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Building a learning framework for internal communicators

Identifying the typical roles and skills required for your team

BY SUE DEWHURST AND LIAM FITZPATRICK

Planning your team's professional development means understanding the skills and experience needed to be successful. Sue Dewhurst and Liam FitzPatrick of Competent Communicators have been researching how internal communicators spend their time at work and what behaviors the most effective practitioners display. Here they describe a new learning framework that has emerged from the study.

Over the past five years, we've found ourselves becoming more and more involved in conversations about careers in internal communication. As the profession matures, expectations of its practitioners are rising and, for many people, a job in communication is no longer just a short-term stepping-stone en route to better things.

But the question we hear time and time again is "What does 'good' look like when it comes to

internal communication?" What skills, knowledge and experience should an effective internal communicator have at various stages in their career? How do I know what I should be personally aspiring to and measuring myself against? How can I best develop my team? Where is the definitive framework to help me recruit the best person for the job?

In recent years, there have been a number of good attempts to answer these questions. In the UK, a group of professional bodies got together to write the Inter-Comm matrix¹. It listed the skills, knowledge and experience a practitioner might need according to their level of experience.

We were both involved in developing this skills matrix, which was widely welcomed when it was launched in 2003. Some well-respected consultancies have also developed models to show how a typical career path might progress, which have helped structure career planning for individuals and teams.

A flexible model for a diverse profession

Despite the success of the Inter-Comm matrix, we felt there was more to be done in the area of professional development for internal communicators. Fundamentally, existing models tend to show a one-dimensional and predictable career path, starting as a junior deliverer and developing into a strategic, business-focused consultant.

The implication is that if you're delivering communication or are tactically focused, you must have a junior role, and if you have a more senior role, you don't get your hands dirty doing mundane things like writing or managing the

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

The findings discussed in this article are based on research conducted at the end of 2006. More than 700 in-house practitioners replied to a survey about careers, competencies and development plans.

A factor analysis of the data conducted by Ash Pattni Associates generated a number of role types, which were then discussed with 30 professionals at different stages of their careers, based in the UK, Europe and North America. These discussions mainly took the form of interviews and focus groups.

The study also referred to data on competency modeling prepared by the UK's Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

intranet or organizing events.

But clearly the world of internal communication isn't quite that straightforward. People join the profession via all kinds of routes and at different stages of their careers.

We interviewed someone who started out as the director's PA; a successful senior executive who started out as an engineer; a former psychology lecturer; and others who had joined through more obvious routes in publishing and PR.

Some had started out in junior roles. For others, their first role in internal communication was as a business partner. Others had already reached a senior position in another function and simply moved across at the same level.

A key objective of this study was to develop a model that reflected the diverse reality of life in internal communication, one that was flexible enough to be adapted to fit organizations and communication teams of all shapes and sizes.

So we began our research by surveying communicators worldwide to find out how they actually spend their time on a daily basis and what skills, knowledge and experience they regularly use.

The six types of practitioner

Statistical analysis of the survey data suggested there were six stereotypical role types within internal communication. By "types" we mean segments or groups of people who share very similar characteristics in terms of their skills and strengths, spend their time carrying out similar types of activities, and whose outputs tend to be judged in similar ways.

Most importantly, these types can be plotted against two dimensions based on how they spend their time (advising or doing) and where their focus is (strategy or tactics). Figure One (right) illustrates these six types and how they plot against the two dimensions.

Clearly, every organization is slightly different, but the six stereotypes described below should provide a starting point for thinking about the roles and types of people you need in your team.

1. The Leader

Internal communication leaders manage teams and lead the function either for an entire organization, or for a large division or territory. They spend much of their time managing and coaching team members and working with senior managers. They see themselves as business people first and communicators second. However, it's taken as read that they have sound technical ability and will roll up their sleeves when needed. Great internal and external networkers, they're skilled at dealing with uncertainty and conflict. They're likely to be measured on business results and through the subjective opinion of their senior customers.

2. The Advisor

Advisors support departments or major projects by providing advice, developing communication plans and providing hands-on support to deliver them. Local managers trust them for their insights into business problems and understanding of how their organization really works. Through well-developed networks and time spent understanding their audiences and carrying out research and feedback, they know what's really going on. They're judged on the quality of their advice and their ability to translate that advice into plans, activities and actions.

3. The Manager

The internal communication manager has excellent craft skills and a sound knowledge of channels. They spend most of their time on delivery. When they advise, it's normally about the best channels to use or the most appropriate timing. Good managers aren't easily intimidated and are great at juggling different priorities. They're skilled at translating between the boardroom and the shop floor. Their contribution is often measured by their ability to deliver activity against a plan and the quality of work they and their team produce.

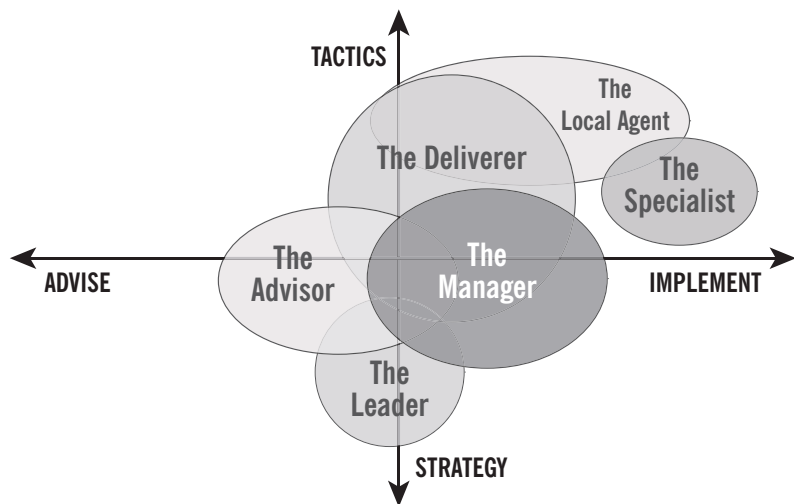
4. The Deliverer

Most teams have someone in this role – a safe pair of hands who can be trusted to make things happen. That might range from compiling distribution lists through to running a conference, sorting out the CEO's open forum or writing and editing a newsletter. They're less likely to supervise other communicators and depend on their organizational and craft skills to get the job done. People value them for their ability to do things on time and to a high standard.



Sue Dewhurst and Liam FitzPatrick run Competent Communicators, a firm specializing in professional development for internal communicators. They're Melcrum's official training and development advisors and deliver Melcrum's Black Belt training program. They're also the authors of a forthcoming report on competencies, development and standards for internal communicators, and blog about development issues on: www.BlackBeltDojo.co.uk

Figure One: Six typical role types for internal communicators



KEY POINTS

- A new study has established how communicators spend their time and what skills, knowledge and experience they regularly use.
- The research identifies six stereotypical roles ranging from a communication leader to a specialist (e.g., a web or events expert).
- It also highlights 12 competencies that clarify the behaviors a competent practitioner should display at each level. An “ineffective” category shows behaviors displayed by less able performers.
- The roles and competencies provide a framework for development.

Figure Two: Twelve competencies for internal communicators

COMPETENCY	DEFINITION
Building effective relationships	Developing and maintaining relationships that inspire trust and respect. Building a network and influencing others to make things happen.
Business focus	Having a clear understanding of the business issues. Using communication to help solve organization issues and achieve organizational problems.
Consulting and coaching	Recommending appropriate solutions. Helping others make informed decisions. Building other people’s communications competence.
Cross-functional awareness	Understanding the different contributions from other disciplines and working with colleagues from across the organization to achieve better results.
Developing other communicators	Helping other communicators build their communications competence and develop their career.
Innovation and creativity	Looking for new ways of working, exploring best practice and delivering original and imaginative approaches to communication problems.
Listening	Conducting research and managing mechanisms for gathering feedback and employee reaction.
Making it happen	Turning plans into successfully implemented actions.
Planning	Planning communication programs and operations, evaluating results.
Specialist	Having specific subject-matter expertise in a specialist area.
Vision and standards	Defining or applying a consistent approach to communication and maintaining professional and ethical standards.
Craft (writing and design)	Using and developing the right mix of practical communication abilities to hold the confidence of peers and colleagues (e.g., writing, design management etc).

◀ 5. The Local Agent

This category covers a broad range of people from the plant manager’s personal assistant to a regional communication manager. Internal communication is often one of several responsibilities for this person and they tend to have a tactical focus. Their agenda is normally set by the local management team, although their local knowledge and network makes them an invaluable sounding board for the corporate communication team. They tend to be judged on whether activities happen and how satisfied their local manager is with them.

6. The Specialist

Our research found a small group of people working in internal communication who see themselves as subject-matter experts in a specialist area such as web management, audio-visual production or event management. They have only a loose connection to the mainstream profession and could equally work in IT, marketing or perhaps HR. Because they’re highly specialized, they tend to work in large organizations.

Building a competency framework

Once statistical analysis had suggested these six role types, we began testing them out through focus groups and interviews with practitioners. In particular, we asked what skills, knowledge and experience people in each type of role needed, what people saw outstanding practitioners doing, what poor performance looked like and how people in the six role types spent their time.

On the basis of this information, we developed a series of 12 competencies (see Figure Two, left). We found that each of the six role types could be defined by:

- Which of the competencies they need to carry out their role (not everyone needs all 12).
- The level of skill, knowledge and experience they need in each competency.
- How much of their time they spend using each competency – a high, medium or low amount. For instance, there was common agreement that the communication leader must have strong craft skills (writing and design), but compared to, say, the deliverer, they spend a relatively low percentage of their time working on this type of activity.

Each of the 12 competencies has three levels: basic, intermediate and advanced. Based on the data we gathered, we defined the behaviors you might expect to see a competent internal communication professional display at each level.

We also added an “ineffective” category, listing those behaviors our interviewees told us were displayed by less able performers. For example,

some ineffective behaviors attached to the “business focus” competency are:

- Doesn’t make the link between communication activity and the business or organizational context.
- Delivers communication activity without considering whether it will serve any useful purpose.
- Lacks understanding of their business area.

Building a framework for a specific role

The next step in this project was to develop a simple table to map out the competency framework for an individual role, showing:

- The competencies needed in this role.
- The level of competency needed in each case.
- How much time we expect someone in this role to spend on these types of behaviors.

You can either build a competency framework from scratch, or, if you think the role fits one of the six types we identified from the survey, use the competency framework for this type as a starting point (see the framework for a communication leader, Figure Three, right).

In practice, competency frameworks will vary according to the size of the organization, the number of people in the internal-communication team, the expectations of managers and the specific requirements of each individual role, which is why we’ve built a flexible model.

For example, a communication leader in a large, multinational organization may spend much of their time setting the vision and standards, coaching and consulting, building relationships and developing other communicators, and a relatively small amount of their time “making it happen” or on writing and design. However, someone in a stand-alone communication leader role in a much smaller organization would probably have to be much more of a “Jack of all trades,” dividing their time evenly between the different competencies.

Next steps

More information about the 12 competencies and the baseline competency maps for each of the six role types will be detailed in a forthcoming Melcrum report. Ideas on how you use these competencies to plan your development are available to download at www.competentcommunicators.com.

We hope the framework will help bring structure to the process of defining roles, planning development and specifying recruitment, and would welcome your feedback.[scm](mailto:scm@melcrum.com)

Figure Three: Framework for a communication leader

COMPETENCY	LEVEL	TIME
Building effective relationships	Advanced	High
Business focus	Advanced	High
Consulting and coaching	Advanced	High
Cross-functional awareness	Advanced	Medium
Developing other communicators	Advanced	High
Innovation and creativity	Advanced	Medium
Listening	Advanced	Low
Making it happen	Advanced	Low
Planning	Advanced	Medium
Specialist	N/A	N/A
Vision and standards	Advanced	High
Craft (writing and design)	Advanced	Low

“OUR RESEARCH FOUND A SMALL GROUP OF PEOPLE WORKING IN INTERNAL COMMUNICATION WHO SEE THEMSELVES AS SUBJECT-MATTER EXPERTS”

1. The Inter-Comm skills matrix is described in an article in SCM February/March 2005 (Volume 9, Issue 2) called: Developing core competencies for internal communicators.

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