

WHERE'S YOUR HEAD AT?

If you're only using the creative right side of your brain in internal comms, you're doing half a job. You want the respect of your business's leadership team? You need to think like a business leader.

IT WASN'T long ago that internal communication was widely seen as the fluffy, nice-to-have department that produced the staff newsletter and organised the Christmas party. In recent years, senior leaders have had something of an awakening, with IC experts showing them the strategic value they bring if brought in early to key discussions. More than ever, comms practitioners and the board need to be on the same intellectual wavelength.

It's no longer enough for IC professionals to be good writers or know their Wordpress from their Joomla. They need to be business people first and foremost, with comms as a specialism, says Sarah Lazenby, who has headed up internal communication at organisations including Royal Mail and the Cabinet Office.

"Internal comms should have a holistic view of the business," she says. "It can be an uncomfortable job. You're holding up a mirror to the business and reflecting what is and isn't working. It's critical that you understand where the company is going, what its people value and the market or industry challenges. Without that, you can't add context to your communication.

How can you address the 'What's in it for me?' question?"

Traditional comms abilities now have a supporting role in an IC practitioner's broader skill set. "You still need to be able to write clearly and better than anyone else in your organisation," says Sarah. "If you can't write, believe me, no one is going to trust your communication advice. How will you help clarify and simplify corporate speak and help people understand what the business wants to achieve and their role in making it a success? If you can't write, get some training."

Freelance communications consultant Lindsey Simpson is often a business's first internal comms presence, brought in to help



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DAVID NORTON, COMMSQUEST

put the infrastructure in place. She says many leaders are late to the IC party.

"Most businesses wouldn't dream of not having external communication," she says. "They see the value of PR and marketing, but sometimes don't understand they need the same level of effort internally."

The realisation usually comes with growth. Small businesses may have no need for a dedicated team to spread messages across one small office. But when a company's headcount increases, and particularly when it goes past the magic number of 150, the comms gaps show.

"Typically, a business is focused on talking to customers," says Lindsey. "When it gets bigger, things don't happen as effectively or quickly and teams are not as easily aligned as they were. I'll go in and ask the senior team about its challenges, where the business is and where it wants to be. If you ask good fundamental questions about their business and can show them how you can help them achieve their goals with planned, sustained communication, you've got their attention."

Not all leaders are quite there, though. Is the word "internal" restricting IC teams from showing what they can really do? We don't have *internal HR* or *internal finance* →

STRATEGY

"I have increasingly seen communicators being added to change programme leadership teams to perform strategic roles that go well beyond engagement. Internal communicators who want to add value to programmes cannot offer just messaging, channel and measurement expertise."

TONY SHARP, communications consultant, Heron Lodge

INVOLVEMENT

Only 38% of IC specialists agree that their internal communication team is involved in corporate strategy. More than half agree that they are not involved in strategic decisions early enough to impact the effectiveness of communication.

Source: Inside IC, Internal Communications Survey 2016, Newsweaver

ADVISORY

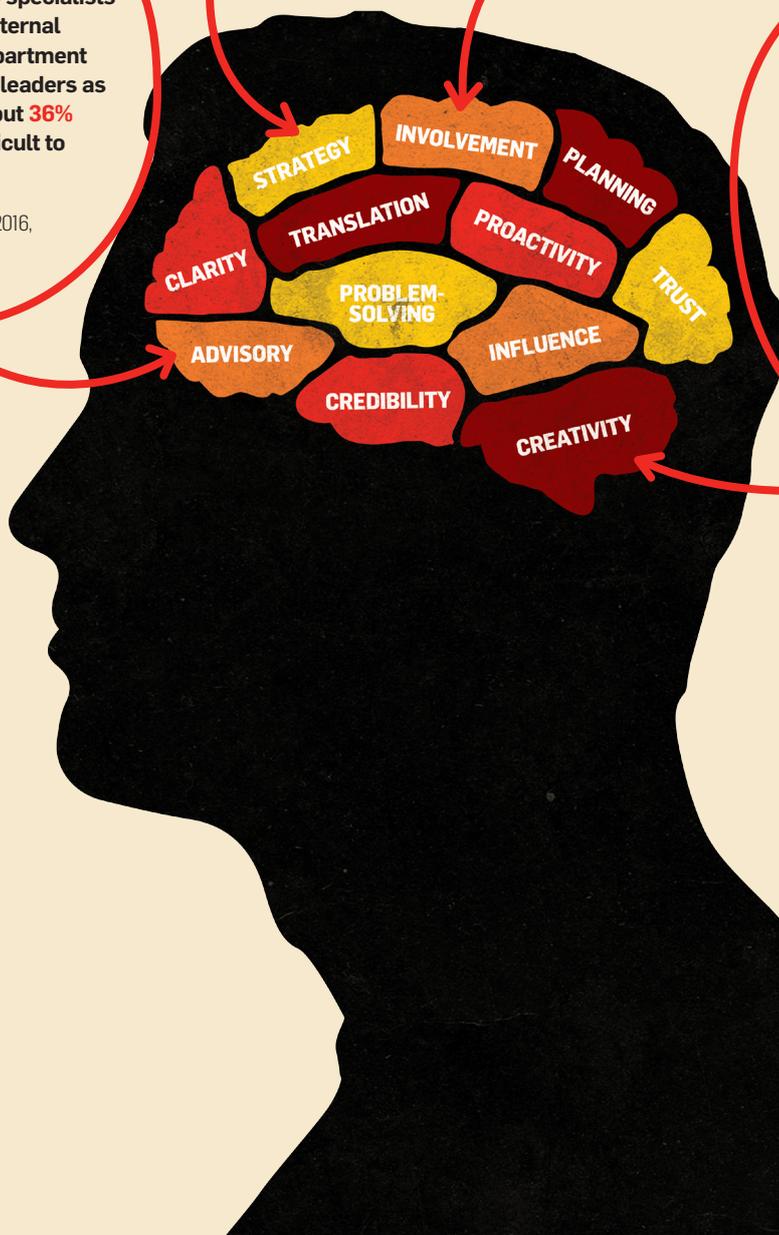
More than half of IC specialists (55%) believe the internal communication department is viewed by senior leaders as trusted advisers – but 36% said they find it difficult to gain their support.

Source: Inside IC, Internal Communications Survey 2016, Newsweaver

CREATIVITY

"Creativity is often missing around the executive table. If IC teams can combine it with business acumen – for example, in helping to dramatise a strategy or build engagement – it can mean the difference between special and staid. And that can start to shift business performance and drive change in outcome terms."

ANDY LOCKE, head of internal communications for civil aerospace, Rolls-Royce



departments, and these days internal comms covers a broad marketing mix. Are internal communicators being unfairly defined by their own job titles?

Internal communication may not be able to rebrand itself by name, but it must do so by perception. If senior leaders have only known you as the people who put stories on the intranet or host bake-offs, they won't involve you in the early days of a major business development. If you want to make that breakthrough, you need to build relationships. And have fewer cake sales.

Mixing in leadership circles

Unless you can hold your own in the boardroom, directors won't see internal comms as a team they should be working with. Passive, reactive communicators will fail to impress. Proactivity and business intellect will win the day.

David Norton, managing director of CommsQuest, says communicators are pushing for more access, resources and tools, but they need to justify the spend. "Look at the content internal comms professionals share online – we always talk about tactical activities and channels. That makes it hard for people to see us as strategic business experts, and it's why some IC teams continually fight for budgets. In my experience, once you educate leaders on how you will help strategically, budgets are freed up and support becomes available.

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IC practitioners should know what is stopping leaders from getting a good night's sleep. "I guarantee they are not concerned about the latest tone of voice guidelines or new apps," reflects David. "Issues such as cyber security, exchange rate volatility, growth and competition are keeping them



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awake. The quicker IC teams can tackle leaders' personal pain, the more respected and effective we become. What leaders want are flexible and adaptable problem-solvers, who know how to engage people and help them quickly change direction and focus."

As the trust increases, leaders open up. "The more time you spend with the senior team, the more they reveal their pressures, challenges and needs," says David. "When you get to the point that you're having natural off-the-record conversations, you'll start picking up key business information about where the business is going and what needs to change."

Gaining leadership skills

Today, the attributes expected of comms professionals are similar to requisite leadership qualities: commercial nous, business acumen, influencing skills. Eighteen months ago, Shan Chatoo left the comfort of a communication role to spend a year in-house as a client director of an insurance company to gain these very competences.

"I threw myself in at the deep end and learned what it means to be a business person – budgeting, pipelines, marketing, business planning, growing client accounts," she says. "I did all the things a sales person does. When I went into my next role, which was as a global head of comms, I could knowledgeably challenge leaders. Now, I have credible conversations with them. I don't want to be seen as a pen pusher or a nodding dog."

The next generation of IC experts – who might be business graduates, rather than

writers – also need to get up to speed with market issues and be able to influence those at the top of the corporate ladder.

"I make sure that every member of my team meets a customer twice a year," says Shan. "I send them on pitches and second them into different parts of the business. They need to understand how a call centre person feels. And I give them a business mentor. A line manager did that with me once and I found it really effective."

And why shouldn't junior communicators be involved in reviewing strategy? Shan is an advocate of giving her young team face time with the big bosses. "When there's a change coming, I don't discuss it in darkened rooms with the CEO and then go and stand over my team's shoulder and tell them what to do. I bring team members in to the boardroom with me. They are often nervous, but I coach them. That approach gets senior leaders thinking about comms in a different way. They are pleased to see that their comms executives are more than just deliverers."

The business insight gained from getting in front of people works for experienced IC professionals, too.

"When I start a new job, I go on a reconnaissance," says Sarah Lazenby. "I meet key people and read as much as I can. I give myself an induction on top of whatever the business has prepared.

"If you only sit at your own desk every day, you'll have little understanding of the capacity for, and sometimes the capability for, good communications. You need to get out there and experience what the people in the business experience every day. At Royal Mail, I delivered the post, met union reps and worked in the delivery room. At London Underground, I shadowed station staff and did track safety training."

Likewise, David Norton has seen first-hand what's cooking on the frontline. "My first CommsQuest client was McDonald's. I spent time in the HQ, and also in their restaurants, watching and talking to staff to understand the realities of the customer end of the business and to see how strategy is turned into action.

"We can only add value if we create clarity around the strategy or the rationale for change, the journey we are heading on and the overarching gain this will bring to the business. This is often the hardest part, but then we get down to what we do best – developing creative campaigns that engage the business and drive the changes in behaviours and attitude."