

July 1, 2024

## Communication departments need to sharpen their profile

### Study reveals significant room for improvement in the perception and positioning of corporate communications

- A team of researchers from Leipzig University investigated the perception and positioning of communication departments in large companies. 1,147 top executives, middle managers, and employees without leadership responsibilities in Germany—the largest European country—were surveyed about their perceptions of the objectives, tasks, and relevance of their communication departments.
- The results show that there is still much room for improvement. Only 50% of top managers and 36% of middle managers are convinced that communicators' work helps them fulfill their tasks. Nearly every second manager doubts that the resources and budgets spent on communications in their own company are justified.
- A majority of all respondents call for communication departments to better explain what they do and how they create value. The study reveals possible courses of action.
- Download all results (study report as PDF): <https://bit.ly/perceptionscorpcomms-en>

Many communication departments find themselves in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, the significance of internal and external communications is growing amid digitalization and geopolitical conflicts. On the other hand, the appreciation and available resources for those in charge are stagnating or even diminishing. How can this be? Do top managers and other departments grasp the full range of contributions provided by communication teams? And how does this fuel corporate success?

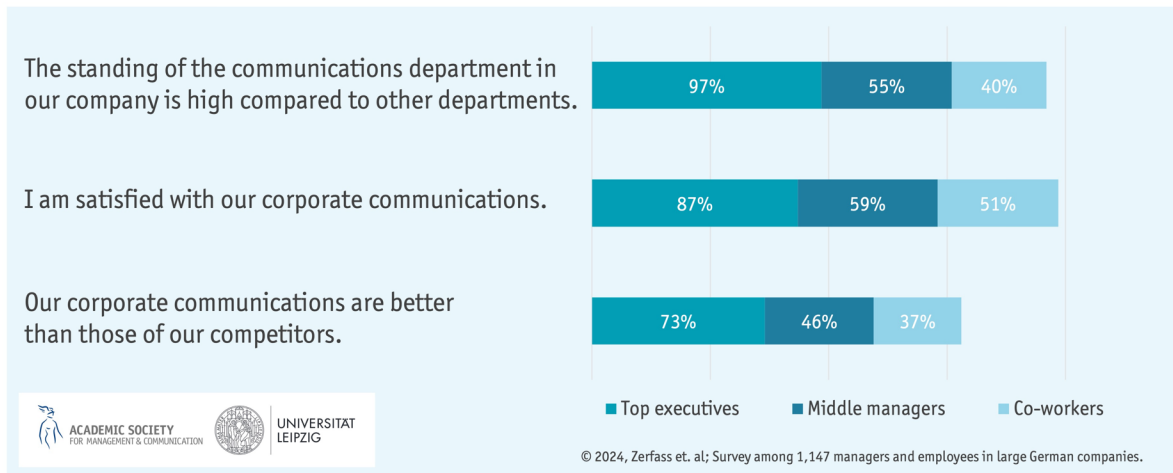
A new study by Leipzig University surveyed 1,147 top executives, middle managers (heads of divisions and departments), and employees without leadership responsibilities on their assessment of the communication department's goals, tasks, and importance within their company. "We found that communication professionals are generally held in high regard. However, they are primarily valued for their operational tasks rather than their strategic contributions," says Ansgar Zerfass, Professor and Chair of Strategic Communication.

The study reveals six critical insights:

#### **1. Only top managers rate the standing and performance of their communication departments highly.**

87% of top managers are satisfied with the corporate communication activities of their organization, and 97% affirm a high standing of the communication department—an encouraging result that provides a solid foundation for further improvement. However, approval ratings drop among middle managers and employees, with only 60% and 51% expressing satisfaction with the communication work. A similar trend is observed when comparing against competitors: only in top management do three out of four respondents believe their corporate communication surpasses that of the competition. At other hierarchical levels, fewer than half share this belief.

## ASSESSMENT OF THE COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT AND ITS SERVICES



### 2. Many are not familiar with the tasks and objectives of their communication department.

Communicators are mainly recognized for their operational duties, such as creating content, running campaigns, organizing events, monitoring public opinion, and overseeing language rules or design guidelines. Among the strategically relevant tasks, reputation and brand management are mentioned most frequently. However, only 60% of top managers see this as the responsibility of the communication department. Among those executives, 80% are aware of the objectives of the communication department, compared to only 58% of middle managers and 40% of employees. Bridging this knowledge gap can lead to greater acceptance within the company.

### 3. Communicators do not sufficiently support managers and employees in achieving their goals.

The findings on the relevance of professional communication work are concerning: Only one in two top managers (50%) and around one in three middle managers (36%) and employees (30%) state that the communication department supports them in fulfilling their own tasks. Respondents are also critical of the human and financial resources allocated to communications. Only 53% of top managers, 59% of middle managers, and 40% of employees believe these resources are justified. This lack of perceived support helps to explain why communication departments often struggle to secure necessary resources despite the growing importance of corporate communications in times of crisis.

### 4. Only one in two regards the communication department as competent.

Only one in two respondents (57% of top managers, 54% of middle managers, and 52% of employees) consider the communication department to be competent. This might explain why communicators are often not consulted on important business issues. In fact, only half of the top managers seek advice from the communication department on strategic decisions. Two-thirds acknowledge that communicators support or coach them in their communication efforts. This discrepancy raises questions about whether communication professionals are truly seen as consultants and coaches.

### 5. Increased interaction with the communication department leads to better ratings.

The study reveals that frequent interaction with the communication department improves colleagues' understanding of its responsibilities, roles, and goals. This familiarity leads to higher ratings of the department's

reputation, influence and capabilities. Conversely, a lack of awareness about the communication department's work negatively impacts its reputation and standing within the company. Another statistically significant correlation found is that when employees view communication as a key business success factor, they also believe that the resources allocated to the communication department are justified. Thus, a better understanding of corporate communications and its value can enhance the acceptance of the communication teams.

## **6. Communication work requires higher visibility and internal advocacy.**

“Communicators need a compelling mission and a consistent narrative for their work,” concludes Professor Zerfass. Communication managers should strategically promote their work and successes within the company to legitimize their role—for instance, by explaining their profile holistically when working on projects with other departments, in management training, and in onboarding processes. “Only those who are in demand and accepted can contribute with their expertise to corporate success. There is still significant potential, particularly in the relationships to middle management, who will be the top decision-makers of tomorrow.”

The study report provides further details from the quantitative survey, as well as insights from additional qualitative interviews with 32 communication managers on how to position the communication department. Download at <https://bit.ly/perceptionscorpcomms-en>.

### **Background to the study**

The study was carried out by a research team from the Chair of Strategic Communication at Leipzig University, led by Ansgar Zerfass and Jana Brockhaus. The project received funding from the Academic Society for Management & Communication. Anke Schmidt (Beiersdorf), Frank van Hoorn (Shell), Nils Haupt (Hapag Lloyd), and Thomas Voigt (Otto Group) supported the project with practical advice and insights.

Full study report (English): Zerfass, A., Brockhaus, J., Ehrlenspiel, M., Gulich, S., Heinz, A., Kelm, K., Leißner, V., Müller, A., Rütth, A., Schick, J., Schröder, M., & Weiß, L. (2024, July). *Perceptions and positioning of communication departments. What C-level executives, middle managers and co-workers know and think about corporate communications and which strategies are used by communication leaders to strengthen their profile. Results of a multi-method study in listed and private companies.* Academic Society for Management & Communication. [www.academic-society.net](http://www.academic-society.net)

### **Contact person**

Karen Berger, Managing Director & Head of Communications, Academic Society for Management & Communication:  
[berger@akademische-gesellschaft.com](mailto:berger@akademische-gesellschaft.com) | Tel: +49 341 9735052 | Mobile: +49 178 6692205