

EUROPEAN COMMUNICATION MONITOR 2024/25

MANAGING TENSIONS IN CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF
GEOPOLITICAL CRISES, ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, AND MANAGERIAL LEARNING

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01 Intro: Research design and topics

The ECM 2024/25 at a glance

- Insights based on an elite sample of chief communication officers (CCOs), representing the Top 300 companies in Europe
- Qualitative interviews combined with quantitative pre-survey
- Holistic approach: Exploring a key concept from strategic management and its impact on communications on different levels
- First study globally with scientific rigor exploring experiences and projections of those shaping the future of the field

New research design for the longest-running academic study on corporate communications worldwide (since 2007)



Key theme: Dealing with tensions

Tensions

- are created by **contradicting yet equally important goals** in decision-making
- **force leaders and organizations to make tight choices**
 - Managing tensions is ‘the new normal’ for communication leaders in fast-paced, globalized, competitive business environments – and a key driver of excellence

Explored on the level of businesses (geopolitics), communication departments (AI) and communication leaders (managerial learning)

Study participants and sample

Chief Communication Officers (CCOs)

- Average age: 52 years
- Ø 22 years of professional experience and 17 years in leadership positions

Companies (Top 300 in Europe)

- based in 10 different countries
- Annual revenue : Ø 54.36 billion Euros
- Ø 138,832 employees
- Diverse range of industries

Chief Communication Officers from Top 300 companies in Europe					
1	Adidas	Jan Runau	16	Nestlé	Lisa Gibby
2	AXA	Ulrike Decoene	17	Nokia	Melissa Schoeb
3	BASF	Nina Schwab-Hautzinger	18	Novartis	Michelle Weese
4	Bosch	Christof Ehrhart	19	PwC	Michael Stewart
5	Diageo	Dan Mobley	20	Randstad	Sarah Campbell Donia
6	EDF	Benjamin Perret	21	Renault	Stéphanie Cau
7	Eni	Erika Mandraffino	22	Repsol	Marcos Fraga García
8	Equinor	Jannik Lindbaek	23	Saint-Gobain	Laurence Pernot
9	Ferrero	Raoul Romoli Venturi	24	Sanofi	Bruno Tourne
10	IKEA	Belén Frau Uriarte	25	Santander	Juan Manuel Cendoya
11	ING	Kim Larsen	26	SAP	Monika Schaller
12	Intesa Sanpaolo	Fabrizio Paschina	27	Siemens	Lynette Jackson
13	Lufthansa	Andreas Bartels	28	SSE	Sam Peacock
14	Møller-Maersk	Mette Refshauge	29	Swiss Re	Jan Dietrich Müller
15	Naturgy	Jordi García Tabernerero	30	Unilever	Paul Matthews

Research team and partners

Professors from six leading research universities



Ansgar Zerfass (Germany)



Alexander Buhmann (Norway)



Aurélie Laborde (France)



Ángeles Moreno (Spain)



Stefania Romenti (Italy)



Ralph Tench (United Kingdom)

Strong partners representing key markets



Organizer



Supporter



02 Managing communications in times of geopolitical crises and risks

How geopolitics impact corporate communications

Geopolitical risks are the threat, occurrence or escalation of adverse events related to war, terrorism and any conflicts between states and political actors that affect economic activity, political decisions and social dynamics on a global scale.

- Significant and far-reaching impact on communication strategies and activities
- Rising stakeholder expectations in times of polarization create major challenges
- Crisis communication practices are in place, but not sufficient to handle new demands

“They’re coming at us at a higher pace, and there are no signs that this will stabilize or that this will not just keep accelerating.” (C80)

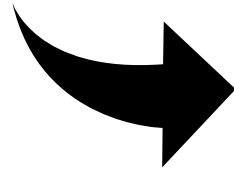
“a massive responsibility, ... rewarding but terrifying.” (B25)

“[T]here is a certain Darwinism in the communication areas. It’s not the one with the most resources or the strongest or the biggest who survives, but the one who best adapts to this new volatile context.” (O45)

Multiple crises frequently lead to difficult situations

Geopolitical crises

- War in the Ukraine
- Conflicts in the Middle East
- Rising nationalism and protectionism
- ...



Difficulties experienced by companies due to geopolitical risks

Actively positioning the company and its top leaders with regard to geopolitical topics	48.3 %
Responding to stakeholders and media who ask about disputed geopolitical topics	48.3 %
Anticipating the reputational risks and opportunities of geopolitical developments	48.3 %
Managing controversial debates on geopolitical topics within the company	41.4 %
Respecting different perspectives when communicating with external stakeholders	27.6 %

Tensions experienced when dealing with geopolitical crises

Corporate communication strategies and activities need to address contradictions between

- taking a position & remaining neutral
- social engagement fostering trust & associated reputational risks
- business demands & navigating in a politically fragmented world
- maintaining a coherent (global) strategy & responding to (local) stakeholder demands

How to be “sensitive to our context, but remain kind of consistent with how we think business should be operated” (R42)

► Internal audiences as key challenge

“You import conflicts that the company cannot do anything about.” (A12)

“I have never, ever experienced, in 25 years, emotions running this high within the company.” (X35)

“Employees try and push the company into places that will become very difficult.” (U05)

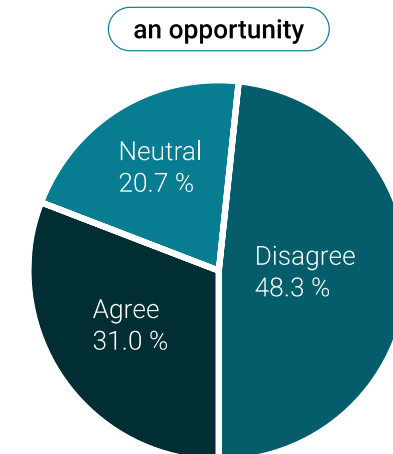
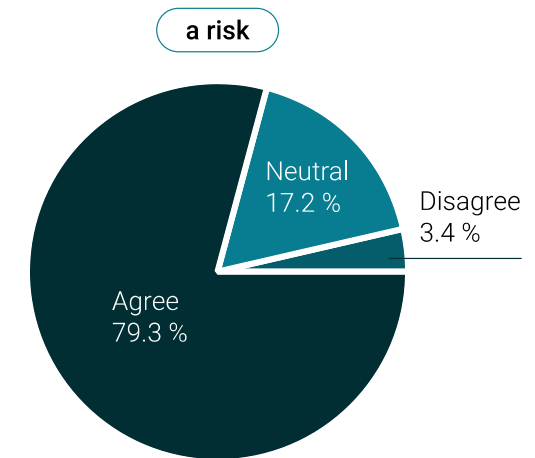
Evaluating and managing tensions

- Overall, geopolitical issues pose both risks and opportunities for corporate communications
- The new role of organizations as political actors is mostly perceived as a threat

Solutions implemented in top companies:

- Investments into social listening and predictive monitoring
- Close alignment with public affairs teams
- Developing narratives that explain paradoxes and ambiguities
- Organizational setup to handle issues across different regions (network of internal experts who are open-minded, diplomatic)
- Governance frameworks and processes to guide daily work (e.g., to objectify decisions on whether to take a stand or not)

For CCOs, current geopolitical crises represent ...



The geopolitical context requires new ways to manage and execute corporate communications

CONCLUSION

Companies are adapting their communication strategies to the multitude of geopolitical crises and risks. But many practices are still evolving.

- 1. Anticipate.** The key to effectively dealing with geopolitical risks in corporate communications is to set up an infrastructure of listening and scenario planning.
- 2. Consolidate.** Establishing, strengthening and moderating discussions within global organizations is as important as monitoring external stakeholders and debates.
- 3. Connect.** Businesses should nurture a network of functional leaders and communication experts with diplomatic skills and sensitivity for value-based risks.
- 4. Navigate.** Managing corporate communications for a global company means choosing what to say and what not to say in situations of ambiguity and paradoxes.

03 Artificial intelligence: a double-edged sword for communication departments

AI as game changer for communication departments

Artificial intelligence is the ability of machines and software applications to produce results for a task that are indistinguishable from the results achieved by human actors

- Most top companies use secure/internal AI systems
- Current uses focus on standardized and repetitive tasks with low risks (analysis, translations, producing copy, ...)
- CCOs are reluctant to use AI applications that may result in high-stakes and high-risk failures

“Right now, we are in that stage of using it in areas that are less high priority because I just don’t think it’s secure.” (F83)

Most established uses of AI-based tools in top companies

1.	Media/Social media monitoring and analysis	55.1 %
2.	Content adaptation	51.7 %
3.	Getting inspiration for content	44.8 %

AI uses cases with the lowest penetration

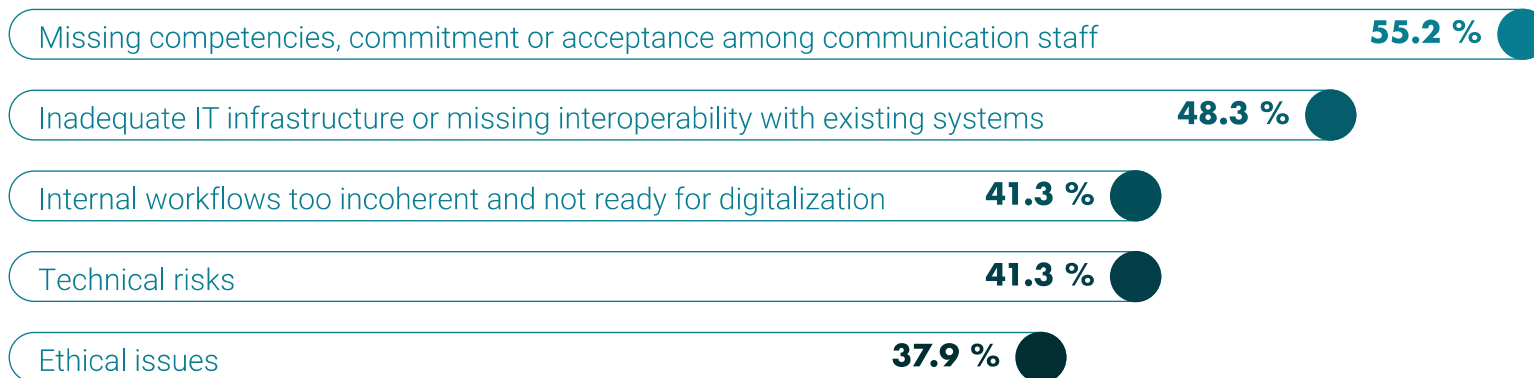
1.	Communication with stakeholders (chatbots etc.)	13.6 %
2.	Managing internal assets (contacts, content)	17.2 %
3.	Optimizing internal workflows and processes	17.2 %

Leveraging the potential of AI

Current focus of communication departments

- Strengthening the ‘people dimension’ through retraining and hiring
- No significant impact on department’s structures and processes so far
- No plans to replace people, but to raise either quality or quantity of output

Perceived barriers on the road to increased AI implementation



AI-induced tensions in communication departments

Utilizing AI results in tensions between

- increasing short-term efficiency & mitigating unforeseen negative consequences (for staff commitment, building essential competencies, proving effects, retaining quality)
- quick AI implementation & staying a trustworthy partner for internal clients
- effective AI systems & secure and ethical data use
- facilitating new AI-based roles & maintaining the core contributions and identities of communication departments and team members

“You have to read, ... you have to expose your thoughts to critical remarks and so on. If we abolish that painful path towards great communications results by using AI, the question is, who still will be able to judge what is great and what isn't?” (B82)

“The currency that we have is the trust of the leadership. That's my biggest tension point – I want to go faster, that we're seen as a source of innovation in this space ..., but not so fast that we get something really fundamentally wrong.” (T74)

Managing AI-based tensions

First leadership approach: Focusing on people

- Involving all team members in using AI but also in reflecting use cases
- Encouraging education
- Recognizing affective, motivational, emotional aspects
 - Either actively managed or left to a kind of ‘trust-the-process optimism’

“The arguments ... are different than what we’ve incurred previously. There is a level of creativity in how we encourage people.” (Q76)

Second leadership approach: Focusing on technology

- Limiting technology
(e.g., by restricting data sets for training AI)
- Limiting application
(e.g., by experimentation in confined use domains)

“For me, the issue is more about: keeping a bandwidth for experimentation ..., but also not spending all our time, all our money too ... thinly over 10,000 things.” (Y86)

Artificial intelligence is a double-edged sword

CONCLUSION

Communication departments must retain their identity and influence when using AI to gain efficiency.

- 1. Trust.** Only trustworthy and ethical AI systems will be able to leverage the full potential of AI efficiency and effectiveness in communication departments.
- 2. Literacy.** Departments need to build role-specific competencies among leaders and staff to ensure a robust and continuous assessment and use of AI tools.
- 3. Experimentation.** Limited applications within secure domains can foster learning from concrete yet 'low stakes' use cases and help mitigate risks.
- 4. Restrictions.** The use of AI systems should be limited if data inputs might be sensitive (restricting inputs) or where results might be high stakes (restricting outputs).
- 5. Emotions.** Recognizing and managing team members' affective responses to AI-based change is essential to create a spirit of innovation and engagement.

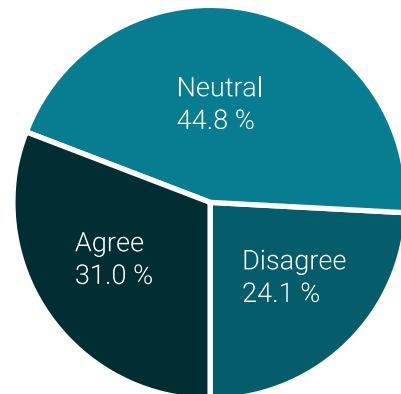


04 Managerial learning as a success factor for communication leaders

Why managerial learning is important for top leaders

Managerial learning is the acquisition and development of knowledge, skills, and personal attributes by leaders through study, instruction or experience – either on the job (by trial and error; applying new concepts) or externally (by observing peers and or sharing ideas; insights from studies or seminars).

Adequate learning engagement “I invest enough time and effort in learning”



Most important barriers for managerial learning



Learning engagement and styles

Current practices of top communication leaders

- Most common approaches: learning on the job, peer learning
- Theory-based learning practiced through executive education (focused on leadership, general management) and coaching
- Reflective learning practices draw on managerial and professional sources – strong trust in reports from management consultancies, but critical view on studies by communication agencies and academia

“I would always read something published by McKinsey or by BCG, for example.” (X35)

“When it comes to the agency studies, I think some are good, but some are also a little bit between science and magic.” (C80)

“They’re very keen to sell stuff.” (D31)

“I don’t have time to read real academic current research papers or current research books most of the time.” (A12)

Tensions faced by CCOs when expanding their competencies

Managerial learning often results in contradictions between

- renewal (foster future capabilities or change) & preservation (perform with proven methods/mindsets)
- being a generalist & specialist at the same time (some learning paths can disturb the balance)
- acquiring knowledge & upholding the internal status as 360° adviser for executives on any critical topic

“It will be hard to understand why you need training if you're already being paid half a million Euros to know everything.” (X63)

“Learning is all about letting go of control, being open-minded, being experimental. I don't think that's, in general, our strongest suit, because we're here to control things, stay on message, make sure nothing goes wrong, manage our reputation.” (D31)

“It's extremely important to radiate confidence and ... have people concentrate on their job and on the results. And if you're jumpy and always have something new, then you cannot do that.” (A12)

Evaluating and managing learning tensions

- CCOs are well aware of contradictory constellations at the individual level
- Role expectation and self-perceptions cause and intensify this

Top communicators handle this by

- prioritizing learning activities based on one's own positioning
- blocking time to learn
- simply accepting undesirable consequences of learning
 - However, many CCOs talk about managing the learning experiences of team members, but do not report on solutions on their personal level

“not trying to grow everywhere ... every year but choosing one or two areas where I really want to move the needle.” (T74)

“Try and make sure roughly half the [Friday] is carved out sort of read and think and reflect or at least discuss stuff with people in a more abstract way.” (U05)

Advancements in managerial learning pave the way for excellence and success

CONCLUSION

Current learning practices of communication leaders are quite diverse and pragmatic. It's time to take them to another level.

- 1. Initiative.** Today's communication leaders must take responsibility for innovating themselves and their profession. Allocating time for self-development and establishing shared frameworks is needed.
- 2. Focus.** Managerial learning should not be limited to business and leadership knowledge where other executives shine as well. The real discriminators are future-oriented competencies to manage and execute corporate communications.
- 3. Quality.** Impactful learning requires more than experimentation and peer exchange. It needs a reflective professional discourse at a similar level to debates in general management – a discourse that is no longer driven by self-adulation and often criticized agency studies.
- 4. Reliability.** The gap between academia and practice should be closed. Personal and professional maturity need reliable insights and conceptual ideas developed over time.

05 Questions & Answers



YOUR QUESTIONS
AND THOUGHTS ?

Read more in the full ECM 2024/25 report (PDF, 44 pp.)

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