Seeing around corners: tooling up for the future

Where does the role of communicator fit in tomorrow's world? And how will their work be impacted by future trends in technology, business models and a growing and ageing global population?

At a recent Comma Partners networking event, attended by senior communications interims, Rohit Talwar – global futurist, award-winning speaker and CEO of Fast Future – gave an eyebrow-raising tour of the future of the business world. Without doubt, over the course of the next decade the world as we know it will change: the result of continued economic uncertainties, political instability, and the redistribution of wealth from west to east, the relentless advances in science and technology and intense global competition from emerging economies. In short, we're in for a turbulent time.

Rohit believes that "Organisations that can survive and thrive in what promises to be a decade of turbulence have to look beyond the here and now and ensure they have a real understanding of the trends, forces and ideas shaping the future. These insights help us assess the future viability of our current decisions and ensure that we are thinking through the long term implications of the choices we make. I think communications professionals have a central and critical role to play in helping organisations articulate and communicate these drivers of change. They are also central to the process of building real organisation-wide understanding and ownership of the implications and facilitating collaborative approaches to defining and sharing the resulting strategies and actions the organisation will pursue to secure its future."

How do communications professionals help organisations take advantage of the opportunities the next decade provides and face the challenges it presents? "We need to be creating environments that are much more comfortable with uncertainty and this requires trust," explains Alastair MacDonald, employee communications and engagement interim, "Sadly, all too often, trust between organisations and employees is fragile and as communicators we have a job to do here, acting as the 'go-between' for the employer and the employees. We have a great opportunity to develop our role – perhaps a little less partial to the boardroom and its decisions - and form a coalition with our HR colleagues to increase engagement in our organisations."

The changing nature of employee relations was a key theme from Rohit's presentation and the discussions that followed. Rohit highlighted that workforces have always been multigenerational, but the generational differences have been polarised through a combination of the effects of an ageing society with people staying in the workforce long after

retirement and the decentralisation of communication. The latter is driven largely by the explosion of social media and the tech-savvy Generations X, Y and now Z who are just coming into the workforce. Madeleine Kavanagh, internal communications specialist supporting transformation, comments: "Today's younger generations are more opinionated and challenging of authority than any previous generation and we are seeing this come into the workplace now."

Tomorrow's businesses and workforces require a very different communications approach, summarised in four key themes: Technology, Attitude, Innovation and Agility.

Technology

Participants highlighted that for organisations that are not up to speed with the impact of peer to peer communication or worse still – trying to prevent it – there's surely trouble ahead. There was a strong sense that, in too many instances, our current cadre of leaders are blocking progress; not necessarily intentionally so, but by virtue of being out of touch with the pace of change, overly reliant on traditional command and control models and not enabling company culture to keep pace with technology.

"The adoption of technology seems to be a little sector dependant, "says Lisa Cornell-Norman, principal consultant at Teynham Associates specialising in business transformation and engagement. "I find the public sector reluctant to embrace social media for example when, ironically, with a diverse workforce – many of whom are not office based – it would be extremely relevant. And with a much greater customer focus too, being able to adopt new technology more swiftly could add enormous value to their services" she continues.

"Everyone's a journalist now – there are no holds barred – and the implications for business are huge. As communicators we must help educate those in leadership positions about the potential of social media. Every business needs to have a strategy about its use; expectations and limitations must be made abundantly clear to everyone. Communication is a lot about behaviours and empowerment, and leadership teams need to be showing the way," says Kavanagh.

Attitudes

And it's not just about new technologies. It's about changing attitudes around communication as Virginia Hicks, director of Comma Partners explains. "There is little desire for complex analysis by the majority and patience for lengthy business cases is wearing thin. With the expectation for immediate feedback and dialogue increasing, management teams need to be nimble and tuned in to what their people want. And being nimble is not something that most corporate environments are set up for. To date, messages have been carefully crafted, fine

tuned and tweaked through a lengthy decision-making process before seeing the light of day. This may still be necessary for price-sensitive City announcements, but leadership teams who agonise over perfecting operational messages behind closed doors will miss the opportunity to be part of the real conversation that their workforce will be having anyway: conversations that will be happening without them."

Of course, how leaders talk to and hear from their people has always been at the top of the agenda for communications professionals, but the risks associated with not getting it right have magnified in the online world. Kim Borrowdale, a communications consultant working at a national legal practice, picks up this point: "I've put more focus on the tone of voice rather than the messages themselves as teams take more control of their own communications at a local level. I coach them to communicate in a much more conversational style where appropriate - a good exercise in helping them understand what they are saying to whom and why. With employees increasingly engaging in their employer's brand externally and online, building trust through an authentic tone of voice is vital. This is particularly important as messages are competing for airspace in an information- crowded world where the audience is in a perpetual state of change."

This sense of increasing informality is evident almost everywhere in business. At a recent conference staged by Adecco Group and attended by a wide variety of internal and external stakeholders including representatives from large corporates, the public and third sectors, government and education, every attendee was given an iTouch for the day. Traditionally, the debates of the day would have been captured by communications professionals, a report or article written, and then made available either by email with a link to the report, or even in hard copy.
At this conference everyone was part of the reporting team, encouraged to Tweet throughout. The communications team were also Tweeting, but instead of dominating the conversation, they were a part of it.   People at all levels from all sorts of backgrounds were following the conference by following 'real' people. And, more importantly, they were able to participate, generating ideas and feedback. People discovered the hot topics via their newsfeeds, added comments and likes, and interacted with people they may never meet other than via a common cause. Far from being dead, the communications function at that conference added much value. They went from producing impersonal content with few readers and little feedback to using social tools and practices to engage a larger audience in a more meaningful way. And the interesting point is that the debates from that day are still raging, reaching a far wider audience than could ever have been accommodated at the event itself. There is no reason at all why this approach cannot become the norm for internal corporate events too, replacing the traditional "town hall" format and the annual PowerPoint presentation from the CEO.

It is this real time and informal approach to communications that employees are expecting in their organisations if they are to be engaged in the business.

The issue of employee engagement is critical. If it ever was an option, it is now a necessity. Being able to make change comfortable and unintimidating is key and communicators play an important part here. "It's essential for us to reference the business context and the changing customer needs in every communication so that employees realise that the organisation cannot stand still. The more we talk about the changing market, the future opportunities and challenges it presents and explain how and why the business is doing what it is doing, the better," says strategic communications consultant, Philippa Anderson. "Linking everything back to the organisation's vision so employees understand how their own goals and objectives fit into that vision becomes even more important with decentralised control over communication," she adds.

Innovation

So what might businesses look like in the next ten years? And will the working patterns we currently accept as 'normal' in the UK still be recognisable? Alastair MacDonald again: "The light bulb didn't come from the continuous improvement of the candle, so we've got to embrace new thinking, new ways of working and enable our organisational cultures to catch up with technology," he told us. "In order to create organisations and businesses that will be truly sustainable on the global stage we have to get comfortable with challenging the status quo." And Jenny Nabben, a senior interim manager working with large corporates, agrees wholeheartedly: "Leadership teams need to get comfortable with employees having the big ideas. This takes courage and humility – it's a fundamental shift in the traditional workplace relationship. Our departmental structures already look a little tired, all too often stifling the flow of knowledge they were expected to promote, and almost always slowing down decision-making. We need to be working towards a genuinely cross-functional approach where flatter and less hierarchical structures focus on capability and knowledge sharing. We need to create environments that unlock the intelligence, creativity and innovation that exists within any employee base. This isn't about skills: it's about a shift in mind-set."

A more flexible work force with more virtual teams is also the view of Philippa Anderson: "Teams of the future will be less dictated by geography and physical location and much more driven by skills and capabilities. For communicators this means an emphasis on face to face communication for 'need to know' information and ensuring that individuals can access information and be connected at any time via intranets, wikis, Skype, Yammer and the like. Encouragement to share knowledge and information freely within organisations will mimic the communication habits already well established in personal lives where people choose what, how and when to access, create or share information."

Agility

Employees will have a greater say in how they work with high levels of trust rather than just sitting at a desk 9 to 5. Jacobina Plummer, global change and communications manager at Unilever explains further: "In traditional ways of working, time and attendance were the key measurement of employees. At Unilever, we have introduced our Agile Working programme which values the performance and output of our people. For us, time and attendance are artificial barriers that can be removed.   It's about creating environments where employees want to work, where there's a palpable energy to improve business performance and where individuals at all stages of their working lives feel valued. And it's all possible with the technology we have at our fingertips today.

 "We looked at how the next generation of employees – current university students – behave and realised that there is much less structure in how they work. As a result, it made sense for us to develop working practices around idea sharing and collaboration. By giving people more choice about how and when they work, we improve talent attraction and retention, increase our capability across the globe and improve collaboration and productivity. And there are other benefits for the business – we're more environmentally sustainable and our real estate and travel costs are reduced too. It's a win-win.

"Of course, this doesn't happen overnight and we've put a real focus in the business on preparing our managers to manage for the future. Trusting their teams to deliver their work anytime anyplace is the starting point. Part of our communication role is to help teams create the visibility around how and when they will communicate with each other and to share their expectations around delivery and accountability."

The communicator's future role

The senior communications interims who attended Rohit's presentation have enormous experience between them. Here are the top ten points that they believe every communicator needs to take note of if they are to survive and thrive in the next decade:

1. It's important to work far more closely with HR, OD and Training functions. The challenge of engaging a multigenerational and ageing workforce in organisational structures that are more fragmented, fluid and virtual cannot be underestimated.
2. Building and sustaining employee trust is a high priority for successful business in the next decade and employees will expect the same technological conveniences at work as they have in their personal lives.

3. It's the responsibility of both HR and communicators to design processes for employees which are centred on the demands of the individual and their changing needs throughout their employment lifecycle.
4. Employees must be treated as seriously as customers.
5. The relationships between leadership and employees are critical and communicators play a big part in breaking down the barriers between them. Communicators must be prepared to challenge leadership.
6. Communicators need to keep on top of technology, know what is possible and how to use it appropriately for different audiences within the workplace, taking account of individual needs and preferences.
7. Communicators and HR must work together to instil a mindset in the organisation that is tolerant of change and uncertainty – this is the new 'normal'.
8. By helping employees understand what's expected of them and how this fits into the organisation's strategy, employees can become more open-minded and nimble.
9. Communicators who are still relying on others coming to them for the messages – visiting intranet portals, reading emails – are missing out on one of the biggest communication shifts in history.
10. Communicators are more often than not 'agents of change'. Does the function need a rebrand?

Comma Partners is a company which provides internal and change communications managers to clients who need high calibre expertise on an interim basis.

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