

ELLWOOD ATFIELD INSIGHTS SERIES:

The challenges faced by
Corporate Affairs Directors:
learnings from 2023 and
predicted trends for 2024
and beyond



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Executive summary

How many times have you heard commentators say corporate communications is at a crossroads?

Well, perhaps this time it's true. With executive pay, cost of living, a return to recession and corporate misbehaviour being exposed like never before last year, it is clear that corporate affairs is (or should have been) front and centre for businesses across the economy.

Greater visibility than ever is needed

Against the backdrop of wider market volatility is the very real fact that corporate reputations are under even greater scrutiny than ever before.

The Post Office scandal, so dramatically brought to our attention by ITV's remarkable drama, has highlighted – like none other in recent years – the fragility of once-solid corporate reputations.

And despite the financial pressures and conflicting demands that so clearly exist for many organisations, evidence suggests there is a real need for communications to increase in visibility, to take a more strategic role, and have ever more influence over the executive.

So, what has the past year looked like for corporate affairs leaders and their teams? And in a year where half of the world's population will go to the polls under a continued cloud of economic uncertainty, what might 2024 look like for the function?

We asked Corporate Affairs Directors for their views

What key communications challenge did you face last year and what were the learnings?

How are corporate communicators juggling these conflicting demands?

What trends do they see their function needing to respond to?

How will these influence the structure of communications functions?

How do Directors themselves feel they are listened to?

Does their function really have the ear of the executive?

These were the big questions we wanted to ask the market, to gauge how practitioners are seeing current realities playing out.

So we spoke directly to a group of Corporate Affairs Directors, to listen and understand from them what they see as their challenges and opportunities this year.

We interviewed leaders from major global brands through to government departments; utilities and big corporations – the likes of Centrica, VISA Europe, Royal Mail, Southern Water – some 18 different heads in fact – to garner their perspectives on the ground.

Common themes

All of the individual reflections of each director are presented here, over the next few pages. We think you'll agree they make for fascinating reading. But before presenting these, there are some common themes I feel are worth reflecting on.

Improving and diversifying skillsets:

Broader skillsets which cut across multiple communications disciplines are ever-more widely sought after. A more strategic mindset is required at both Head and Director level and the ability to develop and deliver more cohesive, multi-channel campaigns is key.

Upcoming political activity means many leaders have reviewed their public affairs capabilities and are involving broader communications colleagues in political engagement activity to maximize impact.

Strategic stakeholder influencing expertise is being prioritised across the board. Priority is being placed on upskilling digital communications capabilities across every communications discipline. Leaders require experts with the ability to translate corporate narrative into visually compelling content for social media channels, while the 'good, old fashioned' skills of great content creation are needed more than ever.

Department structures:

Despite budget restrictions, many leaders are investing in the restructuring of functions. Leaders want their hiring to be more strategic – not just hiring for the sake of it – but resourcing themselves properly, both to be able to meet the challenging demands being placed upon them but also to ensure their functions are 'future-proofed' with regard to the skills needed to support rapid technological change.

They are thinking more purposefully about their function; not just how to be more strategic, but also how they can add more value and demonstrate ROI. Many are converging communications disciplines to break down silos and as a way to offer development opportunities to existing team members. Others are looking ahead to the impact of AI on the function – whether greater reliance will be placed on agency partners to support with operational tasks - and how to use technology to enhance current structures.

A seat at the table:

Without doubt, there is appetite for (and progress towards) more communicators recognising the need to have a greater voice. In addition, there is an understanding of the need to be more strategic about relaying that voice to have a deeper impact on the rest of the business around them. By having a seat on the Executive Committee, there is more scope to proactively manage potential reputational risk and seek opportunities to raise corporate profile. Our communications leaders are actively pursuing having either a bigger voice at the top table, or being more closely connected to it in order to influence with maximum impact.

Technology:

Leaders are looking ahead to the increased use of AI in communications and the skills required to maximise its potential. Many of the leaders interviewed over the next few pages talk about the development of artificial intelligence, more digitisation, and the risks posed by the failure to adapt quickly and effectively to technological changes. Many are exploring the ways that AI will influence the structure of teams and the nature of relationships they will forge with agency partners. The growing impact of visual communications and new social media platforms is influencing content strategy and the types of skills being hired into teams.

Reputation and Trust:

There's no doubt communicators feel they are operating in more challenging, fascinating, and uncertain times. In many instances this has the effect of business leaders being unwilling to put their heads above the parapet in fear of potential reputational risk.

There's nervousness about the trust they have from customers and wider stakeholders, but there's appreciation too that uncertainty impacts employees – and that there is the parallel need to engage their own workforce through more powerful storytelling and more ebullient internal communications.

ESG and Purpose:

Defining purpose to improve engagement and aid corporate storytelling remains crucial to many business strategies.

The rising prominence of key topics such as ESG is also cited as an issue that leaders really need to be confident in - most now formally lead the corporate ESG strategy and function, although over time there is acknowledgment that this will change as the discipline becomes more embedded in business practice. Greater investments are being made in hiring ESG experts as businesses navigate the challenge of being able to demonstrate truly unique solutions that counter ESG risk.

In addition, the geopolitical situation globally and politicisation of issues surrounding ESG will continue to have an impact.

Global Political and Economic Uncertainty:

In a year when numerous countries will be heading to the polls, the political landscape looks increasingly uncertain. The ongoing economic turmoil, inflationary pressures and geopolitical tensions create uncertainty which make corporate trading more challenging – both in terms of tightening budgets, adding additional pressure to the CEO and meaning, in some instances, that shareholders' expectations need ever-tighter management. Corporate affairs leaders with global remit are balancing often competing global-versus-local priorities.



The Evolution of Corporate Affairs

Some of our contributors even reference the interplay between HR and PR and the role internal communications plays in employee motivation, psychological wellness and engagement.

The greatest takeaway, however, is that while all these challenges could be perceived as a source of frustration, or even contribute to pessimism and despondency, one message from our interviewees comes through loud and clear: that they are very much ready and up for the challenge.

We have long known this at Ellwood Atfield, but there is a palpable sense that our interviewees really do see themselves as business-critical; and that they understand that if they are to be properly impactful, they need to prepare, train and develop their teams to be more agile. Not just this, they need to enable their teams to have a definite point of view, be able to tell it with good, old-fashioned writing skills, but also be able to adapt-to and embrace new technology – and be especially capable with data.

These are all, without doubt, significant challenges.

But we believe that greater public scrutiny of organisations; growing demand for more corporate transparency; and the need to build strategic expertise and respond to wider stakeholder demands, means corporate communications is in a good place to showcase what it is capable of.

When I read the following responses, I absolutely pick up on the additional pressures communications directors are facing.

But I am comforted, too, by a mood presented that is overwhelmingly upbeat.

Yes, there are budgetary restraints, and yes there are issues around skills development, and retention of top comms talent, but what I'm not reading is desire to secure column inches at all costs. Instead I'm picking up on an understanding about what the organisation's business-critical needs are, and how they can deliver this. As one respondent sagely said, it's not about doing 'more' but doing less, and doing what's needed, well.

We hope you find these reflections both interesting and insightful.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "J. Shelley". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a pen nib graphic at the end of the final stroke.

Jules Shelley
Chief Executive,
Ellwood Atfield

State of the market 2023 - 2024



Last year was an extremely busy year for our team. Since the start of 2023 we have placed over 220 communications, policy, and advocacy professionals at 127 different organisations.

2023 was a varied year of peaks and troughs in the world of executive search and recruitment. The first half of last year continued to be an exceptionally busy time for corporate affairs hiring, with search volumes maintained at the high levels seen throughout 2022 post-Covid.

In the last six months of last year, the combination of wider market volatility, inflation, and political uncertainty resulted in a slowdown at the top end of the market, and in some instances, the introduction of temporary recruitment freezes.

We saw wage increases softening in the second half of the year and a reduction in the volume of hiring at leadership level – except in critical growth sectors such as renewables, utilities, and infrastructure. Fast forward a few months to the start of 2024 and the most senior end of the market has picked up at pace.

Interim solutions have continued to prove their value in a market of ever-increasing transformation and unpredictability. EA's interim practice has seen a growth in interim appointments over the past six months, as more organisations appoint strategic experts to help navigate upcoming political change and cover gaps in their teams post-restructure.

Notwithstanding a technical recession at the end of last year, in 2024 we have seen a pick-up in hiring activity with more organisations making plans to restructure and, in many instances, expand their functions in the next 18 months – particularly those operating in heavily regulated sectors and / or those needing to build public affairs capabilities ahead of the upcoming election.

Facts & Figures

Head, Director and CEO appointments:

- Corporate affairs leaders operating at ExCo level and CEOs received an average salary increase of 28% when changing roles (please note this figure masks a broad range between 17-100% and includes several outliers).
- At Head / Director level, the average base salary increase we saw was 16% - while in the public, health, and not-for-profit sectors, the average increase of base salary was 12%.
- Of leadership placements made over the past 12 months by our team, 65% of appointments were female and 13% from a BAME background, reflecting an ongoing improvement in diversity at the top level.
- Over half of the Communications and Corporate Affairs Directors placed by us sat on the Executive Committee.

Working patterns:

Hybrid working and its impact on hiring has continued to be a topic of discussion over the past 14 months. Of the candidates placed by EA:

- **19%** work 0-1 days per week in the office
- **46%** work 2 days per week in the office
- **29%** work 3 days per week in the office
- **6%** work 4 days per week or more in the office
- At ExCo and CEO level, **51%** work 3-4 days in office

The expectation in several sectors where the employee base is mainly on site is that communications leaders are visible 4-5 days per week. The close working relationship with the CEO and wider Board, importance of leadership visibility, and oversight of employee communications means a greater physical presence is again required.



EXECUTIVE
COMMITTEE

Facts & Figures

Main motivations for seeking a new position:

- 1 = Scope of role / greater challenge - **26%**
- 2 = Step up / promotion - **21%**
- 3 = Change of sector (between Government / NFP / Corporate) - **15%**
- 4 = Improvement on financial package - **12%**

Other motivations included culture, internal restructures and flexible working arrangements. Interestingly, we've seen financial motivation become less of a driver for senior job seekers in the past 12 months, despite wider economic pressures.





Insights from the experts



Andy Brown

Group Corporate Affairs Director,
Manchester Airports Group

Challenges and learnings from the past year

“Reflecting on things like Covid-19 (and people getting back to travelling), you do notice new things. Part of the challenge being B2B, but also consumer facing, is there are large parts of our operation that we are not responsible for, and the bad experiences some people have get connected to our brand even when it isn't part of our operation. We've noticed a big uptick in angry customers taking to social media – almost as “freelance journalists” – and then the media picking it up to drive content, which is completely different to how it used to be. But we've made some good progress in blunting tricky coverage and we are now having grown-up, mature conversations with newspapers' editorial teams. We now feel we can work collaboratively together, feeding relevant content to them.

“The lesson this has taught us is that comms has to be prepared to know how and when to respond when issues like these arise. This is more so considering ESG is only going in one direction [more of it !]. We know we'll need more people to manage the volume of corporate reporting we predict we'll need to do. Customer communications, call centre complaint management and social will all have to grow too. So we need to think about how we resource ourselves, and how we'll use technology to make our lives easier (but without making staff feel threatened).

Prioritising social media expertise

“In the customer facing and social media world, the skills we need are more readily available because, there is a wider pool of people who understand social media engagement and management. Around media and public affairs though, I think there is more of a challenge. In the past there was more one could do by turning the handle. You could stand out with less, and expectations were lower. Today though, things have all become much more tightly wound. It is forcing us to the top of the executive agenda, but these people have high expectations for what you deliver for the business.

Political change and ESG

“Obviously, the big challenge is going to be the forthcoming election and potential changes in the UK political system. The big challenge is how do you engage with Labour when everyone else wants to do that too? Also, how do we stand out and do genuine thought leadership? For our sector ESG is one of the most important topics. But is Labour going to care about this more than the Conservatives ? We will have to put more emphasis on ESG.

“If Labour wins, the time is ripe for a reset of the formal ways in which businesses engage with government. All we can do is prepare. One way will be developing more commercial acumen – having the ability to say ‘I know how to shape the public affairs agenda, to deliver real commercial outcomes in a way that will be demonstrable.”



George Eykyn

Corporate Affairs Director,
Southern Water

Key challenges

"In my previous role with a secure network infrastructure provider, the big challenge was getting cut through. As a B2B brand operating as a monopoly under licence, the customers funding us understandably wanted to see us focused on the 'day job' of running the network. Branching out beyond that and carving a more proactive reputation-building agenda was a challenge.

"Political short-termism doesn't always help either. We're not blessed with a strategic, stable, long-term vision that we are all sticking to in the UK.

"Business, and investors backing it, need a stable policy environment to plug into and need to know they won't be made to reverse things or write off their business case assumptions. With a more stable environment will come good, strategic, long-term decisions around investment.

"At Southern Water, the organisation is extremely busy, working fast to improve performance. The comms side is fast too, heightened by the electioneering period we've entered and the sheer speed of social media. So, there's a risk of defaulting to being reactive. The cultural dimension to the turnaround we're delivering is also important – instilling customer focus, a hunger for improved performance, high safety standards and fostering pride – will take time. That's the challenge for corporate affairs: our role is to help join things up, communicate progress and validate that for our people."

Integrated teams

"To achieve our goals, the aim is to get our team operating in an integrated fashion. As such, we look for people who are well organised; people who can plan and evaluate (and provide associated data), and who can feed back what they learn into better performance. We need people who can operate and think in an integrated way; people who are genuinely proactive in their approach.

"Broadly, we will look to boost our regional stakeholder engagement teams; these colleagues will be the spine of our effort to rebuild our reputation. But we know we are also moving towards a greater emphasis on owned and self-created content rather than splashing the cash on big marketing initiatives. There will be some proactive work in social media, but this environment can be hostile. So we're trying to curate, create, and disseminate our own content that shows people what is happening

Future-oriented solutions

"If I were to sum it up, our strategy this year is about showing not telling; making full use of visuals, building on what we're saying externally; talking about actions we have taken, rather than on what we'll do in the future. In the current climate, audiences are sceptical and are fed a black and white narrative about water and waste companies. At some point the public debate will switch from what's happened in the past to being more future-oriented and solutions focused. In the meantime, our task is to report progress and challenges transparently."

Nokia Louise Fisk

VP, Corporate Affairs Programs and Corporate Communications, Nokia

Supporting colleagues through change

For Nokia, our industry was significantly impacted by the weakness of the global economy. It started in good shape but as we moved through the year the challenges around inflation solidified and the impact on customers, particularly in the north America business made it challenging.

We had to be on top of the geopolitics piece to flex plans and strategy. In addition, we had to have solid communications for when issues hit, and when we restructured the business – including the corporate affairs function.

We needed to help employees through this period of change but also be able to adapt to the constant changing landscape. Flexibility and adaptability were key. We had to be ahead of the game enough to advise but we also needed to be able to make plans and provide stability.

Our culture did allow us to work quickly, we're very good in a crisis. For example, when Russia invaded Ukraine we responded quickly, and within weeks were able to announce we would exit Russia. In that sense, there is a real ability to flex with changing times.

However, in a large organisation we also have many necessary processes in place and changing those and 80,000 people's mindset can be challenging.

In corporate affairs we have to know when we need to put the pressure on to change quickly and when to step back and allow people some breathing space - we're the lens to the outside world.

Restructuring the function

We changed the structure of our team partly because of the availability of AI and data, we need to be able to make good use of these tools and this changes our talent profiles somewhat. We have also slimmed down our corporate affairs function – but maintained strong agency support. The roles we now have require people who have real business acumen to have senior, strategic conversations, so a strong understanding of the business is key and an ability to get the best out of our external support. We're the strategic centre and then we build out capacity through the agencies.

Being more strategic

We've reduced function size but made it far more strategic. Everything around it is impactful. Anything operations focused has gone into a business group or different functions, which helps them to feel more accountable and in charge of their own communications, and centrally we focus on the corporate piece. The impact of geopolitics will be unprecedented this year; half the world's population will be voting. Another year of transformation for economies will have an impact. Then there's how we use AI and data and become more predictive.

The whole thing points to being slimmer in size but more strategic and impactful for the business.

Stabilizing the team and delivering results in the here and now is equally as important as looking ahead and building for the future. We have to be able to do both at the same time.

Key skills for success

Skills: there's a few, the government affairs piece is hugely important so having people who really understand the different impacts around the world – and importantly – potential impacts as elections take place, is critical to our business.

Business acumen is also a must. We need to be able to converse with our global leadership team and senior external audiences on their level. Provide insights both for the business and from the business. For example, what impact are activities / decisions external to our business likely to have on us? Are we responding and shaping our strategies in the right way? Are we in the right conversations to help shape these landscapes? Are we engaging well with our internal audiences and using methods that they prefer?

We need people who are curious about the edge that data can give us. People who can see how it can make their work more impactful. Social listening is big for us – having clear, real-time information about issues allows us to make more informed decisions.

AI is part of that of course, understanding how to use it and what to do with it. How is it really going to help us, all about data and using it to make us better and more impactful.

Tangible ESG actions

Outside of technology there's another piece we're keeping an eye on around ESG. This area is maturing and as such, particularly in North America we're seeing regulations come into being regarding green washing. As CA teams, we need to have a clear understanding of the arguments on both sides and navigate to ensure that what we're doing as a company is tangible and will make a real difference.



Alison Flynn

Global Head of Corporate Affairs,
World Gold Council

Professional learnings from the past year

“Right now, any business thinking ‘I don’t want a Post Office-type moment’ should be making sure their corporate affairs team is less concerned with press release writing and more focused on looking at risk and being strategic.

“To me, acknowledging the power of storytelling is all part of this. Storytelling needs to be at the centre of things. It can work for you and against you though, so getting stakeholder engagement and people that understand third party advocacy and partnerships is vitally important for promoting this underrated discipline. We recently launched a podcast discussing what might happen in 2024, but used leading geopolitical experts to give their insights. This way we weren’t just talking about us. We are placing ourselves, and our sphere of influence, in the context of what is going on in everyday life.

Humanising storytelling

“Part of our challenge is humanising the stories we wish to tell. But getting into these conversations internally, and using what is going on in the external world to harness this, will help. We definitely want to place our sphere of influence in the context of what is going on in everyday life.

Data, Measurement and AI

“Data analysis and measurement still remain essential. Many organisations realise this is a discipline in itself, but it’s still easier to do this in marketing. Measuring the impact of corporate affairs on reputation is much harder. We’re still quite analogue in corporate affairs and this needs to continue to evolve.

“But if I look at the work some of my former teams are doing around digital, it is a powerful example of using people around the business. As for AI, I think the jury is still out here. There’s a place for it in research and data analysis, but it can’t – I feel – create the empathetic tone of a human writer.

The Evolution of ESG

“Off the back of recent corporate scandals I really hope a better appreciation of third-party storytelling can affect change. While we won’t quite see the death of press releases in 2024, they will increasingly be less relevant. I also think things like ESG could start to suffer an identity crisis. But if it’s wrestled away from the comms function it may not be a bad thing. ESG has to be rooted in your business model. Communications can make it a disclosure practice not a behaviours practice, so in time it will evolve away from corporate affairs functions.”



Andrew Friel

Corporate Affairs Director,
888 William Hill

Challenges and learnings from the past year

“Like most businesses, we’ve gone through a lot of change. Last year (when 888 took over), we went through an integration process, and this led to all teams being slimmed down. On top of this was March 2023’s record fine [from the Gambling Commission], in connection with people being allowed to get into debt and even – in some cases – people committing suicide. We also faced a shareholder takeover in July where we were fighting lots of press coverage. The Gambling Reform white paper was also later published. This is already having, and will continue to have, far-reaching consequences, and it’s an area we know we need to secure public engagement around before the next general election.

“In the midst of all this, we are resource-constrained because of the financial challenges that continue to exist. We’re constantly under the radar and we have to challenge this to build public engagement.

Leading a lean function

“My team is super lean, and in an ideal world I would have a brilliant media person, someone on the public affairs side, and someone looking after social media channels. Having people who can wear multiple hats would also be great – especially those at manager or senior manager level; people who understand how things work and are credible, both externally and internally. In resource-constrained teams people need to be able to deal with multiple audiences. If I was taking people on, I’d want to expose them to both the internal and external sides for their own development.

“In terms of where I see trends developing this year, I think it’s definitely around the continued importance of the CEO and ExCo taking the advice of corporate affairs advisers seriously. I don’t sit on the ExCo, but am close to it. What really matters is having regular interaction with the leadership function. And when you’re involved early, you can really add value and advise.

“ESG for us is around player safety, keeping gambling enjoyable and not problem causing, and making sure anyone who is impacted negatively is properly looked after.”



Jane Goddard

Director of Corporate Affairs,
BRE Group

The issue of relevance:

“As a solutions provider in the built environment space, the ‘relevance’ challenge most businesses face is even more pertinent to us. Even though we have good messages to tell around health and housing, current economic and geopolitical uncertainty can make creating impactful thought leadership difficult.

“All this said, we’ve worked hard to make sure we have representation across all the key political parties [we are speaking to Labour a lot], and I have expanded the team to 12 people in recent years. This is to make sure we’re covering everything from responsible business to strategic stakeholder engagement and external communications.

Navigating unpredictability:

“If Labour wins the next election we’re expecting greater focus on devolution, so we’ll also see a change of emphasis in our communications; but this is all part of the unpredictability we are having to deal with. Uncertainty is undoubtedly making it very difficult to plan, but we’re preparing for this already by doing a lot of mapping around the impact of political change. Some of the thought leadership we’ve been involved in has also been cross-party.

Investing in skills

“Clearly we need to be agile around how we manage this uncertainty, and data will play a bigger part in what we do in future. This could include, for instance, taking industry surveys and using them for thought leadership, or using the associated data to produce impactful statistics. When hiring into my function I have definitely found I now need communications colleagues who are much more experienced, and who can hit the ground running. I need people who can demonstrate initiative and development potential from the start. At BRE we have stretched our recruitment budget to support this, in terms of strategic hiring at the mid-to-senior levels.

Professional evolution

“Ultimately, many of the challenges I’ve set out also relate to how the profession should evolve, and whether corporate affairs should look more broadly beyond the world of politics. I still don’t think corporate affairs is as well understood as it could be – but our impact on reducing business risk is huge. As reputational risk increases, the impact good communication can make needs to be better understood. Managing fallout and developing proactive strategies is key. There is a definite question around how we can grow as a profession to ensure we don’t stand still.”



Jenny Hall

Director of Corporate Affairs,
Royal Mail Group

Challenges faced and learnings from the past year

“Last year was a big year for the business – including industrial action, inflation, a new CEO, dealing with a £400 million loss and instigating a turnaround to kick start the business again. Our priorities were introducing the new CEO, embedding him quickly, driving media activity but, most importantly, getting our employees back on board. When a lot is at stake emotions can run high. The joy of corporate affairs though is that we have the ability to judge whether issues are massive reputationally, or if it's a one day story that will disappear quickly. We can (and must) stay calm and keep focused on the big picture reputationally.

The case for expanding skillsets

“There are two areas we know we'll need to focus on in the immediate future: building internal engagement, and making our case for regulatory reform to politicians and wider stakeholders. This year we have a consultation on new postal service reforms and a general election, so effective political engagement is needed. We see more of our PR team getting involved in public affairs – which should widen their existing skillsets and offer brilliant career development opportunities.

Sitting on the Executive Committee

“Having stepped up to the ExCo in 2020 I can see how crucial it is that corporate affairs is an ExCo role. We're highly regulated; we have one of the biggest workforces in the country; and virtually everyone in the UK is our customer. Given all those factors [plus high levels of media and political interest], it's key we ensure communications is there at the top table.

“For any new programme I make sure comms is brought in at the start to face down any potential challenges. We do a huge amount of internal education about political dynamics and I feel it's important to tell people what we're doing and to really promote the value of corporate affairs to build understanding across the wider organization.

Data and measurement

“We'd all obviously want more budget, but broadly, I'm a big believer in insight-driven communications, and promoting this, and these skills more. People really do beat themselves up about measurement and analysis - I don't think I've met a single corporate affairs leader who thinks they're doing this as well as they'd like to be yet – and I would love to use more of this as the strategic basis in our comms campaigns. This is a key priority for the coming year.”



Nick Lakin

Group Corporate Affairs Director,
Kingfisher Plc

The role of business in society

“My team have created and delivered some really fantastic campaigns - campaigns that increasingly sit at the intersection of public affairs, the role of business in society and communications.

“As such, I believe our function has become much better at engaging in the sorts of societal issues that are relevant to our business and which I personally believe is the role of any responsible business to contribute to the debate for the common good.

“But the challenge going forward is huge. From a comms perspective, cut-through is diminishing as is much of what was once called “traditional” media; the need and expectation to engage in bigger issues is increasing, while the growth of social media; the importance of social media but also the ‘busyness’ of social media, all make it harder for organisations to cut through and win share of voice.

Staying close to the business

“This makes it even more critical that comms stays close to the business – to be aware of how reputational issues play out – and for us to also make better decisions about which issues the business does and does not publicly engage with.

“This means really starting to look at the comms skillsets we think we’ll need for the next five years. We’re already looking at how we can be a part of the growing trend for more visual communications. We’re also looking at what I call the “TikTokification” of corporate communications, exploring how we can bring ever-more complex topics to life riffing on forms of media my teenagers love. So more short, 90-second or less videos on newer platforms.

“The challenge of getting cut-through in the sustainability agenda “Immediate challenges I see are that half of the world’s democracies will be going to the polls this year, meaning we as a function have to help our business prepare for an uncertain future. But all the while in the background is an additional ongoing challenge: how we continue to make sustainability interesting and relevant to people.

“Any large company will tell you they’ve got a net zero plan but for the person on the ground, let alone our colleagues, it’s difficult to connect.

“So we need to increasingly try and talk about issues that are more distinctive, more real, ultimately more relevant. We need to find ways of delivering sustainability communications in a genuinely unique way to what every other big business is saying.

“Where I feel we’ve made significant progress at Kingfisher, however, is precisely working out how to bring societal issues and public affairs issues together as part of building our reputation and business strategy. We recently ran a campaign on trade careers which was hugely impactful, resulting in policy change and great profiling. We also launched a campaign on water sustainability for tradespeople. These types of campaigns helped bring our corporate and commercial stories to life.

“But there’s always room to improve - such as around how our leaders use social media, or the role our website plays - are they still a door to the company or just wallpaper?”

Managing message discipline

“PR doesn’t sit on the ExCo at Kingfisher. To make a difference I don’t think that’s necessary as long as the team is close to the business and has dynamic and regular enough access to the CEO and other execs.

“I feel optimistic about the role of corporate affairs. In an increasingly complicated world, it is even more challenging to manage message discipline. That makes it pivotal in how we can help the business lead its way through difficult times and periods of near constant change.”



Alan McLaughlin

Group Corporate Affairs Director,
Centrica

Sector challenges and learnings

“Covid-19, the energy crisis, the cost of living crisis, and the collapse of the energy market [supplier numbers have fallen from 80 in 2021 to 20 today], have all combined to see our sector experience an immensely challenging few years. Almost everything we’ve done since has been through the lens of higher bills. Even up till Q4 of 2023, energy was the biggest story – and relentlessly so.

“To some degree though, Covid-19 sharpened our team. They were agile, moved quickly and stepped up to this challenge. There have been bumps along the way (we weren’t capable of redistributing money customers at the scale government wanted when it introduced subsidies), but overall, the business has been very good at being able to change direction quickly.

“We need to ensure this continues, and we know that our work must be about adding value. We don’t take on vanity projects that don’t help the P&L or customers. We’re a lean team and this gives us the freedom to get the work done and be appreciated.

Greater integration of corporate affairs specialisms

“I’m increasingly of the mind that the traditional model of public affairs and media and digital being separate no longer works. I want these specialisms to work well together, so I need people who can work on all sides. Sharp operators will be those who’ll proactively pick up the phone. But it’s a trait I see less and less in candidates. I always look for people who want to network, who want to be on the phone and not rely on email. Finding that talent is an interesting challenge!

Challenges in the year ahead

“We are not yet beyond the cost-of-living crisis, and I can see its’ long tail continuing. Its impact has also hit consumer trust. Confidence is at a premium and we must be very focused on that. The Post Office situation – as shown by ITV – really exposed this.

“From a purely corporate affairs perspective there is a trend towards being closer to commercial teams and not just being about overall reputation. The question is how do we help create a better environment for commercial goals as well? I don’t sit on the ExCo. But I report into the CEO, talk to him regularly, and I am brought into board meetings frequently. If you have the ability to engage with leadership then you don’t necessarily need that seat.”



Kate O'Neill

Director of Stakeholder Engagement and Corporate Affairs

Key challenges and learnings from the past year

“Comms has grown in importance at the FRC because its been set up to be a really well-regarded function at the heart of the FRC. Last year a new CEO arrived and around the same time the withdrawal of our statutory instrument around audit and assurance policy meant we had to quickly re-set narratives, and create new work streams. But we’ve delivered great projects and the value of what we’ve done is clear. We’re always expected to give our views at the top table and it’s critical to have us ‘non-technical’ experts as a contributing voice when it comes to wider reputational impact.

“The intersection of media and politics is greater than ever; something that makes our roles even more challenging. Because corporate affairs professionals are at the forefront of stakeholder engagement, it is us that need to be asking about the world in which we operate.

Back to basics

“Reflecting on this, the skills I’ll be looking for in 2024 and beyond will be the old-fashioned stuff – better writers, myth busters, really basic communication skills, being able to tell a story and telling it well. This is more important than ever. Network-building too – and not being transactional – is key. We need people who are more flexible in their thinking and communications professionals who don’t try to stay too rigidly in ‘their lane.’

“A lot of the activity we do at the FRC is around strategic stakeholder mapping. We’re constantly tracking the issues of our stakeholders and feeding this into our plans. We’re using more data to help us do this, and we know that the data being collated needs to genuinely help answer the key questions we set out to ask.

Sitting on the ExCo

“In terms of working with CEOs, as the corporate affairs leader you effectively operate as their confidante – being the person who tells them the stuff that others may not want to say – but that is our role. It’s important to be realistic and to explain that not everything needs to be a win.

“Ultimately, corporate affairs is not a popularity contest. It’s often hard to be the one speaking out at the top table and telling the Board that a certain angle won’t land well, but it’s our job to do so.

Key leadership traits

“We are a sector that needs resilience, creativity and flexibility. Leaders must have the strategic ability to find a way around the problem. However much you plan, things happen and you need to be able to pivot quickly. You also have to be brave. And to own the issue when it happens.”



Deloitte.

Jo Ouvry

Partner and Head of Corporate Affairs,
Deloitte

Global Versus Local

“Geopolitical upheaval in various regions; balancing global versus local remits; issues management; dealing with the pace of change; and on-going transformation in our own business – these are just some of the challenges facing my own corporate communications team right now.

“In order to inform how we manage challenges, as a function we’re doing a lot more listening across the business to support how we advise the business.

Run the business, change the business

“At the same time, our philosophy is very much ‘run the business, change the business,’ and I’m continually looking at how corporate affairs can support this. To achieve this there will be a growing need for change communications expertise to be more of a fixed feature given the scale of business change. We’ll need people who can both communicate and engage with empathy, appreciate the power of compelling content and engagement approaches – and understand the role of behavioural science in comms.

The importance of EQ in hiring communications leaders

“When hiring leaders into my team having a high level of EQ is a key priority. A large chunk of the communicators’ job is being able to read people and tailor a response to them.

“It is interesting to examine how the evolving role of corporate affairs can shape an organisation’s culture, and how behaviours can be influenced through effective employee communications.

“Leadership maturity within the teams I’m working with, along with a post-Covid-19 recognition of the importance of communications (it was front and centre and continues to be so), has really enabled corporate affairs to drive business objectives and support cultural and commercial needs.

Joining the Business Executive

“Deloitte has a Business Executive - and Corporate Affairs having a seat at the table has definitely added to the strategic expectations of what my team should be contributing to and being part of. I’ve learned a lot too. Before this I’d be trying to ‘second guess’ what may be coming down the line. Now I can operate much more on the front foot. It’s very apparent how that access can shape the function and business impact in a much more strategic way.”

Kathryn Partridge

Group Corporate Affairs Director,
Britvic plc

Challenges and learnings from the past year

“As both a B2C and B2B brand, the degree to which the world is unsettled economically plays out in lots of different ways. My main task is making sure all stakeholder views and sensitivities are considered. Last year everyone was struggling with what the ‘right price’ was for their goods and how to make profit in a sustainable way, and at times it felt like we weren’t necessarily on the same side as our retailers. At the same time, you know that your workforce is also struggling.

“What we’ve learned from this is the importance of bringing both our employees’ and the person-on-the-street’s insights into our financial PR advice. But ensuring balance is always part of our role – crucially as a point of view rather than being part of the prevailing view.

Improving corporate affairs standards

“I still believe in the need for a better corporate affairs discipline. Standards are always increasing, but we are always needing to demonstrate value. The challenges around ESG, close-to-home scandals like Post Office, and cost of living all throw into sharp relief the need for our function.

“To meet this demand, the ability of comms professionals to translate trends into something that is helpful and pragmatic in terms of business performance is essential. The next generation of specialists needs to start from the point of view of what is the most feasible and credible contribution it can make. There is a whole area of neuroscience around behaviour and motivation. How we can tap into that, to engage stakeholders differently and understand how we can better make connections, is a real emerging opportunity.

Key challenges for 2024 and beyond

“I still believe that we’re not well represented as an industry, and it is hard to continue to develop without standardised qualifications. In the background we’ve also got to contend with AI and digital, and there is a race to see the best and most predictive way of using it for planning and forecasting. The ability to translate this into something that is helpful and pragmatic in terms of business performance is essential.

“But I also think there will be a trend of the HR function needing to help differentiate more around the EDI agenda. Corporate affairs will have a key role to play in making that work.”



Priya Brahmhatt-Patel

Director of Communications & Engagement,
Ofgem

Current challenges and learnings from the past year

“I’m acutely aware that we’re living in times where trust in government is low. Whether it’s watching the Covid-19 inquiry unfold or acknowledging the recent Post Office scandal, we see that trust in government to do the right thing is not where it once was.

“Because of this it’s more important than ever that comms steps up and makes its voice heard. When dealing with a crisis, demonstrating value is key to mitigating risk. Comms is much more able to directly impact outcomes if we’re there from the “off”, and there is something to be said about the value of ensuring the most senior leaders around the table are listening to you when you’re facing the most intense scrutiny.

Contributing to wider strategic conversations

“I’ve sat on the Executive Committee since I joined Ofgem but I’ve also had to build trust and prove myself. Even if you don’t have a seat at the table you still have a duty to speak up and build the space to be listened to. What I value the most is being a corporate affairs advisor to the CEO, the board and wider ExCo. My advice and judgement is sought on wider strategic conversations – not just related to communications. It’s anything and everything to do with reputation, issues, our people and the wider landscape.

The broadening remit of corporate affairs

“But I see my role as broadening too – into more value-add consumer engagement, and how this can be brought inside. As part of the government’s comms service we will also start piloting AI in comms which will ultimately involve handing over some more operational tasks. But that enables communications experts to focus more on strategy. Data’s use to meaningfully shape corporate affairs strategy will remain. We want to amplify what we’re doing across all channels, and so the skills I’m looking to hire are those that can really mix strategic thinking with diplomacy. I need people who think longer-term. We’ve historically been too media-heavy and reactive, but if we’re strategic, we’ll make better judgements about how we deal with the media and the press. Comms needs to build relationships and manage challenging stakeholders effectively. We’re not here to ruffle feathers but rather to influence with impact.”



Jennifer Scardino

Senior Vice President,
Head of Communications at Visa Europe

The challenge of leading communications for a major global brand

“VISA is the 6th most valuable brand in the world and employs more than 25,000 people globally. We are the original fintech, having started building our network in 1958 and now seamlessly and safely transacting payments more than 65,000 times a second in over 200 countries around the world. Being a systematically important business, this quite rightly brings high standards for service, trust and security – internally and externally. As a communications team our working environment was extremely complex last year. We had numerous incoming communications-related missiles to navigate. Given the scale of our brand, our function is lean – this gives my 32-strong communications team an innovative and start-up feel.

“Why is this? Well, I feel we challenge the status quo. Given the scale of the brand, VISA used to have a slightly conservative approach to communications, and when I first joined (some two and a half years ago), it’s fair to say the organisation was a bit light in comms and reputation and very strong on marketing and brand. Our brand is a tremendous asset of course but it’s even more powerful when combined with a strong reputation. Today, potential reputational/commercial risk plays a much heavier role in our communications strategy – but we are also actively campaigning and telling our story better.

Demonstrating commercial value

“I have a strong view that communications professionals really should be ‘communications professionals’. We need professional public affairs and communications experts because of the change and volatility we’re seeing in the business and political environments today. Commercial-savviness is also crucial. We need to show and measure our commercial value, and I really value strong people managers who are great at leading the team and developing people.

“Because our company is built on data, AI plays a crucial and ever-increasing role in most of our functions – VISA has been using AI in fraud detection for more than 30 years, but I’m still a huge believer in human judgement and genuine people skills. Inevitably there are areas where it will soon catch up and in the future we’ll be able to reduce the workload of some colleagues because of it, but it doesn’t provide the answers to sensitive reputational judgement and strategic consultancy.

The need to PR the corporate affairs function

“As a function, we could still be better at celebrating our people and our work. I think communications people need to sell their services more, and educate colleagues better about the value we bring and what commercial acumen we add. I feel that I can only achieve the full potential of my role by sitting on the leadership team. A lot of business people still don’t consistently know where and when and how to involve communications, but if we’re not in that weekly boardroom we’d miss out on the chance to both prevent harm and exploit moments that would be great opportunities. I hear snippets of information that can be turned into significant communications opportunities. Serious communications professionals at the top will ultimately expect to have a seat at the table.”



Lindsay Walls

Group Communications Director,
QinetiQ

Challenges and learnings from the past year

“Having previously worked in several FTSE 100 businesses, my move (last year), to a FTSE 250 company has been a real eye-opener. Paradoxically, you realise that the machinery in FTSE-100 firms gives you more bandwidth to tackle issues. There is more resilience there too. In a FTSE-250 however, the challenges can actually feel far greater (I also oversee marketing as well as comms), because there isn’t the same strength and depth or firepower already embedded in the business.

“I oversee marketing as well as communications and it was interesting to discover a much less integrated approach to communications when I joined. There was an assumption marketing and comms can work separately and still be effective. The company has experienced significant growth in terms of its financial performance, geographic footprint and people, but there is still an education job needed in terms of the benefits of the value of comms, especially not tackling issues in isolation. We are working hard at developing a more integrated approach when it comes to managing reputation.

“To help get us there, we need to tackle assumed knowledge, and what it means to be answerable to shareholders. Despite being a company that has been listed for some time, there isn’t a common sense of shareholder value across the business. Communications has a big part to play in changing that. A trend I spot is the ever-growing need for communications leaders to act as coaches and as the conscience of the organisation. Boards are increasingly relying on comms to help navigate ever-more challenging external pressures and scrutiny.

Upskilling and diversifying team skillset

“To do all this we probably need to think more about how we up-skill the comms team. I’ve had to blow apart the idea that marketing and comms are separate and explain that both remits are about reputation management. We need people who can think about our reputation and be able to bring in a communications campaign to support bids or to promote new technology in a cohesive, integrated way.

Communications priorities in 2024

“Being in the mid-cap sector, I definitely think there needs to be more thinking about how we support the equity story. Another trend will be how corporate affairs functions harness technology better, like where does AI come in and what does it mean for the function? Data needs to play a bigger role too. We’re doing a big digital transformation programme at QinetiQ, which should also help to provide better metrics around internal comms and employee engagement. There is desire from the team to do more with data and learn from it – and this will be a priority in the next 12-18 months.”



Mary Whenman

Director of Communications,
British Business Bank

Working closely with the CEO

“Post-Covid-19 communications is continuing to truly establish itself as the critical strategic advisor to the top. Its role is growing in importance and credibility, and while I don’t sit directly on the board [more down to board structure than anything else], I do have regular, direct access to the CEO and Chair and feel confident I can influence the ExCo on reputation management given their recognition of the important role of strategic communications.

“Fortunately, I don’t feel that my voice is heard any less by not formally sitting at the table. In fact, having a new CEO arrive 18 months ago, and being tasked with establishing him in the organisation has been very successful. I then had to do the same again when we hired and embedded our new Chair a year later.

Learnings from the past year

“My own learning from this has been the need for communications to be able to adapt and respond to the new style of a CEO – but not to be over awed. You have to pivot, while being completely honest and not being afraid to give your point of view or advice. The CEO really does need to hear anything and everything in the early days – warts and all. Building that trust is critical for ongoing success.

Trends in 2024 and beyond

“In terms of trends moving forwards, AI will inevitably continue to evolve and improve efficiencies – not by replacing the role of communications pros, but by enhancing the role of the communications function. And in an election year, the public affairs expert will be king!

“To manage change, I think the skills we’ll need most are people who are more multi-media in outlook. Communications needs people who are able to think strategically across all platforms and channels. A crisp understanding of reputation management and how to bring the ‘outside inside the organisation’ is now essential. I’d want to ensure I hire people with a highly strategic mindset.

“Finally, much like what other people have been saying, we’ll increasingly need people who really understand the importance of EVP and the employer brand – those people who don’t just see internal communications as a means of getting corporate updates out to employees but genuinely engaging them in the corporate journey and recognising the commercial benefit of doing so.”



Andy Winstanley

Director of Communications,
Oxa

Better quality communications

“The more I think about it, the more I come to the conclusion that less is more. Just because we can produce 1,000 press releases and millions of blogs doesn't mean it is the right thing to do. I think companies need to find a balance between what they can do and what they should do.

“Quality of communications is essential. Companies that stand out are ones that aren't content-production factories; rather they are disruptive in the way they put forward credible new ideas and arguments, so that what they say is a rip-roaring read or listen. Reaching back to my reporting days [I was formerly transport and environment correspondent at the BBC], news is not just about information; it's also about entertainment and the same is true for corporate communications.

Priority skills to hire

“The thing I look for are people who can think between the lines; people who are likely good network builders, and capable of telling stories relevant to the business. Can they find unique ways to say this? Can they adapt their approach for different audiences?

“I look for these creative [perhaps journalistic], traits in corporate communicators because trying to train these skills is hard. It can take a long time to get people to be excellent. In this world where you can use tools like Chat GTP, the human skills bar is actually higher. To get cut-through you need to hire brilliant, or at least – potentially brilliant people. In many respects, you're looking for the most human humans – not necessarily polished diamonds, more those with only a few tarnishes.

Be a creative wolf

“Which brings me to AI. Debate about the impact of AI is everywhere. Getting cut-through in a world that has been wallpapered with AI is challenging and there's a difference between true AI innovators – companies designing the technology and employing data scientists to hone algorithms – and those companies just using an AI tool to support existing processes.

“My response to all this is that being honest about your business is increasingly important. Ask yourself: Is AI your product, your USP, or just something you bought and use? My advice is don't splash AI all over your website if your true value is something else.

“Even if you are an AI innovator, truth (something my first journalism professor said didn't exist), is ever-more important. Corporate communications folks need to hold the line on the truth about AI in particular. Also, be the cliché police in the same way good writers reach for a sick bag when they see quotes from the CEO starting with: ‘I am thrilled, humbled, honoured, proud, ecstatic...’ My view: Don't be a sheep, be a creative wolf (a nice one).”

Emma Young

Group Corporate Affairs Director,
Moneysupermarket Group

The importance of collaboration:

“For me, one of the key ingredients for success is being collaborative – as well as also thinking beyond the day-to-day stuff, and being able to work with each different function to ensure the communications strategy aligns with the business strategy. Common sense is something that’s seriously underrated. But I think it’s invaluable if we are to be able to provide advice to the business about how the media will perceive certain decisions and actions before they’re taken. That said, the importance of knowing what makes a good story hasn’t gone away.

“As newsrooms continue to shrink, it’s up to us to come to journalists with great ideas that are ready to go and which will help them to do their job. I’m still amazed that some people working in communications don’t spend a lot of time reading and really understanding different media outlets, and the kinds of stories that work for each of them.

Agency partners:

“We’re a lean organisation, using agencies for external work (across corporate/financial communications and consumer PR), while we use in-house talent for internal communications and public affairs.

“I think this makes us an extremely collaborative organisation – which is handy because in my very first conversation with the CEO (when I joined last May), I was asked to launch a report, sharing the data we have, to help people understand their spending. What we produced was the Moneysupermarket Household Money Index – with a view to making financial data interesting and digestible.

Driving change at pace:

“What this work taught me is what our communications guiding principle is – that everything we do needs to be interesting, without being glib. We don’t want to leave people in despair for the sake of a PR story. But we also use the mantra that we can’t let the perfect be the enemy of the good. Our view is just to go with things, knowing full well that what we produce will continue to evolve and there’ll be an element of figuring more things out as we go. My experience of working in start-ups and other tech companies definitely helped me in that sense – while we weren’t moving too fast and breaking things, we explored what the MVP would look like and built on top of that so we could iterate as we went. Fortunately, I think the culture at Moneysupermarket Group genuinely allows for this. It’s a supportive, fast-paced environment, and Peter Duffy, our CEO, is used to fast-paced environments and getting things done at pace. That really sets the tone.”

“Rather than sitting directly on the ExCo I sit on the Customer Leadership team which enables me to contribute strategically. Generally, I agree it’s easier to make the CAD role really successful when it sits at ExCo, but it also works well with the current set up here. I report to the Chief Customer Officer, and have regular one-to-ones with the CEO.

Closer alignment between disciplines:

“In the immediate future we’ll undoubtedly see digital marketing and traditional PR becoming closer, if they’re not already combined within the same team. I haven’t really seen enough people talking about this, and yet it feels like a false separation at the moment. I think it also makes sense that external and internal comms will come ever-increasingly closer as well. Before I joined, internal communications sat with the people team but I brought it together with external comms. While the people team remains a key stakeholder, it means we can better operate as one comms function and are more closely aligned.”

