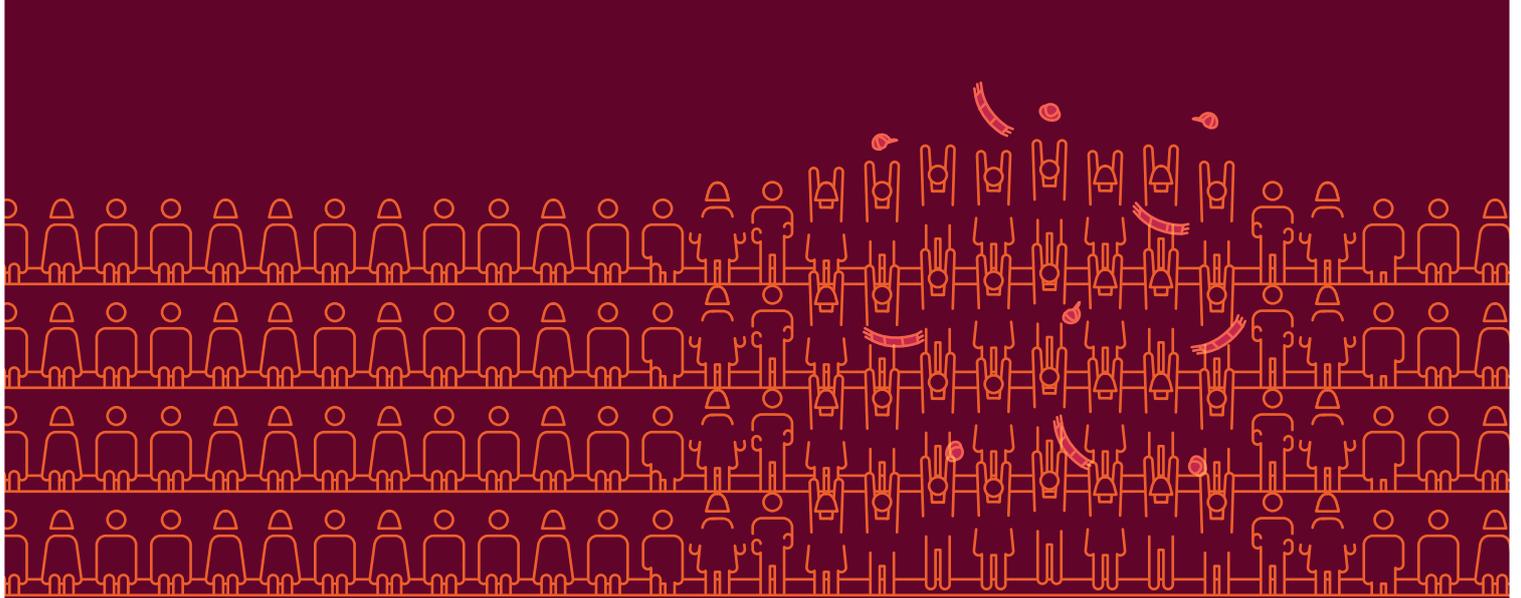


# Employees / Transforming spectators into fans

A REINVENTION AND REPOSITIONING OF INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS



# Introduction and executive summary



**Nick Helsby**  
FOUNDER / DIRECTOR

Internal Communications (IC) is a function whose purpose, remit, expertise and impact urgently needs redefining, if not reinventing, in light of changes in the workplace and business landscape as a whole. This new world requires a new type of IC role and this paper sets out what this role and function should look like.

Elevating the status of IC and getting it recognised as a strategic discipline and partner is something of a personal crusade at Watson Helsby. A common theme in our work with clients and our research into high performing IC functions is the gap between what's possible with IC and what is actually delivered. Nick Helsby has written a number of blogs on the subject and his thoughts recently appeared in *HR Director Magazine*.

As a specialist executive search and research firm we have a ringside seat on how Internal Communications and Engagement ('Engagement' has been added to the title in some companies) is practised and resourced and the role that senior practitioners are playing, along with the influence they wield.

IC is still often viewed (and hence used) as a transactional and tactical discipline and its strategic value and impact under-appreciated and under-utilised. This is the legacy of a function that emerged in an era of command-and-control leadership. With some honourable exceptions IC has been used to communicate and disseminate news and information that employees are judged to 'need to know'. Precious little research or insight underpins the activity, nor much thought given to the business, behavioural and reputational outcomes that IC is intended to drive. This approach is hopelessly outdated and notoriously ineffective and has resulted in a function that is, in many organisations, woefully underpowered and undervalued.

## The most challenging of all stakeholders

The way Internal Communications is practised, generally, fails to recognise the complexity of how and why employees think and behave as they do.

They are by far the most challenging of all stakeholders, undoubtedly the most important, yet historically IC practitioners have been paid less than their external communications counterparts. The inference is clear – if it's 'internal' it's less important and less challenging.

This is beginning to change, but the result is a function that is too limited in its scope, expertise and impact and its limitations are increasingly exposed as the needs of employees, organisations and business leaders change.

In this paper we look at those needs and the developments that have moved employees to the top of the stakeholder hierarchy and, by so doing, given IC a much needed boost (but that also necessitates a fundamental rethink and reboot of the function). These include a radical shift in employee expectations, the ubiquity of change, the porous nature of organisations, and the fact that, more than ever, reputation and brand are built from the inside out.

This has created a gap between what the function does and delivers and what is required of it, particularly by business leaders who now regard culture and employee engagement as business-critical. We explore this in pages 7 and 8 (on the premise that you have to understand what is wrong in order to change it) along with the characteristics that distinguish the more advanced and progressive functions and how they play a more expansive and substantial role.

## Redefinition and repositioning of Internal Communications

The purpose and remit of Internal Communications, we conclude, needs to be reframed away from ‘informing’ and communicating (perversely), which has limited value and contributes little to cultural or behavioural change or business outcomes, to an altogether more ambitious and strategic goal. Indeed, a high-performing and effective IC function needs to deliver against six key objectives:



**1 / Utilise much more sophisticated research** to develop the insight that will help build a more systematic and rigorous understanding of employee behaviours, motivations, expectations, beliefs and attitudes and how they are influenced and how they influence each other. This enables the function to provide better insight into how and why employees behave and make decisions, and how to ‘nudge’ them into different behaviour or towards different decisions, such as through very subtle changes in the use of language.



**2 / Build trust and confidence in the leaders of the business** and their vision and organisational purpose. Trust is often, incorrectly, viewed as more of an external stakeholder issue, but it is no less an internal one.



**3 / Influence and shape the internal environment and culture of the organisation** (much like external comms/relations shapes and influences the external environment and using many of the same techniques). And, like external communications, it has to be informed by research and insight.



**4 / Act as ‘chief dot joiner’ and ‘connector’**, joining up organisational silos, disparate workstreams, brand, purpose, values and culture initiatives, as well as helping leaders and managers make better emotional connections with employees. IC needs ‘connectors’.



**5 / Mobilise employees** as advocates behind key corporate themes and creating ‘movements’ – by identifying influencers within the organisation and harnessing the power of peer-to-peer influence.



**6 / Help build a stronger and healthier culture** and enhance levels of organisational effectiveness.

This is a much wider remit than traditional IC and completely redefines its purpose and the impact it should have. We deliberately omit any reference to ‘increasing levels of engagement’, since engagement, though obviously important, is a means to an end, and not an end in itself. All of the above will inevitably raise levels of engagement, it should not be a goal in itself.

We have scoped out ten key characteristics of a cutting-edge Internal Communications function (page 10) which we believe most business leaders, and particularly CEOs, would truly value and that would radically alter their perceptions of IC.

With this wider remit comes the need for a broader set of skills and knowledge (which leaders will respect and defer to) led by professionals of substance and authority (page 14).

IC has to have a corpus of knowledge that commands the respect and deference of leaders and which clearly helps them make better decisions, and research, data and insight are in this regard.

Of course this comes at a cost. Leadership, vision and senior-level advisory skills do not come cheap, and the wider expertise we advocate will require additional cost. But so long as salaries in the range of £100–120K are the norm for Heads and Directors of Internal Communications the function will not evolve as it so urgently needs to. This is particularly the case in organisations with larger employee populations where engagement is a pervading and more complex issue and where leaders need to be challenged and given the advice and insight they so often lack.

# Employees move to the top of the stakeholder hierarchy

At the beginning of 2019, we predicted in a blog ('Internal Communications must seize its opportunity') that it would be the year when expectations of the function would shift, with an associated demand for stronger leaders and leadership. And so it proved – we worked with a number of companies last year looking to strengthen the leadership of the IC function and to invest more in the capability.

Until quite recently External Communications has always been seen as the priority and where supposedly the more important, interesting and complex work happens. In comparison IC has been very much the poor relation, perceived as workaday, unsexy and less challenging, with salaries to match. But, as we saw last year, the gap between the remuneration of Heads of Internal Communications and Heads of External Communications is closing and in certain cases, being reversed (see page 6).

A FTSE100 Communications Director told us recently that she believes that *"it is internal communications, not external, that gets you a seat at the top table, provided it brings insight, challenge and counsel"*. Such an assertion would have been unheard of two years ago.

What lies behind this? A cocktail of factors, including social media and shifting societal trends, the continuing and increasingly existential need for change and transformation in business, and the blurring of the internal and external worlds.

In an era where employees are increasingly comfortable challenging and critiquing the generation that pays their salaries, business leaders are much more attuned to the importance of their reputation and standing among employees, and how this matters if they want to create 'followership'.

They also recognise that their internal reputation, given the porous and transparent nature of businesses today, can easily write the narrative for their external reputation and that of the company. They know that this work needs to start on the inside, not the outside.

They therefore recognise that, whether inside or out, their reputation and their engagement now needs the same level of stewardship and thought. They also need insight and advice to help them better understand and influence this more complex employee landscape.

All of these factors have driven a change in the ranking and importance of employees in the stakeholder hierarchy and by association leader's interest in IC.

Below we highlight five issues, all critical considerations for most organisations, that have elevated the importance of internal communications and employee engagement in the eyes of business leaders.

## 1 / Changing employee expectations and behaviour

The generation of employees now rising through the corporate ranks want to work for companies (and leaders) that share their values and that have a strong purpose with which they can identify. Companies know that to attract the brightest and the best, and to inspire and retain existing employees, they have to have a strong employer brand and purpose is now a crucial component of the employer brand.

A considerable amount of research supports this. A recent report by Accenture reveals that two-thirds of consumers (who of course are also employees) are more likely to engage with brands that stand for a purpose that reflects their own values and beliefs, and,

**62%** OF PEOPLE WANT COMPANIES



TO TAKE A STAND ON  
**SOCIAL, ENVIRONMENTAL  
AND POLITICAL ISSUES.**

Source: Accenture

The purpose of the organisation not only needs to be communicated, it needs to be brought alive and activated across the organisation. This is more than just a communications task; purpose has to be embedded into the fabric of the organisation, it has to be socialised and employees need to see it being lived by the leaders and reflected in the decisions they take.

Leaders have to ensure that their purpose is more than just a catchy, superficial slogan, since employees no longer hesitate to call out leaders whose behaviour and actions fall short of expectations or fail to deliver on promises. If a company or its CEO says or does something that is not perceived to be aligned with its stated purpose, employees won't hesitate to make their feelings known; they may well openly disassociate themselves or, in the case of Google, stage a global walk out. This discontent can easily, and instantaneously, be made public via social media and amplified by mainstream media.

CEOs who are able to explain their values and purpose and who also remain open to having them challenged are more likely to harness their employees' social media savvy.

A recent article in the *FT* highlighted this emerging trend of employee activism, describing how they *"are feeling increasingly emboldened to take collective direct action and lead protests against policies, often human rights related, that they disagree with"*.

Special interest groups have historically been an external issue, but increasingly this is surfacing internally, with employee interest groups emerging around specific issues. In turn this can force the hand of management. This employee-led (as opposed to union-led) appetite for collective action is not yet widespread, but evidence that it can work is only likely to perpetuate further action.

Expectations have also changed in other ways, further adding to the burden placed on leaders. According to the Edelman *2019 Trust Barometer* employees want their CEO to speak out and take a stand on societal issues (the 'activist CEO', at this stage more common in the US) to fill a vacuum of leadership and action left by governments, politicians and other institutions.

## 2 / What goes on inside is easily visible from the outside – the new reputation-makers or -breakers

Organisations are porous and most internal communications can be assumed to be in the public domain. The proliferation of social media platforms also means that more data than ever is available outside organisational walls about what is happening inside them. Platforms such as Glassdoor ensure that culture and employee sentiment are easily seen from the outside.

These platforms can and do influence the perceptions of a number of external stakeholders, from potential employees and talent to investors and analysts. Indeed, we have recently interviewed a number of buy-side portfolio managers who confirmed they use it as a tool to gain an insight into culture and engagement issues.

A FTSE Communications Director recently remarked to us that *"our employer story is a live commentary now via LinkedIn and Glassdoor, so our ability to attract talent depends on how our employees are feeling about their work"*. He further observed that *"due to the rise of social media, employees can be huge brand builders (or detractors) so we must get higher levels of engagement with our purpose, brand and resulting campaigns"*.

As a company's most trusted and honest spokesperson (source: Edelman *2019 Trust Barometer*), employees are therefore both a significant reputational asset and a potential liability. Tech-savvy and quick to speak up, they have an instant and powerful tool in social media. Not only does it empower them, give them a voice and a platform to air their opinions and experiences etc, it enables them to connect, coordinate action and create grass roots/frontline movements; movements which can quickly go viral and become headlines and national conversations overnight. But there is an upside to this – positive employee advocacy can enjoy the same instant cut-through and create reputational dividends.

Some employees are powerful influencers within their organisation themselves, and in a world where peer-to-peer is the most powerful form of influence, they themselves are becoming an important channel. This is not new, but the immediacy and reach of social media has galvanised its impact and importance. CEOs are not blind to this, and are keen to harness that influence through employee advocacy campaigns that are designed to have an external as well as an internal impact. However, if these lack credibility or authenticity, employees simply won't take part.

The Edelman *2019 Trust Barometer* above also found that

**76%** OF PEOPLE BELIEVE THAT 

HOW A COMPANY TREATS ITS EMPLOYEES IS A **KEY INDICATOR OF TRUSTWORTHINESS.**

Now that this information is more easily accessible the ability of a business to truly engage its employees can also have a direct impact on trust amongst its customers, the general public and other stakeholders and opinion formers.

The old axiom that 'reputation is built from the inside out' has never been more apposite.

### 3 / Loss of control of the airwaves

Loss of control of communication, how an organisation is being talked about etc, is not just an external issue, it is an internal one as well.

Employees' opinions are being shaped by a far wider and increasingly fragmented number of influencers – they are absorbing information and opinions, accurate or not, from a myriad of sources. More imaginative and impactful ways of competing for their attention and influencing them have to be found. This requires a different approach to internal as well as external communications, since employees see and read external communications with a sceptical eye, searching for inconsistencies.

### 4 / The ubiquity of change and transformation

Digitalisation is impacting almost every sector and the ability to adapt, change or transform can be an existential issue. Driving successful change is therefore key to the survival of almost any CEO and, to a large degree, rests on their ability to convince employees of the need for change and then to take employees with them on the journey. This is where the majority of change and transformation programmes fail and communications often plays a role in this failure.

The accepted wisdom now is that successful change is impossible without the consent, engagement and willing participation of employees. This is stating the obvious but historically it has rarely been a key up-front objective of change or transformation programmes. A model of co-creation of the future with employees is now encouraged to avoid the danger of employees feeling that change is “being done to them”. The emphasis of internal communications has to change accordingly, from pure communication and informing to a much stronger accent on involvement, persuasion and emotional engagement. Given the ubiquity of change, this is a huge opportunity for the IC function to shift perceptions of its role and value, but it requires strong leadership and a different mindset, not to mention new competencies.

The role and the voice of employees in the change process has also acquired greater prominence through social media, which enables leaders to learn first hand how change is landing and how employees feel about it. This sensitises them to the opinions and commentary of an audience whose voice they are more used to hearing anecdotally or via surveys. Employees can also see what their employer is telling the media and investors and any disconnect between what the outside world is being told and the internal reality and the lived experience of employees is likely to emerge on social media platforms such as Glassdoor.

A Group Communications Director from a well-known FTSE100 put this succinctly in a recent conversation, remarking that *“I am paying my Head of Internal Comms more than my Head of External Comms because I know that if we are really to change, and to persuade the outside world we have changed, we have to change on the inside. Our people have to believe it and really feel it, such that they can act as the advocates for the strategy.”*

Aside from persuading, influencing and helping emotionally engage employees, IC has a crucial ‘connecting’ and ‘joining up’ role to play. Change and transformation almost always consists of a number of different but simultaneous workstreams. The risk that these don’t ‘join up’, and may often appear contradictory to employees, is ever present. A Communications Director talking about his experience to us observed that *“the conversation with the CEO has changed and moved on. Now it’s about the different scenarios involved in the change and how each workstream joins up and links into the overarching narrative”*.

### 5 / Silos and connectivity

Despite advances in technology that have helped organisations share knowledge and collaborate more effectively, many organisations still encounter difficulties connecting horizontally and vertically, mostly due to a lack of communications or communications breakdowns. The bigger an organisation, the more likely it is to be made up of dispersed teams, tribes and micro cultures. This creates silos (and indeed silos-within-silos), the very enemy of agility and collaboration.

Similar problems are replicated vertically. Disconnects can start at the very top of the organisation and then work their way down through the organisation, from the CEO to the executive committee to the wider leadership, to the line management and then on to frontline staff. Loss of cohesion and coherence of narrative is often the price that is paid. It is a two way problem in that important front line issues don’t get flagged to the executive team.

IC, with its oversight and knowledge of what is going on in and across the organisation and its responsibility for embedding narrative etc, is in a unique position to identify blockages and help leaders create a more connected organisation. It can, and should, make a significant contribution to ensuring that silos and management layers are connected and that the knowledge and experience of line managers and frontline staff is fully harnessed.

The function should carve out a position for itself as the ‘chief dot joiners’.

# The gap between the opportunity and the current modus operandi of IC

In this era of ever-greater transparency and rapidly changing employee expectations, in which purpose, trustworthiness and shared values are critical drivers of employee engagement, there is a huge opportunity – and an irrefutable need – for IC to play a more substantial and expansive role which would enable it to become a valued strategic function.

If IC is perceived as doing little more than providing the organisational plumbing and the content to go into the pipes, without any real research/insight underpinning the activity nor much thought given to the business and behavioural outcomes it is intended to drive, then it is too limited and narrow in its scope and expertise to meet the current needs of organisations and business leaders. This still tends to be its modus operandi in many organisations and it is inadequate to the task of influencing and engaging with employees, who are the key enablers of almost everything an organisation wants to do or change, more so than any other stakeholder.

**But perhaps IC's real Achilles heel, albeit one that a few functions are beginning to address, is that it lacks the depth of employee data and insight to be influential and credible at a senior management level.**

Without it, it is impossible to understand the underlying issues, obstacles and challenges that IC can help address and it is impossible to develop a credible and effective strategic plan that has clearly defined business or behavioural outcomes.

We believe that the purpose and deliverables of the function, together with its strategic value and positioning, need a long overdue redefinition and re-tooling.

There is so much more that IC can offer when equipped with a genuinely expansive license, but this requires a different blend of skills driven and orchestrated by IC leadership with real weight and internal clout.

## Legacy issues and obstacles blocking progress

**Leaders' view of IC is inevitably governed by their experience of using the function, and the value they have seen it add.**

This experience is often around content, production and messaging – the making of a video, the organisation of leadership events, the social media blog, the speech, the drafting of an email etc. Some companies still spend a small fortune on an event to create a temporary energy and excitement around a big corporate initiative. Money that could probably be better invested in helping managers and leaders improve their ongoing communications and engagement skills.

So the support that leaders receive from their IC team is inextricably intertwined with the process of production (**output**), often at the expense of the strategic advisory conversations that should be had about **outcomes**.

The net result is that senior leaders grow to appreciate those who are good at delivery and project management because that is the lens through which they perceive value.

**What they don't grow to appreciate, but need to grow to value, is a function that helps them take ownership of their communications, which they naturally don't do if they think that other people (i.e. the IC team) are doing it for them.**

This often falls into the well-known category of 'vanity publishing' and though it may please the ego of leader, it adds little, if any, value. There is still too much of it.

Only recently, we heard of a company that was planning to reduce the size of the IC team, but when some of the leaders involved in the decision realised that they would mean losing their 'personal messenger', they suddenly had a change of heart about the need for the reduction.

When too many leaders have internal communications support the result is often an information-cluttered working environment where many initiatives compete for airtime. Repeated top down communications can become very inefficient and leads to information pollution and overload and noise and signal get blurred.

We have heard other similar stories so it remains an unfortunate legacy issue.

A highly respected Chief People Officer recently told us, *“Communications functions do not work at their best when the organisation looks to them to do the communications. There is far more valuable (and senior and difficult) role that needs to be done to equip leaders to communicate and connect more effectively”*.

Few leaders have the time to look beyond their organisation to explore what other organisations are doing, and tend to rely on either their comms or HR leaders (the two main reporting lines) to identify best practice and latest thinking.

But HR and Communications’ views tend to be influenced by the agendas and priorities of their respective functions (more so with HR).

And, with a few exceptions, neither has the knowledge or external awareness to design more progressive and expansive roles. This only perpetuates the ‘status quo’ with roles failing to break out of narrow and transactional straightjackets.

So what do innovative, more developed functions look like? In organisations where IC has noticeably advanced and where it is respected and has a seat at the top table, they tend to exhibit three powerful characteristics:



**1 / Strong, highly competent, heavyweight leadership.** They have the credibility to push back and deliver uncomfortable truths that leaders don’t always want or get to hear. They lead, rather than follow, the agenda. These IC leaders are listened to, deferred to, and they are present at key meetings. Their advice is valued (even if it is not always taken). This is reflected in a higher than average salary (£140–180K).



**2 / An investment in, and ownership of, sophisticated employee research, insight and analytics.** The communications function of a global bank we know hired a behavioural scientist and has built the organisational capability, by further hiring two data analysts, to connect and aggregate data from multiple sources and make sense of it in simple terms. The team has also developed a diagnostic tool that measures the impact of transformation programmes on employees and provides actionable advice on possible future interventions. It is greatly valued by the leaders because it helps them make better decisions and to predict outcomes more effectively.



**3 / A move to a campaigning model.** Typically used for external issues and reputation-led campaigns, this model recognises that people make decisions both emotionally and rationally. It puts audience insight at the centre of what it does, to inform attitudinal and behavioural change campaigns. It can be effective at creating movements and networks that influence and inspire others, which can help mobilise support for a specific initiative or objective. Too often ‘standard fare’ IC, often at the behest of rational, data-driven leaders, is driven by information and news (facts and figures) which, though at times necessary, rarely move the dial.

# Influencing and shaping the internal environment

The internal environment (i.e. the workplace) is, in one key respect, no different from the external environment in that it is made up of stakeholders who have an opinion about you. These stakeholders (employees) have a set of assumptions and beliefs which will inform their behaviour. These taken-for-granted and often unconscious beliefs and behaviours form an organisation's cultural DNA and they can be influenced and changed.

Like external stakeholders, employees:

- **are constantly being influenced** by a wide and increasingly fragmented number of influencers and they get and absorb information from a myriad of sources.
- **can't be controlled** about what they choose to hear and see.
- **won't be told** what to think and what they need to know.
- **can connect easily**, mobilise and create movements and coalitions.
- **have commodities** – their trust, confidence, belief and goodwill – that have to be earned and cannot be assumed.

And, just as you can't tell investors, the media or any other external stakeholder, what to think or do, so you can't tell employees what to do or think. Nor tell a culture to change.

But employees and the workplace/culture, again in common with the external stakeholder environment, can be influenced, shaped and changed. But this requires a different approach to IC, with the emphasis shifting from telling, informing and other forms of transactional communications to persuading, influencing and connecting. The traditional approach to IC seems to be based on the belief that since employees are a) paid and b) a captive audience, they don't need to be influenced or persuaded, not in the same way that external audiences do. This has led to a different and often less thoughtful and strategic form of communications (compared to external), hence the 'poor relation' image alluded to earlier in the paper.

IC should have the same goals as external communications and employ some of the same techniques of persuasion and influence. It should also be underpinned by the same rigorous data, insight and strategic analysis. The team should also be able to develop strategies and plans to address the same types of problems encountered externally such as:

- Why don't employees understand what we are trying to do and where we're trying to go? What is at the root of this misunderstanding and how can it be addressed?
- Why is there a lack of conviction or excitement about our purpose and direction for the business?

- What conversations are going on internally, why, and who is influencing whom?
- How can we increase levels of trust? What lies behind the deficit?

## A more sophisticated and scientific understanding of employee behaviour

This has implications, which cannot be glossed over, for the leadership of the function along with the expertise and knowledge that it can draw on.

Although channels, content and messaging are all important, the function also needs the capability, or access to it, that can help an organisation understand how and why employees are influenced; how they influence each other; how movements appear; how ideas spread; and how behaviours are copied and new norms appear.

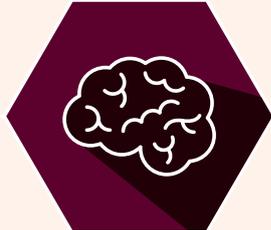
For example, peer-to-peer influence is exceptionally powerful and every organisation will have a small number of people who have a high level of influence with peers, who are well-connected and whose behaviours are likely to have an impact on others. As the organisational architect Leandro Herrero, author of *Homo Imitans*, observes, "Ignoring the social network is ignoring the organisation".

We know of a small number of IC functions that are beginning to employ methodologies and thinking drawn from the fields of cognitive psychology and behavioural science, with some success. Not only does it provide better insight into how and why employees behave and make decisions, it can help 'nudge' them into different behaviour or towards different decisions, such as through very subtle changes in the use of language. Google, for example, tests different wording of the same message, to help them learn what works, what doesn't and why.

If IC is to evolve into a more rigorous, insightful function, with the ability to help effect changes in behaviour, it needs to be able to demonstrate a stronger understanding of employee behaviour based upon more scientific behavioural research. It should integrate this into its strategic planning and advice and its content, which would transform its value and impact.

# The end of IC as we know it / Redefining its purpose, scope and impact

Drawing from our research with a number of people in our network whose opinions and insights we value, we have scoped out 10 capabilities and characteristics of a cutting-edge IC function and its leadership. Some of these can be found in existing IC functions, but bringing all 10 together would create a highly potent and influential team, one with clear strategic intent and heft. We believe that most business leaders, and in particular CEOs, would truly value and welcome a function or team that brings them the capabilities below.



**1 / Research and insight** that provides a more systematic and rigorous understanding of employee behaviour and motivation, and how and why they make the decisions they do. Particularly important is research that helps develop an understanding of how employees chat, express, learn, share information and ideas and use social media and other channels. The insights from a sophisticated research programme, and the data it generates, can be used to inform the communications and behaviour of leaders, the communications strategy and campaigning priorities (akin to external stakeholder research and comms campaigns). It will also help leaders make better decisions. In senior forums data and data translation imbues a function with legitimacy and IC needs more and better data.



**2 / Building and strengthening employee trust and confidence in the leaders of the company.**

It is difficult, if not impossible, for a leader to succeed if employees don't wholly trust them, believe in them or share their values. They are certainly less likely to trust a leader they don't know and whose motives they don't understand.

A leader therefore has to give people a clear sense of who they are; what they stand for; the type of organisation they want to create and why (purpose, vision and culture); and where they want to take it. They need to paint a picture of a future which excites their people and gives them reasons to believe. This is where good IC excels, helping leaders articulate their purpose and cause, build their personal brand, gain the trust and belief of employees and create stronger emotional connections with them.

The IC leader should discourage leaders from delegating communications and instead work with them to design bespoke programmes and activities that will really help them connect with their employees. This advice will encompass message-framing, style, impact, language and visibility as well as storytelling and narrative.

As with external communications, the function should also provide insight and intelligence, based on research and feedback, into how they are landing internally with employees, how they are perceived, employee expectations of them, and so forth. This, for obvious reasons, requires a senior advisory and coaching skill set. In these cases the IC leader has to possess and exhibit gravitas and judgement that the recipient will respect and defer to. He or she will be able to 'sell' uncomfortable truths based on solid experience,

clear thinking and personal authority and credibility. This is not naturally the domain of a c. £100K leader (a salary that many heads of internal comms are paid).

Its value cannot be underestimated and the more progressive and emotionally intelligent leaders undoubtedly recognise this. According to research published by leadership consulting firm Edgcombe,

*“Our employee survey data shows that it is actually people’s perceptions of the leadership team and not their line manager relationship, that matters more to their level of engagement. Time and time again with our clients we find that perceptions of the visibility of the leadership team, how the leadership team communicates with and listens to staff, and overall confidence in the leadership team report some of the strongest correlations with engagement levels”.*



### 3 / **Helping the organisation and senior executives to connect more effectively.**

IC should become the ‘chief connector and dot joiner’ in the organisation. Connections can break down very easily in an organisation, both vertically and horizontally, mostly due to poor communications and communicators.

Vertically, disconnects can start at the very top of an organisation (and then work their way down). IC plays a crucial role in ensuring that the CEO and executive team are united in their understanding of, and commitment to, purpose/narrative etc, and then that the executive team then connect effectively with their leadership (breakdowns frequently start here because the executive team don’t always

understand how important it is for them to communicate and connect, or just don’t see it as a priority). Getting the leadership constituency involved is the next challenge and IC has a key role to play here, ensuring they understand their role but at the same time ensuring their needs and expectations are understood and addressed.

Horizontally, there is a very important role to be played by the function in breaking down silos and organisational boundaries (functional, geographic, cultural, and hierarchical) and connecting disparate workstreams, activities and communities across the organisation. The IC function is uniquely positioned to identify and help remove these barriers and spot opportunities for employees to form networks and communities which will foster greater collaboration, joint problem solving and thus break down silos.

Similarly IC should help connect purpose, brand, culture and leadership. They all intersect but are rarely joined into an integrated whole. IC can be the glue that joins them internally as well as leveraging their impact with external audiences

This ‘connecting’ aspect is even more crucial during change or transformation, which almost always consists of a number of different but simultaneous workstreams and many moving parts.

IC should be involved right at the beginning when the planning is being done, working with the CEO and transformation leaders to develop an integrated comms strategy that connects all the workstreams and ensures that they are all coordinated; and crucially appear as such to employees. IC also plays a key role in making sure these workstreams all ladder up and connect to the purpose, vision and overarching narrative.

This connecting and dot joining aspect of the role is quite invaluable. It enhances organisational and leadership effectiveness from so many different angles.



**4 / IC should be an anticipatory function.** The value of this is twofold. Firstly, the process of horizon scanning can help identify and anticipate employee issues that may be fermenting and bring these to the attention of the executive team. This kind of pre-emptive issue management is usually considered to be an external-facing task and capability, but it is equally applicable internally.

The second is anticipating how particular strategic initiatives or news more generally will play internally. In turn, IC can guide timing, positioning and communications or, indeed, help to prevent a decision or action itself.



**5 / The narrative of a company's purpose is now understood as one of the key enablers of engagement.** This has to come from the top and communications must articulate it in a way that gives it impact and meaning. Setting out the why, where and what of a business, and the societal forces as well as market forces that are causing it to reappraise its place in the world, really does matter. IC's role should be to shape and help communicate a narrative and a strategy that brings this purpose alive, activates it and shows how a company's people are pivotal in achieving it.



**6 / Mobilising employees as advocates.** Employees are now a channel in themselves. IC should mobilise employees as advocates behind key corporate and social themes and create 'movements', by identifying influencers in the organisation and harnessing the power of peer-to-peer influence. Andrew Hill, the *Financial Times* management commentator, observed that "*business leaders should divert their efforts to the harder, often under-recognised work of converting their employees from spectators into their biggest fans*". However, employees will only be willing and credible advocates if they truly believe in the company and its leaders. They won't be converted into advocates simply by giving them the right content and tools.



**7 / Organisational listening.** IC should own organisational listening and put in place the tools and tactics to tune into employees, consolidate their voice (particularly in the case of multinationals) and capture their ideas, joys and woes. Employees as a body know more about the customers, processes and workings of the organisation than any single leader can ever do. Small wonder that the more enlightened leaders tap into the deep reservoir of wisdom available from the workforce at large. This insight should then be packaged to guide executive decision making, combining hard (quant) science with a 'softer' (qual) insight.



**8 / Campaigning.** A campaigning model is effective because it is predicated on the recognition that people make decisions on the basis of emotion as well as reason. By putting audience insight at the centre of what it does, and by engaging emotions rather employing rational fact-based arguments, it can help inform effective attitudinal and behavioural change campaigns. It is also effective at creating movements and networks that influence and inspire others, which mobilise support for a specific initiative or objective.



**9 / Reducing noise, information overload.** There is plenty of research to suggest that employees are overwhelmed by information that is being provided to them by a multiplicity of sources, on often irrelevant topics, across an ever increasing range of channels. In an information-cluttered environment where many messages and initiatives compete for airtime, the result is information pollution. Internal communications is the only function that has the oversight to ensure that the tsunami of superfluous communication that many employees are sent is stopped.



**10 / IC - 'the socialisers'.** IC should not only have a mandate for communication but be a catalyst that helps socialise an organisation by creating more open, honest, human conversations. It should also be licenced to go 'truth seeking' and identify disconnects between what the company says and what it does: the 'say-do' gap that can derail even the most carefully laid comms/ engagement activity.

# Expanding and strengthening IC's core capabilities

To deliver on this broader and much more valuable mandate, one that has real strategic impact, IC needs to add expertise and skills that it does not have in great strength and broaden its core capabilities. These don't have to be recruited externally, some could easily come from within. We have identified these capabilities as follows:



**High-level advisory** which includes not only the professional knowledge, insight, intellect, authority and maturity to credibly influence leaders, but the courage and confidence to challenge, question and push back (i.e. preventing them from communicating). This is particularly important with hubristic, arrogant leaders who are not inclined to self-doubt or self-criticism, but it is equally important with leaders who feel compelled to communicate when what they want to say will only add to the noise pollution and add little of value. Many IC heads, through no fault of their own, do not conform to this description (too inexperienced), but a key skill for IC is in delivering feedback to senior leaders, which may at times be uncomfortable.



**Research and data analysis skills** – an understanding of the types of research methodologies available (and their limitations) that provide genuine employee insight and also help promote a better understanding of employee and organisational behaviour. IC so often lacks the research, data and insight which is a prerequisite to developing a strategic plan and the campaigns and programmes that flow from. It is not a natural communications capability, so will have to be imported.



## **Strategic thinking and planning.**

The standard approach for many internal comms-focused engagement campaigns is to start with the message. It should start with desired outcomes and work back from there. IC is known for being tactical and transactional and it is crucial that it upgrades its strategic-thinking capability.



**Campaigning skills**, described in the section above – these are as important, arguably more important, in internal comms as they are in external comms.



**Connecting** – the IC team needs 'connectors' in it, people who can see where connections need to be made; across silos, teams, workstreams, disparate campaigns. Organisations are full of disconnects, competing priorities and messages and IC is the best-positioned function to create a more joined-up organisation.



**Coaching skills**, without which it is difficult to help leaders connect authentically with their employees.

# Conditions for success

No Director or Head of Internal Communications role, however designed, will be wholly successful without the right conditions. The role must have:

- Access, influence and ‘a seat’ at the highest level.
- An Executive team, and specifically a CEO, that is wholeheartedly committed to continuous two-way communications and listening, and prepared to act on advice. Not just in bursts as can happen – for instance preparing the ground for what is expected to be an unpopular announcement to help them get through the fall-out and then when relative calm returns, their interest in communications wanes.
- Utilising the right data and listening. Too often data is there for its own sake or becomes unwieldy. For instance annual engagement surveys that take a year to deploy and analyse but provide little insight of value (they can’t answer the question ‘Why?’) and are just too big and take too long. Smaller, smarter pulse surveys and listening groups can get to the heart of an issue and course correction can be done more quickly.
- Membership of the right leadership teams, since reporting lines often drive silos and territorial behaviours. This is critical in order to know and influence what is going on across the people-&-change agenda and enabling access to key decision-makers. Membership of the right leadership teams also helps promote a leadership, people, process and communications ‘congruence’.

This commitment cannot be taken for granted, and where a CEO and an executive team haven’t previously seen or experienced the value of strategic (as opposed to transactional) IC at it best, the result is a dangerous transfer of ignorance from one company to another.

- A senior leadership team or ExCo who espouse and live the desired values and behaviours of the company. Any gap, or dysfunctional and disengaging behaviours, immediately undermines the credibility of any communications from the top. The communications function should not, and cannot, be expected to paper over cracks.
- An operating model and governance framework that is agreed with the CEO or business leader concerned, and includes an agreed value proposition and purpose; what value and outcomes it will deliver and at what cost; how it will be organised across the organisation and its key programmes and what the KPIs will be.
- A commitment to investing in employee research and meaningful insight.

## About the author

Nick Helsby is the CEO of Watson Helsby, a specialist Communications (External and Internal), Corporate Affairs/government relations executive search, research and consulting firm. He has over twenty years headhunting experience, in the UK, Europe, Middle East and Africa, placing senior communications, PR and corporate affairs professionals in some of the world's leading organisations including BBC, Barclays Bank, Coca-Cola, Samsung, Tetra Pak, Bank of England, Virgin, Allen & Overy, Lilly, Rio Tinto, BP and Estée Lauder to name but a few.

Nick is also the author of numerous research studies and surveys, all of which explore talent and organisation related topics within the disciplines into which he recruits. He has written, and been quoted in several articles that have appeared in the *FT*, *PR Week*, *Public Affairs News*, *CorpComms* and *HR* magazine. He is both a subject matter expert and a well-informed and trusted advisor to both clients and candidates, helping them build their capability and organisation across reputation management, internal communications/employee engagement, public affairs and government relations, sustainability and investor relations.

Nick is a member of the Arthur Page Society, the US professional association for Chief Communications Officers. He is also a member of several organisations that are connected with leaders in employee communications/engagement, government relations and investor relations.

Watson Helsby also partners with Edgecumbe, a boutique leadership and psychology consultancy with close links to Oxford University's Saïd Business School, to provide a leadership assessment service for corporate communications/affairs directors.

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