



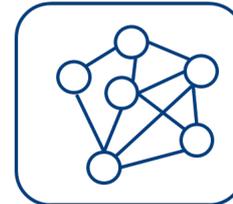
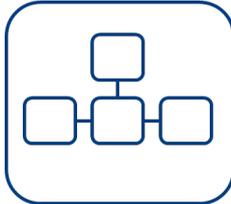
# CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS IN AGILE ORGANISATIONS

## Mastering cooperation in flexible structures

- ▶ In complex and dynamic environments companies in general and communication departments in particular struggle to keep pace with the high volatility of stakeholder demands. Traditional vertical structures, e.g. communications, marketing and IT working in silos, make organizations slow and ineffective. It hinders them to deal with the speed of information flow, which has been identified as one of the top three challenges for communications in Europe and Asia-Pacific (Macnamara et al., 2017; Zerfass et al., 2017).
- ▶ Thus, more and more companies have started to restructure and realign their business processes, focusing on horizontal structures, flat hierarchies, self-management, and empowerment. Companies are becoming more agile and flexible, allowing them to adapt faster to changing markets and environments.
- ▶ This fact sheet demonstrates how communication departments can get to grips with the challenge of inter-departmental collaboration in agile organizations. It identifies success factors and motivates leaders to reflect on their department's readiness for change.

### From formal to flexible structures

Traditional ways of organizational coordination include linear, sequential processes, and rational management approaches. These were effective in times of stable or predictable environments. Today's organizations, however, must handle rapidly changing technologies, markets, and social conditions. Collaborative approaches such as agile projects and cross-functional teams are becoming more frequent. They bring together the expertise and skills of team members from different disciplines and can drive innovation and competitive success. Cross-departmental cooperation is also related to higher job satisfaction, better working relationships, a larger number of acceptable business solutions as well as increased organizational performance.



**COORDINATION** used to be the most important approach for integrating disparate tasks within an organization.

- It is characterized by contractual obligations and formal structures of control such as hierarchy, rules and regulations.
- For instance, job design and job definitions can force individuals to work together.
- Organizational structures and processes prescribe how departments and groups should interact.

! Formal coordination will continue to be of importance, but  
• in the future organizations will have to invest more in cooperation.

**COOPERATION** on the other hand is needed in flexible, more agile organizations.

- It is less formally structured and relies more on behavioral norms than on contractual obligations.
- New ways of working together, e.g. in flexible, interdisciplinary teams become more frequent.
- Important variables are the distribution of power, influence, trust, reputation and legitimacy between the partners.
- Other aspects that can foster or hinder cooperation are personal relationships and organizational politics.

! Cooperation will gain in importance, especially in volatile, dynamic environments. Organizations have to adapt their organizational design, management and leadership style, competencies, corporate culture and other factors of collaborative success accordingly.

The trend towards various forms of formal or informal cooperation can also be observed within **Communication departments**. They are not only governing and executing communications, but they are increasingly engaged in new forms of cross-departmental cooperation – for instance as consultants, change agents or service providers for other functions or business units.

Moreover, external cooperation with **communication agencies** will be different in agile set-ups – traditional make-or-buy strategies and outsourcing approaches might not be flexible enough in the future. These varying roles and functions put new demands on the set-up of communication departments and the competencies of the people working within them. Communication leaders need to understand the consequences of agile organizations for their areas of responsibility.



» Cooperation is one of the most important themes for modern organizations. Cooperation as a synergistic force is a core organizational process driving organizational effectiveness.«

René Schalk & Petru L. Curşeu, Tilburg University

## Success factors for cooperation

Many factors influence the success or failure of cooperation between corporate communications and other departments/units within agile organizations. The most important factors at different organizational levels are listed here.

### ORGANIZATIONAL DESIGN

At an organizational level, a very important success factor is organizational design. Intra-organizational cooperation usually improves when lateral structures are in place that enable people to work together across departmental structures and across hierarchies.

### INFORMATION SHARING

Sharing information – personally or via collaboration tools – is key. In order for different departments or organizational units to be willing to share information and collaborate with corporate communications, co-workers have to trust in the reliability, competence and professionalism of communication practitioners.

### CORPORATE CULTURE

Agile organizations need a corporate culture of sharing and openness that encourages and empowers employees to engage in cooperation and trusts them to do so. Communication leaders should encourage positive criticism and open debates within their departments and work towards expanding such a culture at the corporate level.

### COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

All these success factors have to be personified by the leaders of department or teams. Agile organizations embrace a new understanding of leadership. A culture of collaboration and openness has to be enacted via inspirational leadership. Leadership will be less anchored in hierarchies, departmental power structures, or personal influence, but more in the context of project or team leadership.

### INTERNAL REPUTATION MANAGEMENT

Corporate communications should work towards creating a positive internal reputation. Only then will other corporate functions and business units value the department and practitioners as important partners. Reputation, trust and a track record of good services will be more relevant in agile organizations than set rules of communication governance. Communication professionals need expertise in such informal settings and relevant insights to be able to successfully contribute to flexible projects or teams.

### NEW COMPETENCIES AND SKILLS

Agile organizations put high demands on the competencies, skills and attitudes of employees. These are less rooted within their departments and must be able to work in interdisciplinary teams towards a common corporate goal. With the omnipresence of project and team work, the respective skills and personal attributes (team spirit, project management, interdisciplinary thinking, etc.) gain in importance.

## Background

The specification of these and other factors of success for communication departments within corporations, in relation to external agencies, and specifically for content management are core objectives of the new research project “Corporate Communications in Agile Organizations” initiated by the Academic Society in autumn 2017. A team of researchers from the Universities of Leipzig, Münster and Vienna joins forces to develop conceptual and empirical insights. The results will be shared on a regular basis in workshops and in publications by the Academic Society.

See also [www.academic-society.net](http://www.academic-society.net).

**References:** Macnamara, J., et al. (2017). *Asia-Pacific Communication Monitor 2017/18. Strategic challenges, social media and professional capabilities – Results of a survey in 22 countries.* Hong Kong; Zerfass, A., et al. (2017). *European Communication Monitor 2017. How strategic communication deals with the challenges of visualisation, social bots and hypermodernity. Results of a survey in 50 Countries.* Brussels. Available for download at [www.communicationmonitor.asia](http://www.communicationmonitor.asia); [www.communicationmonitor.eu](http://www.communicationmonitor.eu).



The Academic Society for Corporate Management & Communication is an initiative of leading companies and universities in Germany and beyond. It aims to shape the future of corporate communications through joint research projects and knowledge sharing.

**More information:** [www.academic-society.net](http://www.academic-society.net) | **Contact:** Karen Berger, [berger@akademische-gesellschaft.com](mailto:berger@akademische-gesellschaft.com)

