

#11ways, part 2. Does communication *really* make a difference?

Billions of dollars a year invested in communication by organizations around the world in an effort to improve how they communicate, and make an impact with their target audiences.

Millions of dollars this week invested by IABC and its members around the world to attend the IABC World Conference to, I suppose, improve how they communicate, share best practice, and grow their careers.

Does it really make a difference?

Well to those billions and millions, we can add thousands. Thousands of minutes invested by communication professionals around the world to participate in the second version of the #11ways survey. And what do this year's results reveal? Does communication make a difference?

It seems the answer is "yes".

Our research – covering over 100 organizations with over a million employees – tells us that there are some clear differences between high performing organizations and others in terms of their communications.

- 89% of high performers align communications and strategy, but only 58% of average companies do.
- High performing organizations (HPOs) are 3x more likely to rate their communications as excellent or very good.

Of course, correlation and causation are two separate things but a clear theme emerges in high performing organizations – a theme which is absent from the others: They think about impact, not just output.

The high performers, for example, are more likely to keep their language simple, make emotional connections, and think about communication from the audience's point of view.

In these organizations, we also see stronger connections between the communications team and the rest of the business:

- In a HPO, communicators are over 2x as likely to claim that they have strong business know-how and operational understanding. Less than one in five communicators in an average organization would say this.
- In an average company, only 12% of communicators rate the communication skills of line managers and business leaders as excellent or very good. This figure is 3x higher in a HPO.

However, despite these indications that there is a connection between being an HPO and being a good communicator, there is still some way to go if communicators want to really make a difference:

- Across the whole sample, only a quarter of communicators would rate their organization as excellent or very good at communication.
- Almost three in ten admit that some of their communication is not aligned to strategy and goals.
- 53% keep their language simple and jargon free. Too bad the other half obfuscate.
- 34% still measure their success by their number of twitter followers or facebook likes; and less than one in ten links communication to sales, profit or productivity.

Communicators still struggle to make an impact, it seems. Especially in a world where 96% of senior managers think they are good communicators. And when a communicator does come along – to give some advice or coaching – it is hard to make an impact if you only have a one in four chance of having business knowledge or operational understanding. As a business leader, why should I listen to you if a) I think I'm quite good anyway, and b) you don't understand my business?

There are some hopeful signs, though. Since our 2014 survey, we've seen some positive trends:

- While less than three-quarters say they align communication strategy and goals, this is at least significantly up from the 2014 figure (from 54% to 71%).
- The number who aim for simple and jargon-free language has gone from 32% to 53%.
- Almost half (47%) have processes for creating great stories, up from 31%.
- 53% claim to regularly make emotional connections, up from 34%.

So there is hope, but still a long way to go.

And it suggests that the thousands of minutes invested by participants in the research can help generate a return on the millions spent by IABC members this week in San Francisco, and the billions spent by organizations this year on improving communications, reputation, and performance.

For more information or detailed analysis, please contact:

Michael Ambjorn
michael@alignyour.org
@michaelambjorn
+44 7856 281027

Dana Poole
dana.poole@gmail.com
@dana_poole
+44 7505 084008

Stephen Welch
stephenwelch@eml.cc
@stephenwelch11
+44 7884 110680

A note about how to use this content:

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/). In plain language this means you're free to:

Use the outlined concepts – including excerpts in blog posts, presentations, podcasts etc. as long as you share alike – and attribute accordingly.

If you want to use it commercially, please get in touch with the authors.

Detailed analysis.

Fieldwork April-May each year. Base c80 (2014), c120 (2015)

Thinking about the organization or company you work for, how would you rate the following...

% Excellent or very good	2014	2015	Chg
The overall effectiveness of communications in your organization	21	23	+2
The general communication skills of the leaders and managers in your organization	20	20	0
The overall level of business knowledge and operational understanding of the communication professionals across your organization	31	26	-5

Here are a series of statements about communications in your organization. How much do you agree or disagree with each one?

% Strongly agree	2014	2015	Chg
All of our communication is aligned to our organizational strategy and goals	54	71	+17
Corporate messages are generally devised and written by senior executives	49	41	-8
In general we try to pack a lot of messages into our communications	63	63	0
In our communication to external and internal audiences, we talk a lot about ourselves	75	78	+3
Our organization regularly invests in new tools and technologies to improve communication	44	44	0
Our senior managers think they are good communicators	88	96	+8
We always keep our language simple and jargon-free	32	53	+21
We have a process for creating great corporate stories	31	47	+16
We regularly make emotional connections with our audiences	34	53	+19
We regularly think about communication from the audience's perspective	56	65	+9
When planning communication, we give a lot of thought to who delivers what messages	63	54	-9

Thinking about the organization or company you work for, how would you rate the following...(O = average/other organizations, H = high performers).

% Excellent or very good	14O	15O	14H	15H
The overall effectiveness of communications in your organization	14	13	34	43
The general communication skills of the leaders and managers in your organization	16	12	28	36
The overall level of business knowledge and operational understanding of the communication professionals across your organization	24	18	45	43

Here are a series of statements about communications in your organization. How much do you agree or disagree with each one?

% Strongly agree	14O	15O	14H	15H
All of our communication is aligned to our organizational strategy and goals	50	60	58	89
Corporate messages are generally devised and written by senior executives	49	34	48	55
In general we try to pack a lot of messages into our communications	70	66	52	57

In our communication to external and internal audiences, we talk a lot about ourselves	84	78	62	75
Our organization regularly invests in new tools and technologies to improve communication	37	35	55	58
Our senior managers think they are good communicators	86	95	90	97
We always keep our language simple and jargon-free	21	49	48	61
We have a process for creating great corporate stories	24	35	43	69
We regularly make emotional connections with our audiences	24	43	48	68
We regularly think about communication from the audience's perspective	45	57	71	78
When planning communication, we give a lot of thought to who delivers what messages	53	44	76	74

Measurement tools (% who use). Ordered by biggest difference.

Tool	All	Others	EXVG	Difference
Survey results	65	50	88	+38
Social media monitoring	43	34	57	+23
Website/Intranet analytics	65	58	76	+18
Reputation benchmarking	30	24	40	+16
Number/growth of Twitter followers / Facebook likes	34	28	43	+15
Award programs (won/entered)	18	13	26	+13
Employee retention rate	14	9	21	+12
Organizational productivity	6	2	12	+10
Email open rate	32	29	36	+7
Sales & profit	8	5	12	+7
PR "Advertising Value Equivalent"	13	10	17	+7

What would you say is the biggest obstacle to improving communications in your organization?

Selected quotes from the research (not the full list).

"Lack of Management buy-in, lack of investment in new channels."

"Too much noise/too many initiatives both in the business and communications teams, internally and externally."

"Getting line managers to become better communicators."

Time - people just don't have time to read, absorb or where necessary act on the communications. The sheer volume of messages also doesn't help."

"1a) Apathy/participation amongst audience 1b) "I'm good at it, it's everyone else"."

"Most members of the Communications and Social Media teams have no background in Communications; they've been simply growing inside the company. The age-range is also older, and non-updated, leaving most of the team counting on outdated tools and strategies."

"To prove the ROI of communications to executives, managers and investments decision makers."

"Head of organisation dismissive of involving staff, senior advisers not trusting staff."

"Managers who think they are doing a good job of communicating but in actuality, they have a different perception of themselves than what others have. Also, outdated technology plays a part in ineffectiveness. (We still use pagers, flip cell phones, computer based telephony that is not very reliable...)"

"Even our communications team-leader and director don't understand the need for communications planning. We just do stuff. Even for advertising, we buy ads without any sort of goals in mind or understanding what the need might be."

"As a board member for a not for profit - lack of easy communication KPI's"

"Seeing the opportunities not obstacles. Most discussions end up repeating what is wrong or what won't work rather than trialling solutions. We need less pilot programmes and more experiments."

"The complexity of our organisation often means we have to communicate to the masses vs. communicating clear messaging to the right audience, this will improve as we implement a better process for managing our people data. Change fatigue is also a challenge, we've had so much change over the last 3 years people are growing weary."

"There is not enough belief in the purpose this would serve, it can't be expressed in extra income.."

"Lack of exec buy in, not enough face to face comm."

"Capabilities and talent of our Communications team."

"Having everyone on the same level of technology. Not everyone was given the tools at the same time. While some are enjoying the great benefits, others are frustrated."

"Resistance to change, poor leadership of change management, uncollaborative corporate culture."

"Line manager opposition."

"The lack of a clear vision for the organisation from the Leadership team and their unwillingness to share information about company strategy."

"Support for prioritising strategic comms activity over churn and burn."

"Specialist resource to help leaders/managers to develop consistent messaging."

"Leadership who don't listen to comms experts/ comms professionals not sufficiently senior or empowered."

"Understanding of the full potential and impact communication has. Respect from other functions towards communications professionals. Many think "anyone can do communications properly."

"Thinking about global audience, trying not to be too much of an internal PR machine for our products. "

"Coordinating comms across the org. Making sure its controlled and coordinated but at the same time freeing up others to communicate and not just the comms team"

"Lack of understanding as to broadcast versus engagement."

"People want to receive communications differently based on cultural differences. Some countries prefer email, other social media, other newsletters. It is hard to be global."

"The way that the organisation is structured. Social channels are owned by different stakeholders and there is no one funnel. Emphasis is on content creation and only for a few campaigns do we think about content distribution."

"We have a predominantly office-based employee population who are extremely busy and receive large numbers of emails every day. We need to find an effective way to ensure our employees are reading the messages we send them."

"Lack of dedicated resource and lack of senior leaders who are skilled in communicating."

"Lack of agility. Slow to introduce new enabling technologies Leaders' capability and coaching skills Comms organisational structure and reporting lines."

"Too many 'chiefs' making decisions without being properly informed by the 'Indians' who are often closest to the issue at hand."

"Senior Communications executives/leaders who are poor managers. Identifying, retaining top talent."

"Fear-based communication. And the comms leadership teams are the worst offenders! They would much rather a message be "safe" and overloaded with key messages delivered in an uninteresting formulaic way than provide interesting, engaging, and thought-provoking content. Consensus-driven comms trumps everything. Almost none of the communications leadership will stick their neck out even when it's the right thing to do."

"Competing agendas from various teams who make decisions based on their team's goals and channels they own rather than what is good for the company as a whole - governance i.e. working cross purpose is the biggest obstacle."