

Executive Communication Standard



EXPECTATIONS, SURPRISES, FUTURE PROMISES

Our goal: Define executive comms reality and potential



Objectives:

- **Uncover the norms** of a burgeoning discipline and the **wisdom of its leaders** using combined quantitative and qualitative research
- **Establish current state benchmarks** for ongoing comparisons
- **Explore existing** structures, experiences, expectations, career paths
- **Identify growing opportunities** and **best practices**

Our research process

Create definitive, ongoing research to chart the evolution of executive communication

**Quantitative Goal:
Uncover the Norms**

Survey distributed to participants on Jan. 18, closed Jan. 31, 2022 (N = 149)

**Qualitative Goal:
Collect Leaders' Wisdom**

Interviewed 20 executive communication leaders at mostly Fortune 500 companies

- Conducted between Nov. 2021 – Jan. 2022
- Hour-long, 1:1 Zoom interviews, recorded for accuracy

Executive Summary

The last two years dramatically changed the destiny of executive communication. As stakeholder capitalism expands in the collective contexts of political polarization, social unrest and employee activism, executive communicators are meeting the moment with grit and enthusiasm.

Most highly skilled executive communicators are motivated by the pressures of this moment and energized by the access the profession affords to powerful decision makers. While they play a significant and valuable role, most executive communicators are preoccupied with immediate, short-term issues. Their budgets and teams remain relatively small, yet most are satisfied with their current resources.

However, with stakeholder demands increasing, the questions in the coming years are: Will executive comms professionals invest in the necessary time and energy to elevate their profession into a strategic discipline? Are they motivated to drive business value, or mostly content to satisfy the needs of their executive clients?

While survey results underscored the newness of executive communications, interviews with 20 members of the Executive Communication Council offer a vision for the future. This moment provides an expanding menu of opportunities for executive comms pros to lead, growing their contributions into a highly valued discipline.

It's all there for the taking.

Executive Summary (cont.)

What we found...as expected:

- **Norms that were coalescing into industry standards** and best practices defining the profession as a discipline
- **Common, consistent operating models in the largest organizations** that would be useful to less experienced exec comms teams looking to expand
- **Evidence of growing influence within the organization** in terms of staffing & increasing budgets

And some surprises:

- **Executive communication still nascent**, undefined as a distinct profession and in need of standard operating models and processes
- **Lack of strategic planning despite a universal desire to be more strategic**, measuring minimally beyond executive satisfaction
- **Counter-cultural response to the "Great Resignation,"** attributed in part to exec comms' job satisfaction with proximity to senior leaders and the opportunity to impact the organization and its stakeholders

Executive Summary (cont.)

Where do we go from here with stakeholder demands increasing?

To become a true discipline, most professionals will need to pivot:

From:

Loyalty to individual executives

To:

Working across the entire organization and driving the vision across all disciplines

Individual contributors

Team leaders with broader management skills, including the ability to cultivate talent and the discipline to measure their efforts

Reactive to events and crises

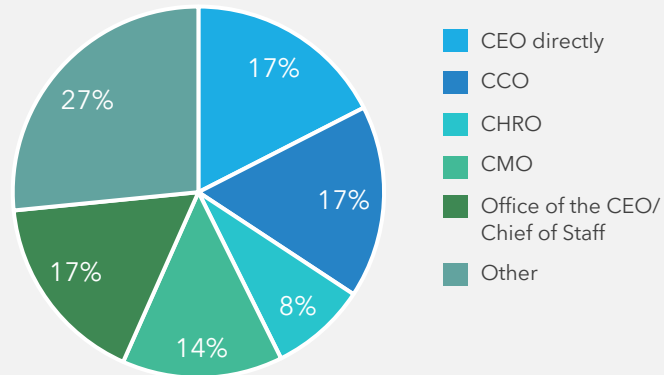
A more strategic, disciplined approach resourced to meet both immediate needs and the long-term goals of the organization without sacrificing one for the other



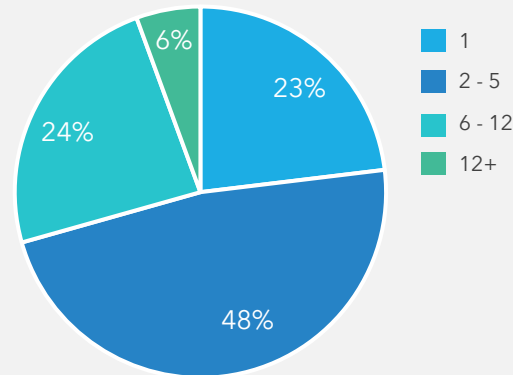
Research methodology

Survey demographics

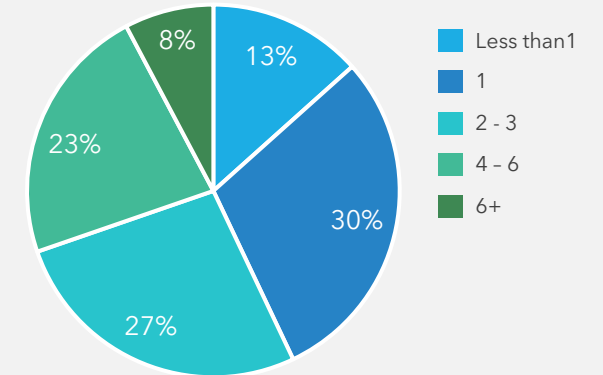
Who do you or your team report to and/or roll up to? (N = 143)



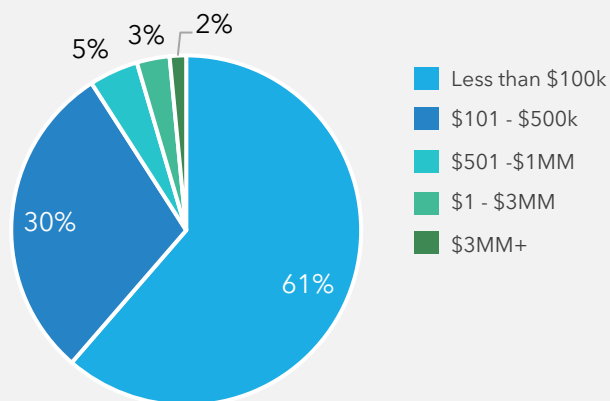
How many executives do you/your team directly support? (N = 143)



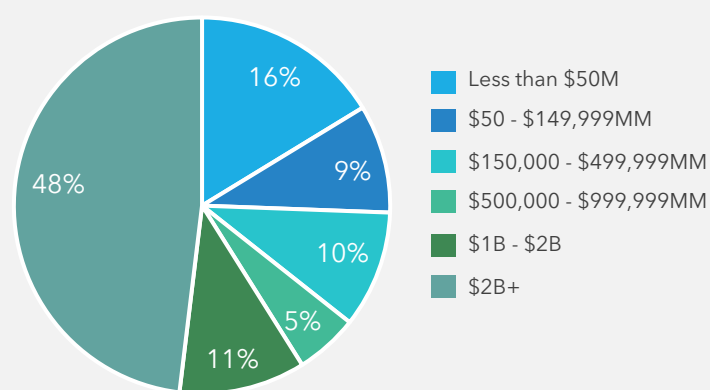
Size of executive communication team (full-time dedicated staff)? (N = 142)



Approximate annual budget for executive communication (excluding staffing)? (N = 132)



Approximate annual revenues for your organization? (N = 129)



What is your title? (N = 136)

- Advisor (4)
- **Associate Director (4)**
- Chief/ Communications Officer (9)
- Communications Manager (7)
- Consultant (4)
- **Director (38)**
- Lead/ Head (11)
- Manager (6)
- Manager (6)
- Principal/ Partner (3)
- **Senior Director (15)**
- Senior Manager (5)
- Speechwriter (11)
- Specialist (7)
- Strategist (2)
- VP/ AVP (9)
- Writer (1)

Survey demographics reveal emerging norms

Reporting Structures

- Almost **1/3** report to the **CEO** or **Chief of Staff** directly (31%)
- While **17%** report to **CCO**

Team Size

- About **1/2** of respondents are still individual contributors (43%)
- Only **32%** have **more than 4 people on the team**

Responsibilities

- **50%** support **2 or more executives**
- **30%** support **more than 6 execs**

Operating Budgets

- **61%** have less than **\$100,000 annual budget**
- Just under **30%** range between **\$100K** and **\$500K**

Titles

- **Almost 40% identify as a Director, Associate Director or Senior Director**
- **Titles range widely** from writer to Chief Comms Officer

Revenues

48% of our sample represent organizations with an **annual revenue greater than \$2 billion** (consistent with previous surveys)

1:1 Interviews with exec comms leaders





Research results

Six recurring themes (survey and interviews)

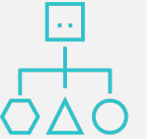
1 A common definition of executive communication is elusive, its core purpose varying significantly by organization and industry



2 Most executive communicators leaders LOVE what they do, accepting trade-offs and generally embracing the 24/7 adrenaline rush



3 Success no longer hinges solely on writing skills; it now requires exceptional interpersonal, talent management, business and broad communication skills



4 Although no common operating model exists, a number of effective structures are emerging



5 As stakeholder demands increase, exec comms must evolve its processes, practices and strategies to become a critical communication discipline



6 Thought leadership remains “the holy grail,” not yet fully realized by most organizations





1.

A common definition of executive communication is elusive, its core purpose varying significantly by organization and industry



A common definition of executive communication is elusive ...

**20 people,
20 different
answers**

- "It's nested communications: Image and reputation management for a person with implications for the image and reputation of the organization that that person represents."
- "Your job is to take care of the CEO, to build their legacy."
- "Developing and supporting the 'voice of an organization' for a variety of audiences."
- "Humanizing the executive ... to further the organization's strategy and deepen its relationships with important stakeholders."
- "Crafting and driving messaging in support of leadership voices and ensuring they are on brand, support business goals, and true to their personal and professional personas."
- "Help give voice and shape to executive ideas, so they connect with audiences."
- "It's so different by company: For us providing comms strategy and support to enable exec to succeed on a personal level and as team leader."
- "Help execs ... shape their story in a way that feels true and authentic...and keep their foot out of their mouth."
- "Amplifying an executive's voice to give them time to do other things needed to run the business."
- "Bridge between inside world and leader ... never a gatekeeper."
- "Go-to comms business partner for each exec and work varies by exec."



...but four core components emerged

Executive communication is the practice of:

Ensuring

principal's
authenticity - and
translating into
messaging

Building

relationships
inside and outside
the organization

Protecting

advancing
reputation to
further business
goals

Creating

a coherent and
compelling
thought leadership
platform

A working definition



Executive communication is the practice of helping an organization's leaders authentically deepen relationships with key audiences to advance business goals and corporate reputation



2.

Most executive communicators LOVE what they do, accepting trade-offs and generally embracing the 24/7 adrenaline rush



What they love: Access & collaboration

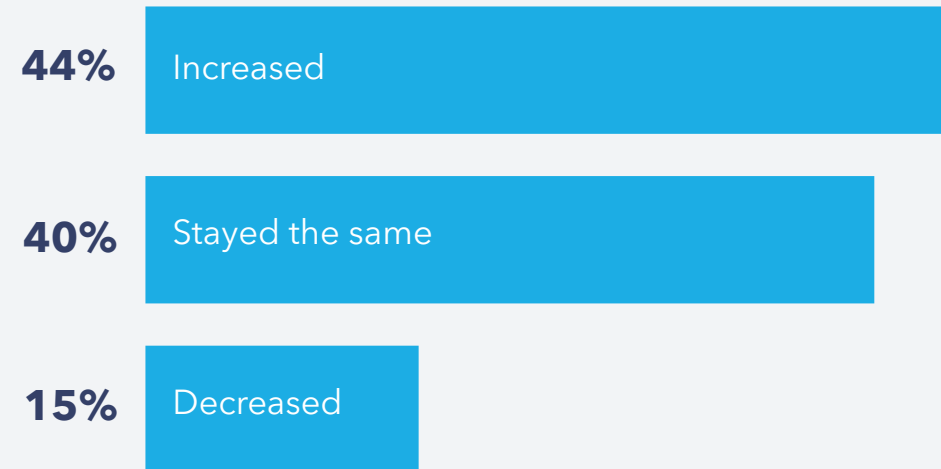
- More than **80%** have frequent access

Over the last year, how frequently did you directly collaborate with your c-suite (CEO, CIO, CFO, COO) (or the executive you worked most closely with)? (N = 143)



- More than **84%** have collaborated more or continued at the same level in the past year

Over the last year, your direct collaboration with the executive you work most closely with has: (N = 144)





In the words of leaders ...

- **Direct access to the top of the organization**, with a “seat at the table”
- **Ability to influence** executives and concomitant business decisions
- **Trusted partnerships** with senior leaders who rely increasingly on exec comms practitioners
- **Getting an informal MBA** - the chance to expand business knowledge and expertise, effectively “going to school” through osmosis

“

We need to build **insane trust** with our principals.”

“

It’s solving a puzzle, fostering a different way of thinking.”

“

Visibility and **opportunity to influence decision making** at the highest level.”

“

Heightening access and input through ongoing **partnership.**”

“

Building relationships with people who see my value and perspective as **the only non-exec in the room.**”



Those surveyed agreed: Executive communicators appreciate ...

Exec/audience



"CEO's satisfaction with how I'm doing in my role."

"When executive messages are well-received by my audiences."

"Leadership engagement and understanding. There are good days and not so good days!"

Influence/access



"My direct access to executives. Too many approval layers complicate the process."

"Having a seat at the table, able to counsel our execs."

"My ability to influence organization's strategy."

Partnership



"Whether the people I work with treat me with respect."

"Collaboration / collegiality of the team I work with."

Recognition



"A one-line 'thank you' note indicating our leader was happy satisfies me more than anything."

"Applause and positive feedback."



But there are trade-offs ...

- **24/7 schedules**
often dictated by external factors and prioritized over personal commitments
- **Being overruled**
especially when advice is sound
- **Pace & volume of work**
leaves little time for strategic planning or program measurement
- **Ambiguous authority role**
among powerful leaders and others in the organizations
- **Feeling subservient**, often relegated to CEO handler



Feeling like a 'geisha' for my exec, carrying a bag with gum, cough drops and Band-Aids."



At the end of the day, we **provide counsel** and will be here **whether they follow it or not.**"



24/7 open season on my time ... requests made all days, every day ... **don't love that.**"



You **don't build a world-class function** without **giving up a lot (in your personal life) ... men don't pay** the same price that **women do.**"



When you can't convince your executive **that what he wants to do will bomb**. It's like watching a horror movie in slow motion."



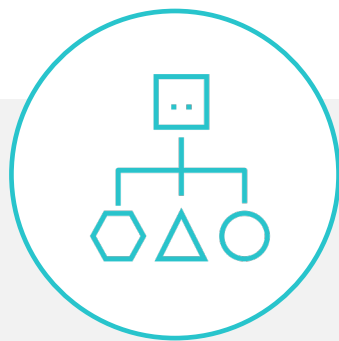
Part of my job is **pissing off people.**"



Half of exec comms pros want to stay within the discipline

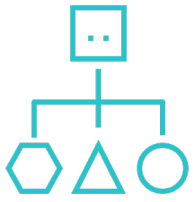
- As you consider your own career over the next 3 - 5 years, are you likely to: (N = 144)



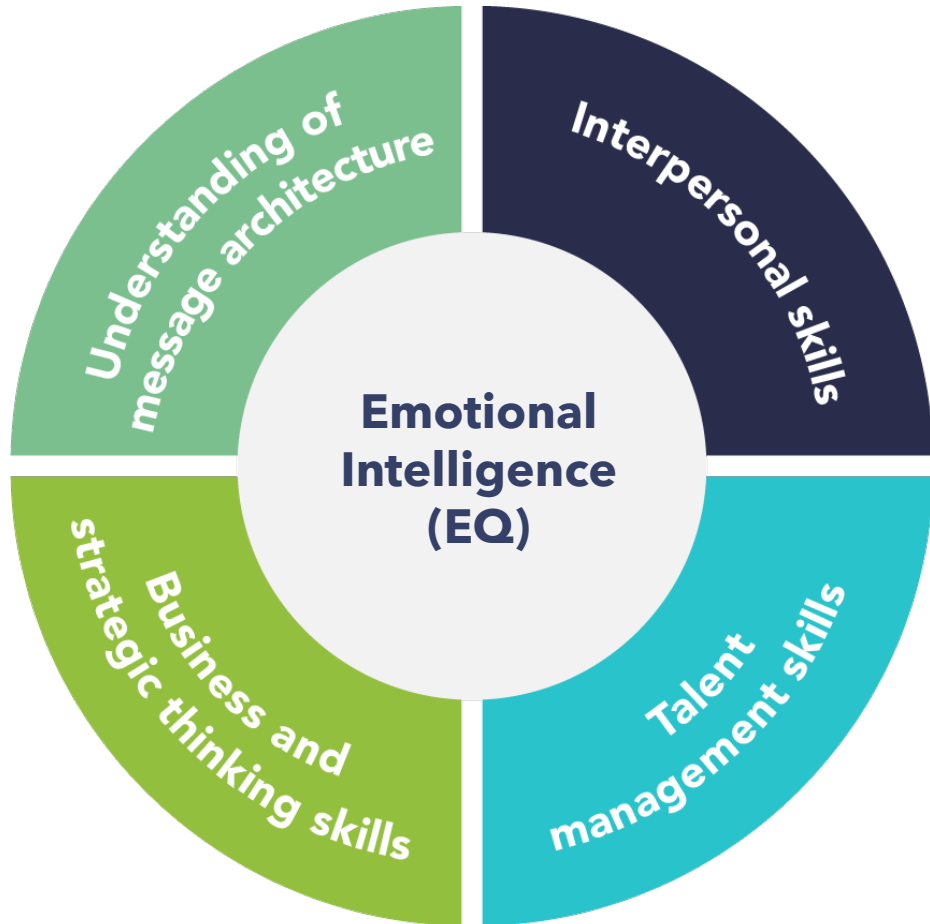


3.

Success no longer hinges solely on writing skills; it now requires exceptional interpersonal, talent management, business and broad communication skills



Leaders note a range of communication competencies required for success



Interpersonal skills:

- Good listening/relationship building
- Quick study, eager to learn
- Willingness to fail fast and start again
- Trusted collaborator

Talent management skills:

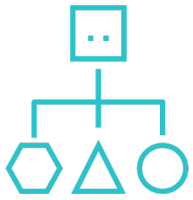
- Organized, decisive
- Teacher, mentor, coach

Business and strategic thinking skills:

- Business acumen/sensibility
- Deep knowledge of the company and competitors
- 360-degree understanding of communications

Understanding of message architecture

- Flexible and adept at covering enormous range of writing styles
- Speechwriting helpful, but can be outsourced



EQ at the center

Confident/poised

- Presence in the C-suite, sensing when to stand up or stand down
- Influence without authority

Curious

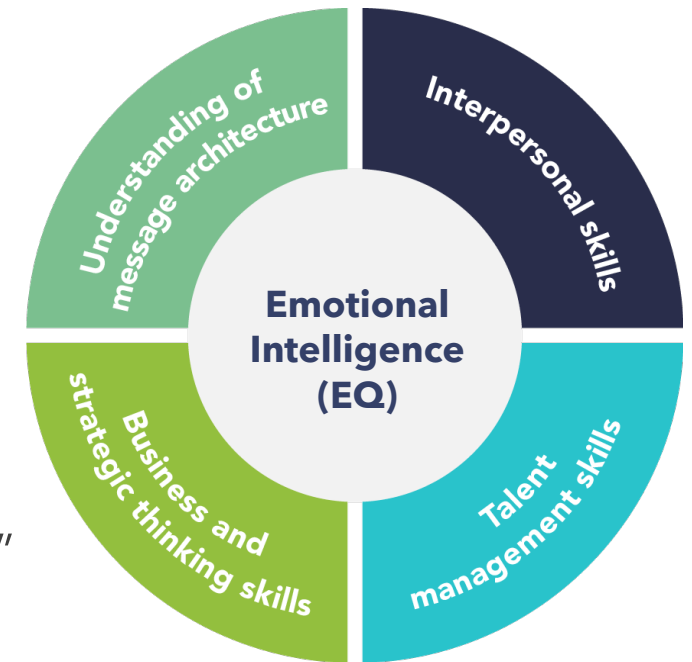
- Inquisitive, always learning

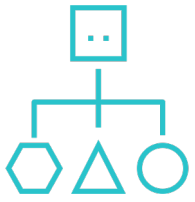
Self-aware

- Able to “kill your darlings”
- Desire to understand another’s mind & heart

Creative & flexible

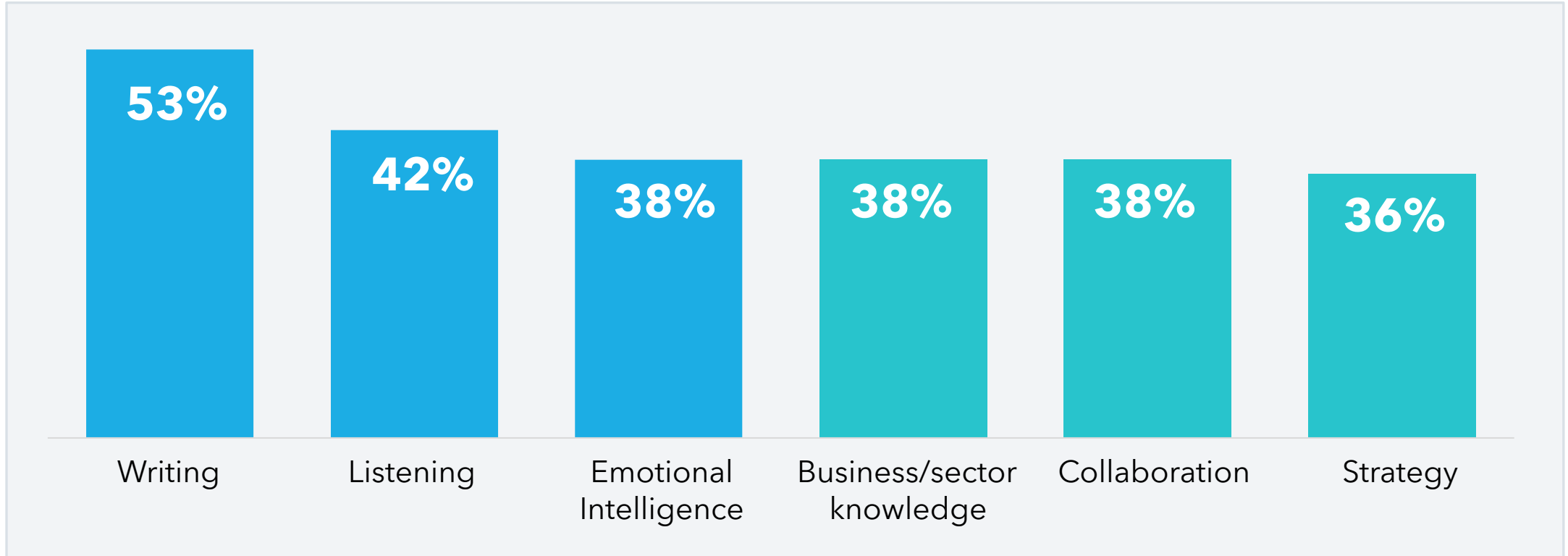
- Chameleon-like versatility to do what’s needed
- Synthesizes various views into effective, engaging messaging





Survey confirms: Writing is foundational, EQ critical

- Of this list of competencies, which do you consider foundational to be successful at executive communication:
[Select up to 3] (N = 144)





4.

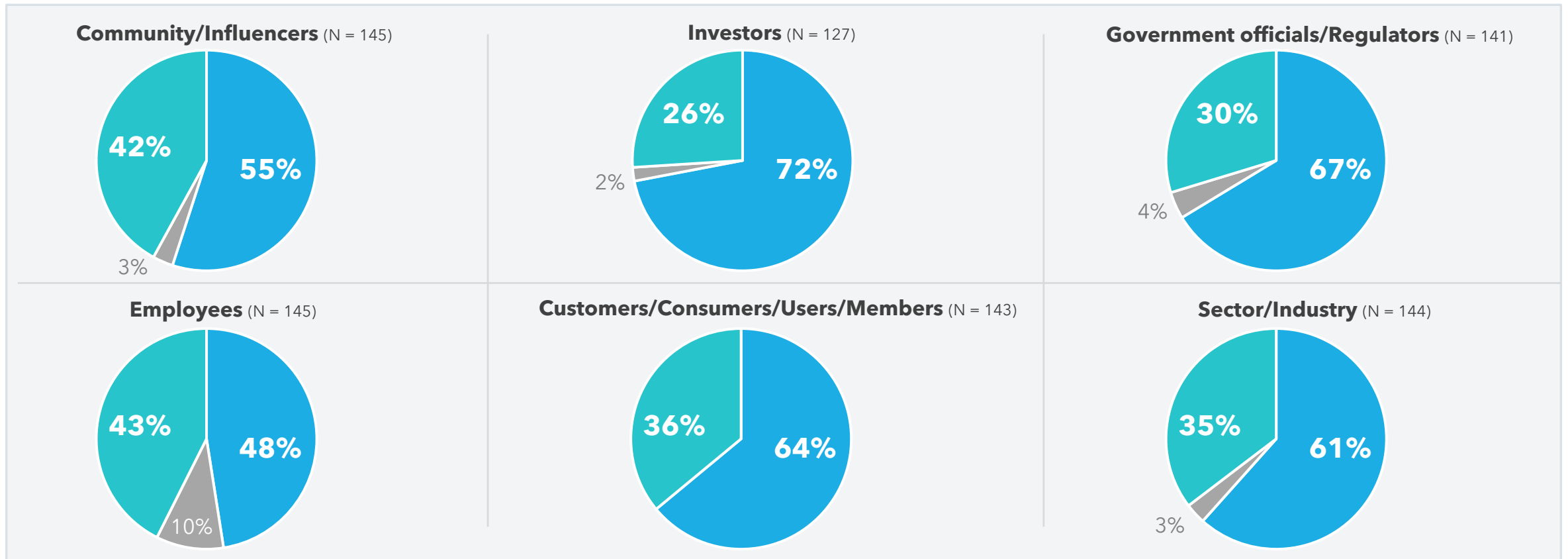
As stakeholder demands increase, exec comms must evolve its processes, practices and strategies to become a critical communication discipline



Stakeholders: Demand for executive communication will continue as is or increase

- Looking forward to the next year, I expect the frequency of communication for our executives to:

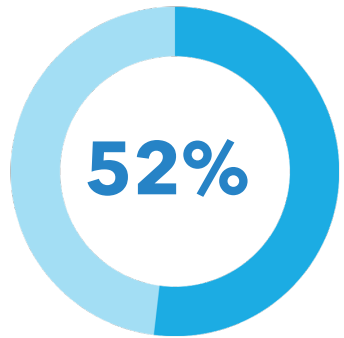
■ Increase ■ Stay the same ■ Decrease



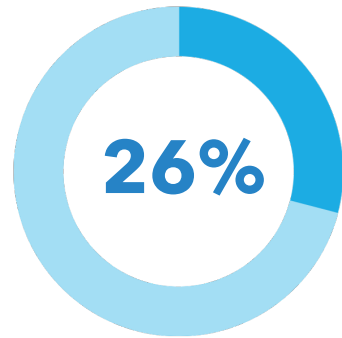


Exec comms expected to gain strategic importance

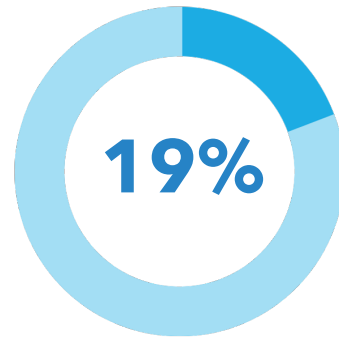
- As you consider the field of exec comms over the next 3 - 5 years, do you see it: (N = 144)



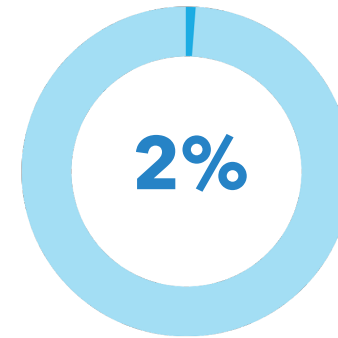
Gradually gaining strategic importance, along with other corporate communication disciplines



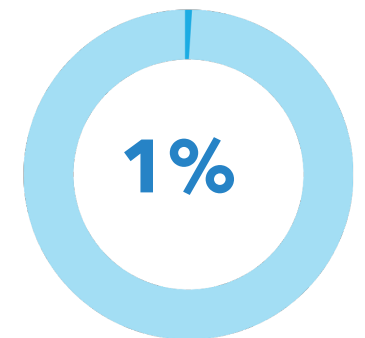
Generally maintaining its current purpose and scope in most organizations



Transforming dramatically to become a more vital business/leadership function



Other

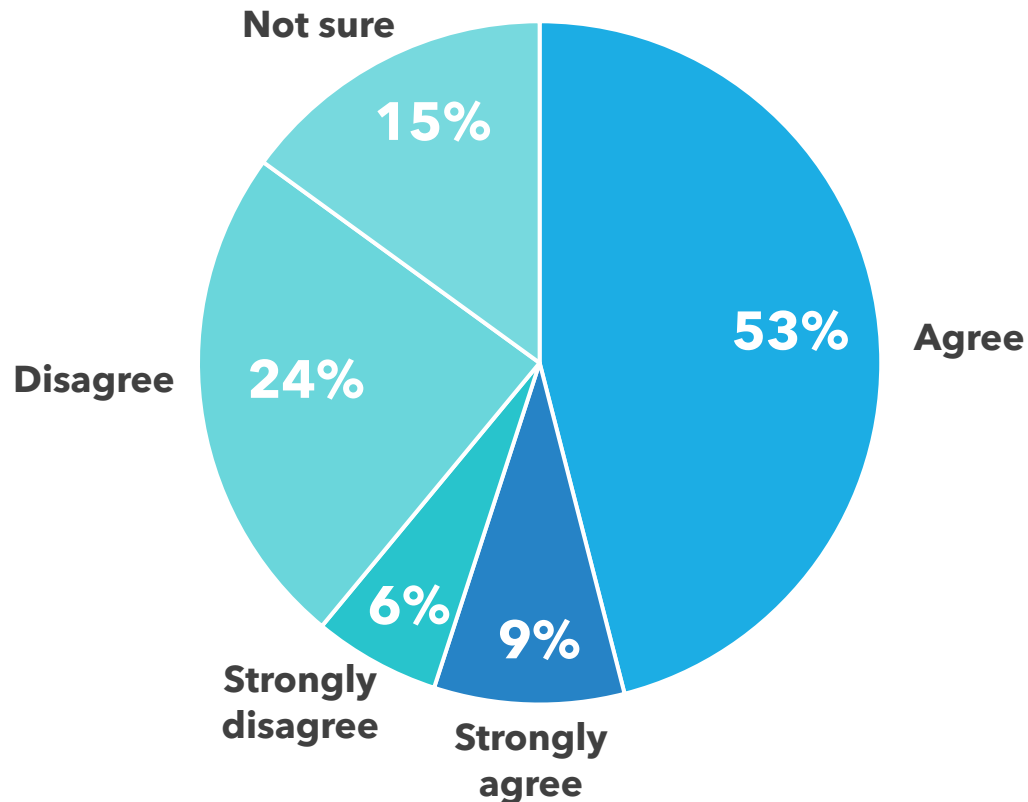


Losing importance in relation to other corporate communication disciplines



Surprisingly, despite rising demand, respondents report they have what they need

- I have the resources I need to accomplish our communication goals. (N = 145)



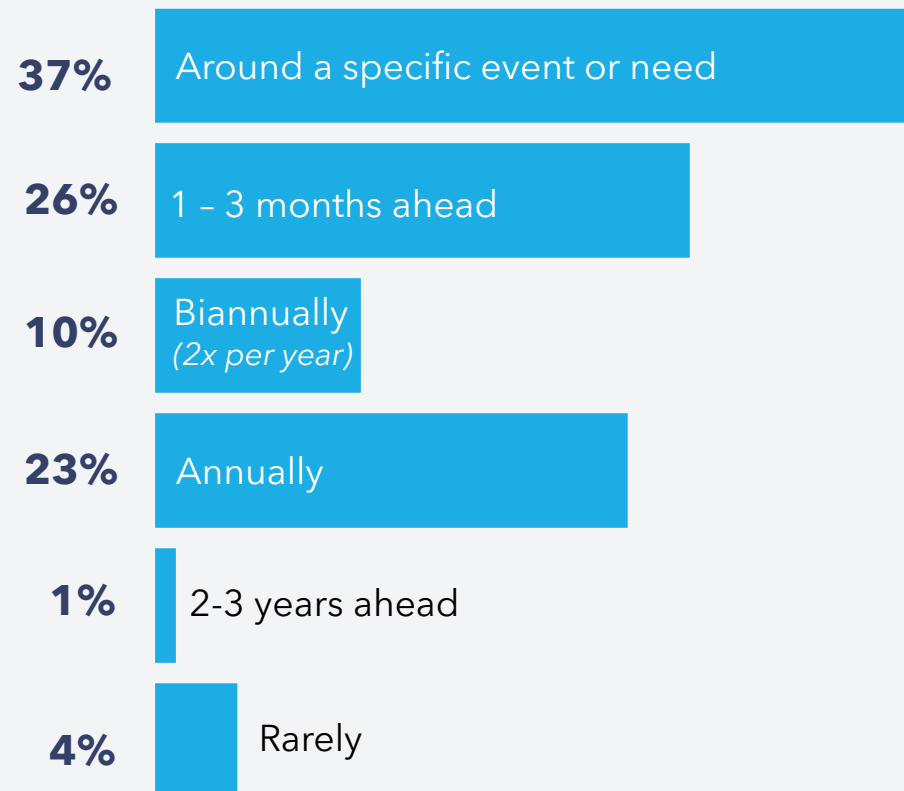
61%
have less than a
\$100K budget

62%
Agree and
Strongly Agree
(+3% since 2021)

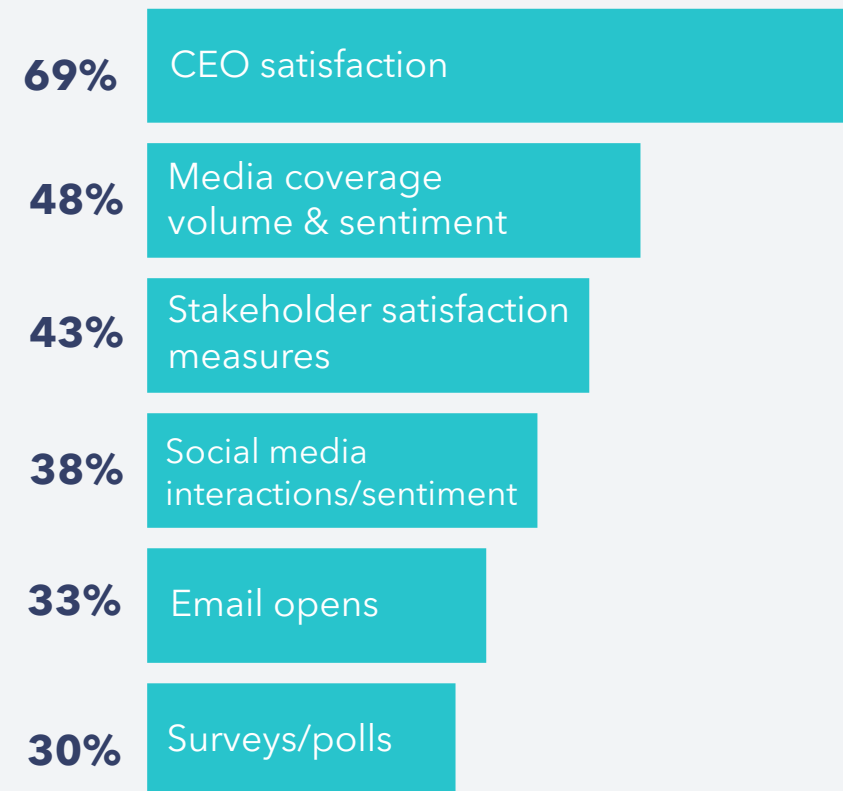


Long-term annual planning and strategic measurement reactive, subjective

- How do you and your team create plans or strategies for executive communication? (N = 145)



- How do you or your team measure the effectiveness of executive communication? [Select up to 5] (N = 145)





Measurement practices evolving

- **Surprising number of exec comms pros eschew measurement**

Lack of time or tools most often cited

- **"Is my CEO happy?"**

Often the only gauge of exec comms value

- **Visionary exec comms leaders tie to revenue growth and reputation management with:**

- Executive dashboards
- Peer benchmarking of CEO competitors & other admired influencers
- Dedicated measurement resources
- Quarterly consolidated communication reports

As teams grow in sophistication and size, the ability to show value, impact and a return on investment will be critical to the success of a world-class exec comms organization

“**Shortest answer** of the day. **It's the last thing I have time for.**”

“We are **notoriously terrible at understanding the numbers** that must change.”

“Our measurement? **No dashboard; our tools are rudimentary.**”

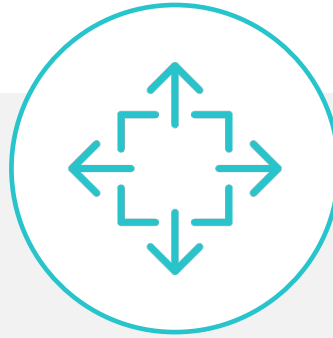
“We **survey our execs** ... what do they think is of value; or want more of?”

“Externally, **we don't bother.**”

“We try to **track close to the revenue, but it's a challenge.**”

“**Feels like the ghost in the corner** ... good intentions but **not enough time**”

“We **measure trust/reputation** including volume of coverage, financials, global impact, new content pushed out with earnings.”



5. Although no common operating model exists, a number of effective structures are emerging



Operating models range from traditional to matrixed

Traditional organizational model

- Sole practitioner, sometimes a speechwriter, supports CEO
- May report to CEO, but more frequently reports to CCO, CMO
- Functional internal/external comms practitioners support other C-suite members
- Planning and messaging driven by individual executives; minimal coordination between them

Challenges

- Inconsistent messaging
- Lack of consolidated strategic planning
- Limited career growth

Matrixed organizational model

- Exec comms pro owns corporate narrative, which lives in communications hub accessible to all
- Exec comms leader manages experienced team that may include:
 - C-suite exec comms pros (1:1)
 - Functional exec comms pros (1:2-3)
 - Production specialists (video, graphics, etc.)
 - Dedicated data analytics pro
- Internal & external comms begin to merge

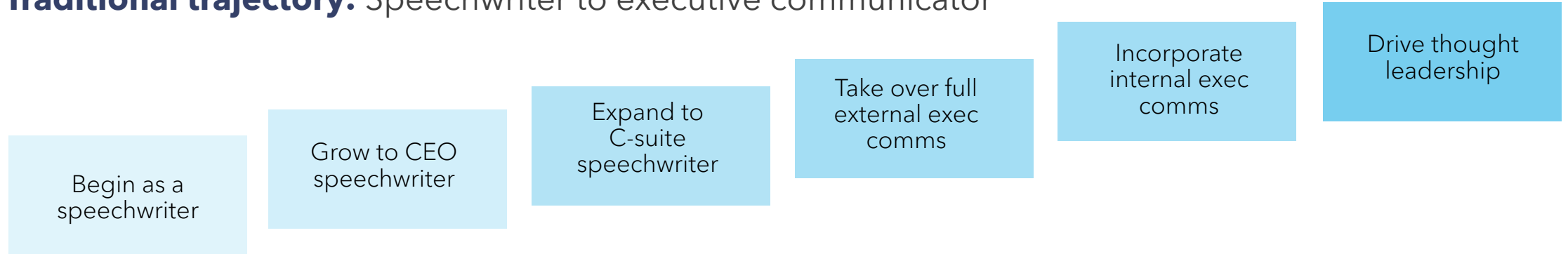
Challenges

- Requires high budget/resources
- Often needs time for the organization to evolve

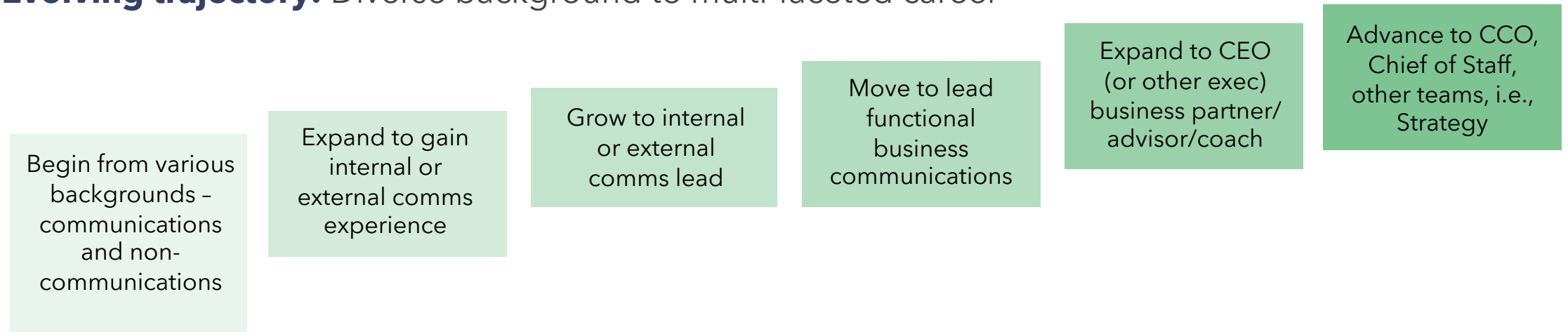


Career paths broadening and expanding

Traditional trajectory: Speechwriter to executive communicator



Evolving trajectory: Diverse background to multi-faceted career





6.

Thought leadership remains “the holy grail,” not yet fully realized by most organizations



Only 21% of those surveyed have dedicated thought leadership programs

- Do you support a thought leadership plan for your executives? (N = 145)

40%

Episodically, we support thought leadership communication strategies

21%

We have dedicated and ongoing resources to support thought leadership

21%

We are considering how to incorporate thought leadership platforms into our communication strategies

17%

We don't specifically plan or program for thought leadership



"Being a thought leader means getting out in front of issues and proposing solutions to our industry's pain points."



"I disdain the term ... we don't need thought leaders. We need people to lead the organization thoughtfully."



"Having command and commenting on industry trends that will elevate them as innovators."



"Naval gazing for narcissists. We're too busy for that."



Thought leadership remains largely aspirational (and definitions vary)

- **Thought leadership formats fluctuate by organization** from social mission manifestos to best-selling books, LinkedIn posts, or CEO podcasts; the unifying element is an original point of view
- **Decision-making frameworks are limited** for evaluating requests / demands for social messaging; and those who have them don't always use them
- Next evolution of thought leadership will **inspire stakeholders to act for a greater good** (e.g., on environmental issues, social justice activities or other CSR priorities)

“ **Must** have a POV and **create tension.**”

“ Having **game-changing ideas** ... that are emotive ... and **that everyone [including employees] can speak to.**”

“ It's being an **expert in the field**, having a **pulse on the industry** and being **able to predict** what will happen and **proactively communicate.**”

“ **Difficult for those facing reputational issues** ... need to address reputation first; otherwise, thought leadership can be distracting.”

“ **Galvanizes others to action.**”

“ Taking a position in your realm without ever **mentioning your company name.**”

“ **POV** on something **more important than your organization.**”

“ Requires **unique** content.”

“ A **book, actually a bestseller!**”

A wide, empty highway stretches towards a city skyline at sunset. The road has a double yellow line in the center and white dashed lines on the sides. The city skyline is visible in the distance, with several buildings lit up. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow. The sky is a mix of orange and blue.

Where do we go from here?

5 trends we see on the horizon

1. Stakeholder capitalism will continue to evolve.

This evolution will pressure CEOs and executives to understand and adjust to growing stakeholder demands while balancing complex political, cultural and societal environments. Exec comms pros are poised to be valuable sources of insight and direction to their principals, anticipating rising external and internal voices and responding with wisdom and courage.

2. A mounting crisis of purpose.

Consumers, society and employees are demanding more from business - and more from their CEOs. As executive communicators and younger generations reflect on the existential crisis of the past two years, they may question how to support these powerful executives - and avoid "enabling" leaders' worst impulses and self-seeking behavior.

5 trends we see on the horizon

3. As executive communication matures from a comms specialty into a strategic discipline, business will demand greater strategic and measurement accountability from executive communicators.

As author Marshall Goldberg says, “What got you here today, won’t get you there tomorrow.” CEO satisfaction was once all that was needed to justify a successful speechwriter’s role. As exec comms profile rises, practitioners will need to embrace measurement understanding and demonstrate how their strategies are tied to reputation, employee and consumer satisfaction – and ultimately, revenue growth.

4. Effective thought leadership will move organizations away from reactive communications stances into a position of rhetorical offense.

Thought leadership is maturing from “nice to have” to a strategic imperative. Executive communicators who successfully craft and manage strategic thought leadership platforms will help strengthen organizations’ reputations and ensure their own position as indispensable partners to their business leaders.

5 trends we see on the horizon

5. Decisions about social issues and corporate responses will benefit from strategic processes put in place in the wake of 2020-2022 fire drills.

At one time, people distrusted business leaders on social issues because of their financial self-interest. Now some employees and consumers expect leaders to take positions on social issues. But that doesn't mean companies need to engage or respond to every issue.

Best practices and processes are moving teams away from improvising crisis responses to methodically deciding how values define who needs to weigh in on what, and why. We expect to see these best practices catch on industry-wide.

In summary



- Executive communication continued to evolve in 2021 – broadening from a field populated largely by speechwriters into a profession distinguished by well-rounded business advisors
- Still nascent and emerging, the profession is spawning new career paths, organizational structures and operating models
- While industry-wide “norms” are still congealing, one thing is clear: Executive communicators are committed to their discipline and embrace its rigorous, sometimes seemingly impossible intellectual and emotional demands as they strive to make this work more effective

The final words: Yours

Advice from executive communicators

- **"Always** come to your executive with **an opinion or advice.** "
- **"Overprepare for every CEO meeting.** You don't have to be funny or even the best presenter, but you need to have confidence and a point of view."
- **"You can never take anything too personally.** Whether you are criticized or edited out of the final product, remember: **So much of exec comms is additive.**"
- **"Be a bridge** between the inside and outside world and your leader."
- **"Don't take the job unless** you admire the person you're going to work for."
- **"Be a matrix warrior;** get to know the organization, key internal influencers and who the CEO relies on."

Appendix



Titles: Interviews

- Senior Director, CEO Communications
- Senior Director of Executive Communications & Production
- Executive Communications Sr, Manager
- Principal, Executive Communications
- Senior Director, Executive & Functional Communications
- Director, Strategic & Executive Communications
- Senior Director, Executive & Employee Communications
- Lead Director, Strategic Executive Communications/Office of the CEO & Executive Communications
- Director, Enterprise & Leader Communications
- Assistant Vice President, Internal & Executive Communications
- Director, CEO Communications
- Issues Management & Crisis Communication
- Senior Director, Executive Communications
- Senior Director, Executive & Board Communications
- Director of Executive Communications
- Chief of Staff, Executive Director of Executive Communications & CEO Communications
- Vice President, Strategic Communications
- Vice President, Thought Leadership & Executive Communications
- Chief Communications & Sustainability Partner