our top management has to make strategic decisions affecting corporate legitimacy, I am asked to participate in strategy meetings. I consult based on my knowledge gained from monitoring key stakeholders. Our CEO frequently asks for my advice, even if there are no touchpoints with communication projects."

In this role, the CCO draws the attention of top management to potential communicative risks, societal expectations and critical issues, and provides advice on strategic decisions. The advisor has a trust-based relationship with senior managers. He is valued by internal partners for the ability to span corporate boundaries. To fulfil this role effectively, the CCO has to be able to offer serious, frank, and even bold consultation to top management as well as to maintain a good relationship with key stakeholders.

### Multiplicator

"Every employee should know and understand corporate strategy. My role is to communicate our strategic goals by selecting the right channels and language when addressing our different stakeholders inside and outside the organisation. For instance, I set up communication activities that accompany the launch of a new corporate strategy. This is done by internal communications that facilitate a dialogue between top management and employees, and by addressing general publics."

In this role, the communication executive is responsible for providing platforms and channels to articulate strategic management decisions internally and externally. By multiplying corporate strategy through communication measures, the CCO supports strategy implementation and execution. Multiplicators break down the strategy into clear and easily remembered messages

### Professional communicator

"I support daily business operations by delivering professional communication. One of my main tasks is to produce communication materials, creating messages for internal and external communication, or maintaining social media platforms. Skills such as writing, editing, and working with media are indispensable in my function."

The professional communicator implements specific communication measures that have been defined in an overall communication plan, and hence operates at a tactical level. Skills such as improvisation and editing are important aspects of the operational communicator repertoire.

### Operational Manager

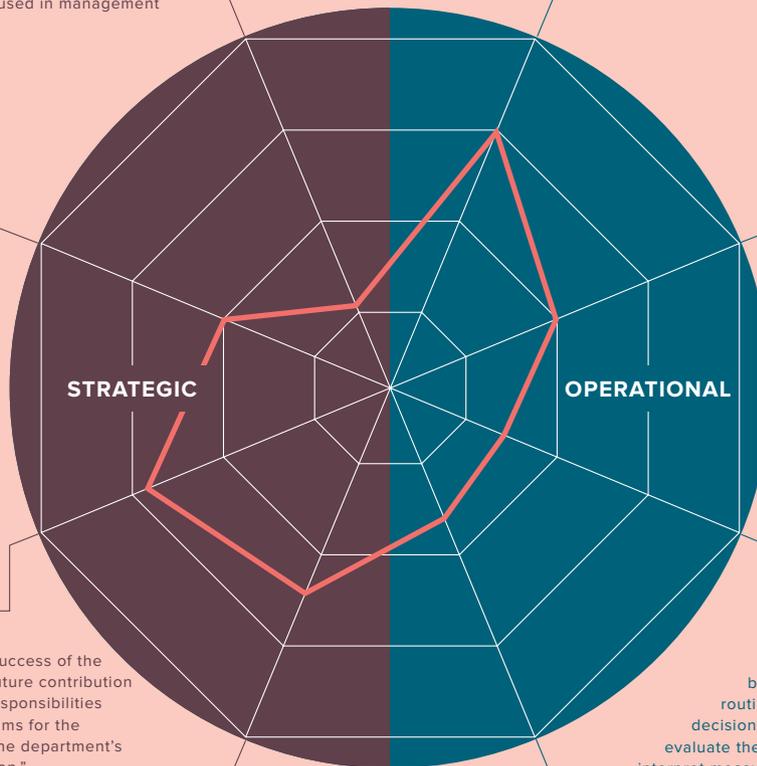
"My task is to administer daily business processes, establish efficient routines, and implement top management decisions such as compliance guidelines. I evaluate the success of communication activities, interpret measurement data, and report to top management on the department's goal achievement. In addition, I have regular meetings with my communication team to coordinate tasks and give feedback."

The operational manager focuses on routine tasks such as budgeting, staffing, controlling and analysis. Communication experts in this role must have competencies to manage resources and coordinate integrated messaging processes across shared, earned, owned and paid media.

### Coach

"I coach top executives and other departments to communicate professionally. This includes presentation skills, rhetorical training or contingency plans. I also write speeches for our top management and offer personal media coaching. Insights from issues management and monitoring help me in this role."

One of the main tasks of the CCO and other communicators is to enable other employees to communicate professionally. This includes the orchestration of many different voices of the organisation. Coaching and feedback skills are essential to enable employees and executives to improve their personal communicative competencies in a world of polyphonic messages.



we developed a new concept based on our interviews with corporate communication officers, a concept that aims to build upon the existing role concepts outlined above. The Communication Manager Roles Grid depicts the role diversity of communication leaders in eight dimensions. It also introduces a clear distinction between strategic and operational roles. These roles should not be seen as mutually exclusive as they will overlap to a certain extent. The distinction between strategic and operational roles in the real world is also blurred due to the fact that strategic tasks and operational activities often go hand in hand. Some CCOs will predominantly perform strategic roles. Others might spend more time in operational roles, just like their team members do. Balancing roles and their requirements is an ongoing challenge.

## How to use the Communication Manager Roles Grid

- The Roles Grid helps to reflect on one's personal role fulfilment and take a critical look at competencies for each of the eight roles. Communicators can identify their roles in the organisation by asking: How much time do I spend in each role? Do I perform well in those roles? How do others perceive me? Do they value my roles as much as I expect?
- The grid can be used to identify individual needs in order to advance competencies. However, nobody has to have excellent skills for performing every role. Leaders can use the grid to match competencies of team members to build up teams with a diversity of skills, create job profiles and ensure that the right staff are in the right positions.
- Finally, the Communication Manager Roles Grid can be used to set personal targets and report individual performance in all eight role dimensions. ●

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Further reading: Communication Insights (2017, Issue 3):  
How to play the game. Free download at:  
[www.academic-society.net](http://www.academic-society.net)