



A study into skills and competencies for communicators reveals a lack of clear career planning

SUE DEWHURST AND LIAM FITZPATRICK

## GET YOUR DEVELOPMENT PLAN ON TRACK

The path to a senior role in internal communication is paved with good intentions. Or so suggests a recent study by development experts, Sue Dewhurst and Liam FitzPatrick. Here, in the first of a new regular column on professional development, they review the study's findings, lament the lack of a career plan and urge internal communicators to take action and plan their own development.

The title of advertising guru Paul Arden's book *It's not how good you are, it's how good you want to be*, captures the essence of ambition. And our recent survey suggests that this is a message internal communicators should take to heart.

As part of our research<sup>1</sup> to define a list of core skills and competencies for professional communicators, we asked practitioners from around the world about their future career goals and how they plan to achieve them. Surprisingly, for a profession that stresses the need for strategies and plans, most internal communicators appear to have a fairly *ad hoc* approach to their own development.

### Results from the survey

About 70 percent of our sample said they expected to stay in internal communication over the next three years. Thirty-two percent saw themselves gaining more experience within their existing jobs, while 37 percent aim to move into a different internal communication role.

When we asked respondents what they were doing to help develop their careers, gaining wider experience, being better

networked and finding a coach came top of their lists.

### Be honest with yourself

Now, these seem like fairly informal activities. You might think they take less organizing than, say, investing the time and budget to do a course or study for a formal qualification. But if you're being honest, you know that getting the go-ahead to work on more challenging projects, finding the right coach and building a professional network takes time and planning. These things don't just happen overnight – unless you're very lucky.

Yet less than a quarter of internal communicators have a formal plan to help structure their thoughts about career progression and make sure their development objectives are met. Twenty-one percent say they have no plan whatsoever, and about half the respondents we contacted say they have a plan, but it's not formalized or agreed.

### Make the time

Making time to discuss your career goals with your manager and getting a personal development plan down on paper will pay dividends. After all, who

decides whether you get to work on the more interesting projects or not? And when you're being dragged under by your workload, wouldn't it be helpful to have some targets to remind you to make the time to network or read that article sitting in your reading folder?

If we've convinced you to think about your own professional development, here are three important steps to get started.

1. **Be clear about where you're starting from.** Think about what you've achieved so far in your career. What skills do you have, what are your strengths and which areas need further development?
2. **Look ahead to where you want to be.** What timeframe do you have in mind for your professional development? What can you focus on right away and what are your longer-term career goals? Be as specific as you can about what you want to achieve and consider the following:
  - Are there areas where you'd like to be a "star performer" in your current role?
  - How can you expand your network or reach in the wider industry?
  - How can you broaden your depth of skills or experience outside your current remit?
  - How do you plan to move onwards and upwards to a new role?
3. **Think about how you'll close the gap.** What knowledge, skills and experience do you need? What type of development activity will help you get to where you want to be?

If you know in your heart of hearts that you don't invest enough time and effort in your own development, make the time to start doing this now.

In our next column, we plan to look at the range of development options available and hear some reflections from industry leaders on what helped them really accelerate their own learning and professional development.

1. Turn to page 16 for a more detailed analysis of the study

"THESE THINGS DON'T JUST HAPPEN OVERNIGHT – UNLESS YOU'RE VERY LUCKY"



Sue Dewhurst and Liam FitzPatrick run **Competent Communicators**, a company specializing in professional development for internal communicators and Melcrom's official training and development partner. For more information go to: [www.competentcommunicators.com](http://www.competentcommunicators.com)

# How to get ahead in internal communication

Senior practitioners share their views on how to gain influence and credibility

COMPILED BY MANDY THATCHER

The path that leads internal communicators to the top of their profession isn't always an obvious one. Which is why we asked a range of senior practitioners to share their thoughts and experiences on gaining the respect of those who matter. Whether its senior leaders, fellow employees or your own team you're looking to impress, these responses provide useful insight into how to make sure you and your work gets noticed.

#### Editor's note:

Succeeding in internal communication probably isn't all that different to succeeding in any profession: understand what's expected of you, do the job well and deliver results. But when you speak to practitioners about how they personally turned the corner in their careers and started to make an impact, it soon becomes clear that there are many dos and don'ts that can help or hinder progress. This article provides a handy checklist for those with ambitious development plans.



**John G. Clemons**  
Vice President, Communications  
Raytheon Technical Services Co. LLC.

#### Take the initiative

There have been a few career-defining moments for me. Among them was the time when I realized that I was moving from a manager level to the

decision-making role of a director.

I worked for a senior executive who hired me from a rival telecommunications company. Upon joining the company, I developed strategic communication plans to address various business challenges. During the development process, I periodically checked in with my supervisor to get his input and approval – probably more than necessary – before moving to the next steps in planning.

One day, he called me into his office and said that, while he liked the work I was doing for him, his expectation when he hired me as a director was that I would take the initiative in the job, rely less on his frequent input, and move forward with implementation and measurement. He wanted results.

His counsel was along the lines of, “I hired you to do a director's job, so do the job of a director. You don't have to get permission to make a difference.”

#### Meet commitments and think strategically

His direction motivated me to take more responsibility at this new job level. This also meant that I had to not just manage, but lead, meet commitments and think more strategically, to continue to earn not only his confidence, but the support of the entire leadership team.

I've found that being a communication professional who is also a leader that can be trusted, can get things done and truly support the goals and objectives of an organization, will not only impress others, but help build your credibility and lead to success.



**Mark Darby**  
 Head of Internal Communications  
 Visa  
 UK

**Be smart, sharp and stubborn**

The biggest lesson I've learned, and keep having to remind myself, is that I need to be smart, sharp and stubborn to get ahead. This is what those words mean to me in a work context:

**Smart:** I need to understand what Visa is doing and what people think about the business. This means constantly spending time in different departments and learning from them. I know who our customers are, what our challenges are and what our current financial performance is. I have contacts in most departments who have a finger on the pulse, which means I can have a relevant conversation with a senior person from any department.

**Sharp:** Internal communication is rarely near the top of the agenda for senior people, and my time with them is usually short. I always try to talk about the impact on business performance as soon as possible. If I circulate a document it will be summarized to a single page at most and I don't use PowerPoint. I ask a lot of "one" questions, such as "What's the *one* thing you want employees to do differently" or "What's the *one* thing you want me to change over the next six months?"

**Stubborn:** I know what I want internal communication to achieve at Visa, and it has the support of the senior team. I've built up knowledge from books and articles, I use my education from the Black Belt training course<sup>1</sup> and I speak to former colleagues. With this knowledge I've become stubborn and good at saying no, because I have the information to back up my arguments. I've stopped my team from picking up extra projects that won't deliver much value. We focus only on projects that add the most value to the business and we deliver on these really well. Successful delivery is the biggest influence on any senior person.



**Monika Stafford**  
 Head of Internal Communication  
 Lloyds TSB  
 UK

**Be creative and focus on a killer issue**

Using creative solutions to bring to life important – but often dull – programs can create a shine that stretches beyond project boundaries. For

example, I worked on the implementation of SAP – a business-critical systems program – requiring behavior change from swathes of key, yet uninterested people. Successful implementation was a big risk to get right, but it was as dull as dishwater to communicate.

Luckily there was a "Eureka!" moment. By aligning the SAP story with the metaphor of Formula-1 racing, we could tell the tale of how it would fulfill our need to create winning performances for both the individual driver, as well as the back-up team, in order to perform well on the road ahead. This storyline was a perfect match for the program's objectives.

Launch speakers from Formula 1, great design work, not to mention fantastic collateral, all resulted in a no-hitch implementation that really resonated with people. The global company picked it up as the approach for worldwide roll out. So, faced with tedium, it can actually pay to stare out of the window for creative inspiration.

My other piece of advice is: Focus on a killer issue. If you really want to get ahead (and do be sure you really do, as being at the center of change is often akin to being in the eye of a hurricane – it's no place for the feint-hearted), learn what keeps your business leaders up at night. Use your stakeholder-management skills to get to the people you need to help you deliver solutions, then execute, execute, execute!

Focus on value-adding work only, because if you end up working on your company's cul-de-sac projects, you'll never shine brightly enough for the leaders in your company to notice you. ▶

Figure One: Table from *The Pulse* report showing the percentage of communicators who rate themselves as effective or very effective at listed competencies

COMPETENCY	%
Planning internal communication	76%
Linking corporate messages to corporate vision	73%
CEO communication	63%
Change communication	60%
Communicating to diverse audiences	60%
Using the intranet as a communication tool	54%
Defending your department in internal political battles	43%
Line manager communication	42%
Professional development of internal communication staff	33%
Helping employees cope with information overload	32%
Securing the appropriate level of budget for internal communication	30%
Measuring the effectiveness of internal communication	28%

## WHAT'S CHANGED IN THE LAST 25 YEARS?



**David Moorcroft**  
Senior Vice President  
Corporate Communications  
RBC Financial Group, Canada

I'm constantly amazed at the changes that have taken place in our profession over the last 25 years, and the degree of talent and knowledge required by communicators today to do their jobs well.

Back in 1979 when I started in corporate PR, the major skill sets were writing, editing and great media contacts. Today, good editorial skills are just table stakes, and the ability to understand business, adapt technology, think strategically, plan consummately and influence stakeholders are what land senior communicators a seat at the management table.

This change has been driven by the globalization of business, the advent of new 24/7 media including the Internet, the growing sophistication of customers and employees, increased demands for corporate transparency, and more rigorous requirements for high standards of public disclosure and financial reporting.

### MORE SKILLS THAN EVER BEFORE

As a result, today's business communicator has to be more capable and knowledgeable, and have more skills than ever before. They must be financially literate and technologically savvy. They must understand the impact of evolving accounting and disclosure rules. They must deal with legal, HR, political and business issues. And they must be prepared to deal with a multitude of potential crises that can arise at any moment, in any language, in any part of the world.

Perhaps most challenging, senior management today expects clear bottom-line returns for their investments in communication. It's no longer enough to inform audiences and measure communication outputs; CEOs expect communication to engage audiences and produce outcomes – something that requires strategic thinking, planning and foresight.

A friend of mine who left a senior corporate PR job to become COO of a major public utility recently summed up the role of today's communicator this way: "It's one of the most important and critical roles in organizations today, and yet it's often one of the least recognized and appreciated."

That sentiment may be a reality in some organizations today, but with more and more CEOs beginning to realize the bottom-line value of communication, it won't be 25 years from now.



**Christina Fee**  
Senior Vice President, Internal  
Communications  
Deutsche Post AG  
Germany

### Seek out the important projects

I can't pretend to have employed a specific approach to my "personal PR" at all. But in the organizations I've worked for, I've had the opportunity to work on a number of exciting, high-profile projects that have connected me with senior stakeholders and influential people at different levels.

I've learned a great deal from the project teams I've worked with and also, due to the significance and scope of the projects, been able to demonstrate my worth, approach and skills. I've had to be passionate, stand up for what I believe in and think outside the box constantly.

My roles within DHL/Deutsche Post, have allowed me the freedom and flexibility to develop and deliver new ideas, but I've also had to practice and embody excellent internal communication skills myself. Having developed credibility and trust with those that matter based on my track record, I was allowed to go ahead with other projects.

I don't actively pursue the "right relationships," but rather let my work and my interactions with people speak for themselves. This has helped me develop mentors and supporters naturally. My learning and development has also been expanded by the opportunity to work abroad and learn more about intercultural communication and interaction.



**Marc Silverside**  
Head of Internal Communications  
Macmillan Cancer Support  
UK

### Understand what's expected of you

A newly established role heightens the need for making a good impression so that people trust you and feel they can come to you for advice.

When I joined Macmillan, I very nearly got this wrong. Perhaps this is an example that other's can learn from.

When my new CEO at Macmillan Cancer Support asked for a meeting "after a few weeks to settle in," I was confident that my wide-ranging induction would help me understand the business and provide the basis for what I'd present to senior management.

Forty structured face-to-face manager interviews allowed me to understand needs and key issues and I started to build personal rapport. My profile was raised and at the same time, internal communication gained good visibility.

Externally, I networked with contacts in similar roles in other charities and soon found the beginnings of a voluntary-sector network. This has since grown to over 25 members.

By the time my CEO slot arrived, I was armed with input from across the charity and the results of an audit. I felt well prepared to present my vision and solutions. So I was surprised to be met with significant resistance.

I later discovered that my CEO intelligence was incorrect. What he wanted was to be asked specifically about his own views on what internal communication should do and what I could do for

him, rather than how *I* could benefit the charity. I had to change my approach fast.

This could have cost me my best ambassador from day one. So my advice is: make sure you're absolutely clear about what's expected from you.

Of course, the insights I gained in my first few months have been valuable and since then, my results have done the talking. Fortunately, the CEO soon became an internal communications convert and advocate.



**Darren Crozier**  
Communications Manager  
HBOS plc  
UK

### Make things happen

Delivery is key to career development – if you say you're going to do something, make sure you do it. Put in the effort, get the results you want and be known as someone who can make things happen. If you're seen to "get things done," no matter how small the job is, people are more likely to get you involved in activities and ask your opinion.

Gaining credibility and respect from senior colleagues is important, but everyone in your organization will form an opinion of you, from the people in the canteen right through to the CEO. So try and make sure that their opinion of you is a good one.

It's not just the people within your immediate sphere of influence who can have an impact on your career, so extend your network, go on courses and get involved in professional organizations. Many of my close working relationships, career opportunities and indeed personal friendships, have come from meeting people at such events and taking the time to keep in touch. You never know how things will develop.

It's also vital to earn respect, be trustworthy and have good manners. To recall what an ex-boss once said, "Be careful how you treat people on the way up as you never know when you may come across them again."

One of the biggest challenges I've found in recent times is recognizing my own success and selling myself. Sometimes you need to take a step back to realize just what you've achieved. Even better, keep a log or portfolio of your successes and don't be shy to speak about them because others won't be shy to speak about theirs.

Finally, try and have some fun along the way. We all have to work for a living, so learn to make the most of it. *scm*

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1. For more about Melcrum's Internal Communication Black Belt training program go to: [www.melcrum.com](http://www.melcrum.com)

## HOW DO YOUR SKILLS MEASURE UP?

For Melcrum's study into budgets, salaries and trends in internal communication in 2006/07, we asked survey respondents to rate their own effectiveness at a range of key communication competencies from planning to measurement. The results may surprise you.

For example, 76 percent of respondents rate themselves as effective or very effective at planning internal communication, but only 28 percent rate themselves as equally effective at measuring its effectiveness (see Figure One, page 29).

In her commentary on the results, development expert Sue Dewhurst had the following to say.

### OUR STRENGTHS

It seems where we see our strengths as internal communicators is towards the "front end" of the communication planning process. For example, being able to link a plan to the business strategy, knowing our audiences and being able to join up the dots and show people how messages link to the business vision.

These are powerful strengths. We are one of the few functions that tends to have an overarching view of our entire company, and is able to view the company and its strategy from a number of different perspectives. Being able to understand the vision and strategy, view it from an audience perspective and then create line of sight to show what those things mean in practical terms for people's day-to-day roles, is one of the ways that we help drive business performance – by showing people what they need to do to take the strategy forward.

In turn, by knowing and working with our audiences, hopefully we're then also able to make sure their views and suggestions can help shape the strategy and how it's put into practice.

### MEASURING EFFECTIVENESS

We see ourselves as less effective towards the back end of the planning process, in measuring the effectiveness of internal communication, which ties in with the feeling from previous questions that in fact we're not doing much measurement or demonstrating our return on investment.

Research and measurement is an area where there is plenty of expertise around to call on. There are measurement conferences, research reports and publications to understand what other organizations are doing and practical training that will give you the opportunity to work in a smaller group, ask questions and practice techniques. For help with specific techniques, try your internal marketing team. Marketers are generally great with data and well-versed in running focus groups and putting together surveys. If you have an external provider to support your employee engagement research, try them too.

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Source: *The Pulse: Essential data on budgets, salaries and trends 2006-07*  
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