

DO YOU MEASURE UP?

A comprehensive new project compares the competences of professional communicators across Europe.

By Ralph Tench and Hasina Juma



Competency is a good thing. It means you can do it. Think of sports, playing an instrument or being able to fly: if you are competent then you will fit the general view that you can handle the task, issue or challenge in front of you. So what does competency mean when we talk about our work? Our recent study has highlighted that there are significant gaps in the shared knowledge and understanding of the issues when it comes to our own professional capabilities, particularly in communications.

Supported by the EU and working in partnership with the European Association of Communication Direc-

tors, the European Communication Professional Skills and Innovation (ECOPSI) programme is the largest European-funded communications project looking into the future skills and competence needs of practitioners. The aim is to influence both theory and practice and has involved 12 months of fieldwork, which some readers will have been involved in.

We recognise that there is a changing context for communications. For example, the position of the chief communication officer on the board of large organisations is becoming more common as communications is being seen as integral to the financial and commercial success of organisations. The communication officer champions the benefits of effective communications through demonstrated return on investment

while internal communication managers are increasingly being asked to help support, implement and drive organisational change through employee engagement and communication activity. Other communication professionals, such as crisis communication managers, face a new reality where a simple mistake can escalate into a crisis in our hyper-connected society. Similarly, social media managers are now responsible for maintaining the integrity, trust and reputation of their companies in the rapidly emerging digital world. These new corporate positions clearly demonstrate that communicators now require a complex set of competences to be successful in a global workplace which is currently undergoing phenomenal change, driven largely by pressure to improve profits and to make cost efficiencies.

A partnership of six leading European universities, the ECOPSI programme is focused on mapping the current competences required for social media roles, internal communication roles, crisis communication roles and communication director roles in Europe as well as understanding their future development needs. The research team members were professors Ayla Okay, Ansgar Zerfass, Piet Verhoeven, Maria Angeles Moreno, Dejan Vercic and Ralph Tench, and the programme reflects 15 months of desk and empirical work by the team in three core phases: (1) the benchmarking report in each country region; (2) quantitative data collection from communication practitioners in 42 countries across Europe; (3) qualitative data from 53 interviews from four senior practitioner roles in the six regions of the study. This article highlights four emerging trends that resulted from the interviews.

I. STRATEGIC SOCIAL MEDIA As organisations seek new ways to drive innovation and build authentic relationships with their various stakeholders, many decide to jump on the social media bandwagon. Some organisations are experts in surfing the social media wave while others struggle or fail. Our study found that practitioners, especially chief communication officers, feel they need a greater understanding of its strategic application and want to find out more about the return on investment that might be realised from their implementation rather than knowing how to use a specific social media technology or platform. This finding links with the fact that all regions view social media as a growing area: not all are necessarily viewing this as a threat, but more as another media channel to use. This is particularly the case in Germany. In contrast, Spanish communications professionals possibly need to hone their negotiation and conflict resolution skills as a result of what is happening in their own troubled economy and the subsequent labour market tensions. The top three knowledge, skills and personal attributes for social media managers in Europe are listed in the table on the next page.

When asked what would be the best ways of improving knowledge in these areas there were also some interesting variations according to job role. For social media managers this could take the form of self-study using the internet or perhaps attending specialist short courses. Chief communication officers and a number of crisis managers felt that the best way to develop their knowledge was to

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talk to peers or (younger) members of their own team already working in this area, as well as by hiring new people (or in one instance a team of people) with this specialist knowledge. Some of the most popular ways to develop skills include on-the-job experience in current and previous roles and self-study using books and online resources.

Opinion varied amongst respondents as to whether personal attributes are something that training and development can help to improve. Some respondents felt that personal attributes could be improved. There was an understanding that this can take hard work and concerted effort while others thought it was part of an individual's character.



II. IMPACT OF CROSS-CULTURAL COMPETENCY

Some academic research suggests that the modern practitioner should maintain an understanding of culture in a variety of different settings while other research suggests that cross-cultural competency is not as important as other competences. Our research wanted to get a deeper understanding on this debate. The majority of practitioners agreed that cross-cultural competency is an increasingly important skill. A minority of practitioners were keen to add that in their current role this skill was not important because the concentration of their particular organisation is based wholly on the domestic market.

Cross-cultural competency is used in a wide variety of settings within the workplace. The importance of localising a global message in order to reach certain markets and audiences, whilst remaining true to the authenticity and heritage of the organisation, was one way in which the need for this skill was said to be emerging; another, was through the desire for diversity within and across teams, in order to make them more reflective, effective and motivated. The ability to adapt to changing circumstances and to respond to new contexts was also explained (particularly by internal communications managers) through the need to adapt to, and interpret, increasing rates of organisational and cultural change as well as wider sector or societal change.

A number of ways were suggested to develop this skill. A popular means was through a prolonged stay of working abroad to gain international experience, perhaps through an exchange or secondment programme, in order to gain hands-on practical knowledge and skills from working in another country and context. Observing others and mentorship would also be helpful in strengthening skills in this area. A number of the practitioners had, in current or previous roles, undertaken in-house training in cross-

cultural issues that were found to be helpful. Others felt that training for this skill should be incorporated into formal undergraduate and post-graduate public relations and communication education as well as in masters of business administration qualifications because they did not feel that this was adequately covered in the current curriculum.

III. MANAGING HIGH VOLUMES OF INFORMATION

We live in a high-tech information age where we are constantly bombarded with information. Those companies and employees who can make sense of this explosion of data and apply the findings to create innovative solutions that meet the needs of their individual stakeholders will now have a competitive advantage in the market. Against this backdrop, future practitioners will need a variety of skills and knowledge in their toolbox to be successful. With information available on a multitude of platforms, practitioners will need to check facts as well as critically assess and filter information. Companies now face a new array of empowered stakeholders who can easily rally around a common goal through the use of digital platforms. Practitioners will need skills in analysis,

Social media manager competency profile

Knowledge	Skills	Personal Attributes
Knowledge about (own) organisation	Planning	Curiosity
Listening, understanding and interpreting trends, linking them to business strategies	Multi-media	Empathy
Corporate strategy		Daring/risk taking

MORE INFORMATION

To sign up for early notification of the final ECOPSI report, diagnostic tool or Communication Management Competency Network, please complete the following electronic form: www.surveymonkey.com/s/LHVXDCF

Visit the ECOPSI website for more information at www.ecopsi.org.uk, follow the Engage ECOPSI group on Facebook and on Twitter at @EngageECOPSI.

monitoring, responding and knowing when and when not to act. It was also felt that general commercial acumen would be needed along with a good foundation in communications. Some practitioners felt that there might need to be amendments and additions to the current curriculum of formal taught public relations and communication courses to make sure that these skill needs were met. The importance of on-the-job experience was again reiterated as well as the view that communicators will need to continue to work hard with the business to help organisations to acknowledge and realise the benefits of the communications function.

IV. WORKING WITH NEW MEDIA An emerging trend is the growing importance of working as a member of a virtual team which brings both opportunities and threats. Some are of the school of thought that since the speed of communication is increasing it is important to assess and interpret content faster as well as be able to react immediately to content that affects your company. As a result, the importance of virtual teams will increase since they are faster and more flexible. As one interviewee said, “In the future there will be no time to

wait until every team member can find a timeslot in his/her calendar.” Others fear that it can erode interpersonal skills and that technology should not be seen as a replacement of face-to-face interaction. At the same time, it was acknowledged that the current technology to facilitate virtual teams was not up to standard. Improvements in both the capacity and guidance in the strategic application of such platforms, programmes and equipment would be helpful in supporting virtual teams in the future. Internal training, mentorship and working in project teams would also help to strengthen skills and knowledge in this area.

NEXT STEPS To move this agenda forward, the ECOPSI researchers aim to develop a diagnostic tool – the Communication Management Competency (CMC) Tool – that will support individual practitioners in benchmarking their current knowledge, skills and personal attributes with those of their colleagues and peers across Europe. The intention with this diagnostic is that it will be an awareness raising and intervention tool for the individuals to seek out and interact with continuing professional development programmes to address the generic competencies as defined in the ECOPSI skills matrix (see www.ecopsi.org.uk). This will be based within an ECOPSI/CMC Portal that will facilitate the knowledge sharing and networking opportunities identified as currently missing and required by many of the participants. An extension of the portal will be the creation of the Communication Management Competency Network, where communication practitioners across Europe can share best practices. We look forward to continuing this exploration. |



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