

The evolution of business communication

 By [Daniel Munslow](#)

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The traditional role of public relations continues to evolve in a dynamic and constantly changing landscape. Today, PR is a key function of an organisation's reputation management strategy...



Daniel Munslow talking at IPRA

It's another function that has changed drastically with the advent on social media and the rise of the employee voice, and the consequent need to focus on internal communication as much as external communication.

The International Association of Public Relations hosts an annual Congress, which brings together some of the most senior PR professionals from all over the world. This year's Congress, hosted in Johannesburg, saw over 300 people from some 30 countries descending into Sandton to hear from leading stalwarts of the communication industry. This was an important event for South Africa to host as well, making it the largest PR conference of its kind hosted in Africa.

Speaking alongside industry greats like Rob Cartwright from Ketchum; Svetlana Stavreva, CMO from IBM Eastern Europe; Todd Babiak, CEO of Story Engine; and Jeremy Galbraith, CEO for EMEA at Burson-Marsteller, to name but a few, I had the privilege of addressing the Congress on the new skills set required of communicators in the current age. This was based on the VMA Group Africa research conducted in April among 189 communication practitioners in South Africa to understand their needs and challenges.

In-house communication development

Sharing the highlights of the research within the context of the skill-set PR practitioners need, it was noted that in terms of in-house skills development for communicators, strategic thinking and business communication positioning feature very high on the list, with one out of three communicators saying this is a key skill they look for when shaping their teams.

Writing skills features relatively low on the list, possibly as it's an area that is often outsourced. It is somewhat surprising that organisational and leadership skills are also low on the list, given the key role leaders play in communication and the support communicators are expected to provide. What was even more surprising was the low focus of business acumen as a skill required - only 5% of senior practitioners felt this was an important communication skill.

In light of the increasingly strategic role communication plays in many organisations, those would likely be seen as the most important skills, whereas at the moment they are regarded as the least important.

On a positive note, while organisation and leadership featured relatively low on the skills communicators look for in their teams, it is the third highest in terms of the skills respondents wanted training on. Further, writing also featured high up on the skills communicators want to train on, jumping from 9% as a skill looked for to 27% as a skill that needs development.

More strategic planning and thinking training

One out of two communicators want more training on strategic planning and thinking. Strategic communication planning can help communicators identify business priorities and build the strategic framework to execute success in an ever-changing business environment.

Focussing on leadership as a globally accepted primary communication tool, the role of the communicator is changing from operational execution to trusted advisor. With this also comes a changing dynamic in terms of prioritisation. Historically, the focus was on the packaging of environmental communication and sharing *content*; today it's about equipping leaders with tools and competencies to land messages effectively within the right *context*. It is this context that connects employees to the brand and promotes operational efficiencies as well as mitigates business risks by retaining talent.

Further, leaders need to be supported to walk the talk and demonstrate a myriad of emotionally intelligent behaviours, such as engaging people, walking the floor, and demonstrating authentic leadership qualities. True engagement can be achieved when leaders are trusted, and this was an overall theme of many speakers at the IPRA conference.

Here are some practical approaches for communicators to use to achieve this level of engagement:

- Build total leadership alignment around communication and strategic messaging
- Improve communication skills of leadership at executive and BU level
- Increase communication capability of key support functions where change is primary (HR, IT, etc.)
- Drive employee voice and multidirectional communication
- Drive integrated messaging standards for leadership to disseminate key facts to the business in the right context

The single biggest concern raised by communicators in South Africa is the shortage of skills, which one in four practitioners experience. This again points to the need for ongoing skills development and training, to ensure communicators are able to deliver business results within an insourcing business model. The second major concern is the downward pressure on budgets, which 22% of respondents noted.

As the world of business communication continues to change, so does the role of communicators and with it the skillset required to drive a strategic function.

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