COMMUNICATION SNAPSHOTS
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CommTech and Digital Infrastructure in Communications

How to manage digitalization processes in communication departments

- The Covid-19 pandemic has been a driving force for communication departments to start implementing new digital tools and software to support virtual collaboration, create and align content, and track resources.
- As this is often done bottom-up by different project teams, we propose a framework to guide digitalization processes in communication departments. It helps communication professionals to analyze the current use of digital technology in their organization and supports decision-making for digital investments.
- This Communication Snapshot explains the upcoming notion of CommTech. It shows how to build a digital infrastructure and select appropriate software and digital tools.

What is CommTech?

Recently, the term CommTech (Communication Technology) has entered the professional discourse. The notion of CommTech, stimulated by a related, more advanced debate in marketing (MarTech), describes the **intersection of communications and technology**. It widens the previous view on digital technologies as channels and instruments (social media, websites, intranets) by asking how digital technologies **modify communication processes throughout the stakeholder journey**. How can communication professionals use digital tools and data to keep pace with stakeholders' demands?

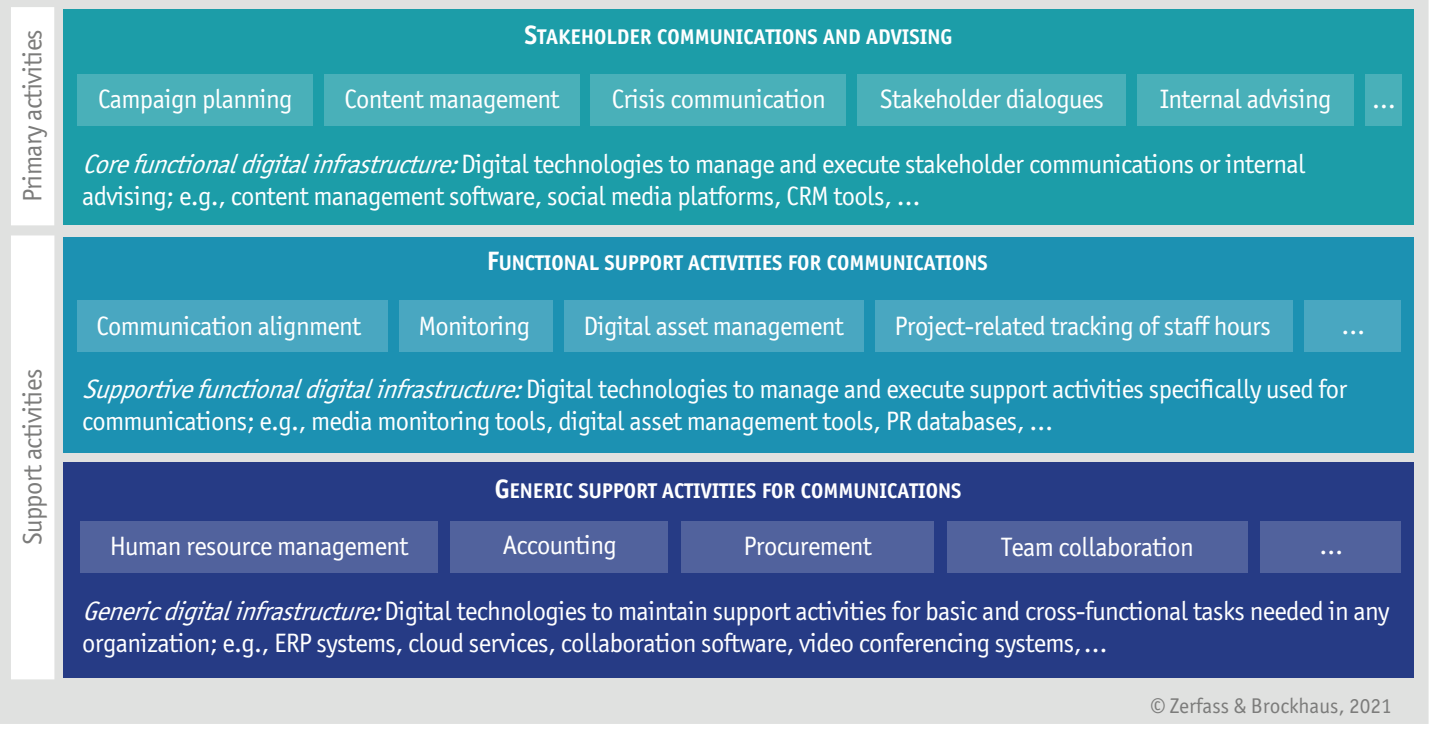
Given the wealth of digital technology available, a broad understanding of its different applications is necessary. A glance at the literature from information systems reveals that **digital infrastructure is twofold**: It comprises mainstream IT, which includes back-end solutions (e.g., enterprise resource planning systems like SAP), and front-end solutions, which directly address the needs of users (e.g., apps).

Challenges of digitalizing communications

Finding a **balance between new, tailored software applications**, and connecting digital technology to the established digital infrastructure in enterprises is a tough challenge. Some digital tools are designed specifically for communications, while others are suitable for multiple functions. In the latter case, decisions about digital investments are taken by IT or other departments. Therefore, a holistic view of managing digitalization processes is important to **avoid duplicate effort**.

Building digital infrastructure

Communication departments need to build their own digital infrastructure based on their objectives, processes, and resources. The framework presented here can be used as a guideline for investments in CommTech. It subdivides digital technologies into three conceptual layers of communication processes and activities which can be supported and transformed by digital technology. The model builds on literature from information systems, management, marketing, and communication research.



» Communications must harness the full potential of digital technology. It will define the future of our profession. «

Oliver Lönker, Senior Vice President Corporate Publishing and Campaigns, Siemens Healthineers

Stakeholder communications and advising

The first layer comprises primary activities directly linked to value creation through communications. They include preparing, creating, and executing as well as evaluating and adjusting stakeholder communications. Other processes such as analyzing and preparing insights, delivering presentations, and considering and discussing relevant issues are part of advisory activities, which are another key contribution of communications to corporate success.

- **Core functional digital infrastructure** consists of industry-specific software and service solutions for communications, i.e., content management software (e.g., Drupal), social media management tools (e.g., Hootsuite), and relationship management and distribution tools (e.g., Cision Communications Cloud).

Functional support activities for communications

The second layer is also related to specific tasks in communications. It includes workflows necessary to manage communication in organizations. Such activities include overall planning (aligning communication and business goals) and monitoring, yet also handling digital assets (logos, templates, pictures, videos) as well as tracking staff hours and resources for projects.

- **Supportive functional digital infrastructure** consists of specific software for the communications profession (e.g., media monitoring tools like Meltwater) or customizable digital tools used for multiple functions (e.g., Adobe Experience Cloud for digital asset management; TSheets for timesheets).

Generic support activities for communications

The third layer contains basic workflows which are needed in any organization for task fulfillment, especially collaboration.

- **Generic digital infrastructure** consists of solutions that are usually provided by IT departments or providers and are not specifically developed or adopted for communications, such as enterprise resource systems for budgeting and sourcing (e.g., SAP), video conferencing tools (e.g., Zoom), and also hardware and software solutions for mobile work with remote access to internal databases.

How to introduce technology

The framework can be used by communication practitioners to manage digitalization processes and guide the selection of digital technology. This will usually include three steps:

❶ Analyzing and considering the current use of digital technology in the communication department:

- What digital technology and tools are already available?
- What is used extensively?
- How satisfied are users?

❷ Identifying and prioritizing activities to be transformed by digital technology:

- What activities are carried out frequently?
- What activities are critical for creating communication value?

❸ Supporting decision-making for digital investments:

- Where is specific software needed?
- When does it make sense to consider adopting digital tools already used for other functions, or to share costs by joining forces with other departments?
- In what cases should team initiatives be revised because only generic activities are being addressed?

Digital mindsets needed!

Digital technologies change the shape of communication processes and activities, job profiles and skill requirements. Leveraging the full potential of digitalization requires **training** in data and technology competency for employees, but also a **new mindset**. Thinking in terms of processes and scalable solutions (which is quite different from creative approaches) has an important part to play.

About the research project

The findings presented here are based on a research project headed by Prof. Ansgar Zerfass and Jana Brockhaus at **Leipzig University** in close collaboration with **Siemens Healthineers AG** in 2020/2021. The purpose of the study is to provide a framework for guiding digital investments in communication departments.

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.

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