

LGcommunications publications

The commission on competencies for senior communication roles

LGcommunications is the representative body for local authority and public sector communication teams. It has 250 members in the UK as well as members in the Republic of Ireland. Its membership now includes PCTs, Fire Authorities and regional economic development agencies.

Endorsed by the LGA and IDeA, LGcommunications is a national body composed of local authorities and public sector organisations working to raise standards in communications. The objectives of LGcommunications are to promote best practice, explore new innovations and drive excellence in local government and public sector communications.

LGcommunications is led by a national committee whose Chairman is David Holdstock, Head of Communications for the London Borough of Hillingdon and it is administrated by a secretariat based at Westminster City Council.

Foreword

Building skills, putting communications at the top table

**Carl Welham,
Chairman, LGcommunications'
Commission on Competencies for Senior Communication Roles.**

This report builds on the first report of the 'Commission on Communications' published by LGcommunications in 2008. That report, 'The Chief Executives' Challenge', found that the leadership of local authorities saw communications teams as tactically proficient channel managers but found that they generally lacked strategic capability. Chief Executives in particular wanted greater advice from PR and marketing teams on how good communications could enhance services.

This second Commission report – on the competencies required by senior communicators - seeks to identify the skills that top communicators need in order to meet the Chief Executives' Challenge

The report provides many fascinating insights into the skills that senior communication managers already have and the ones that they need in order to be successful corporate managers.

The very best communicators are strategic, corporate and work on communicating the vision and protecting the reputation of the organisation. These people also go far beyond communications - they may manage large scale council projects - school building and customer service programmes. In contrast some others confirm the image of being channel managers - heads of communications who do not leave their comfort zone and lack ambition.

Part of the problem is that the training that is available focuses on channel management and tends not to be multi-disciplinary. In terms of developing a programme for heads of communications, some patterns are emerging. It is important to have a cohort of heads of communications working together looking at hypothetical situations and offering action learning sets that explore the local government landscape. Mentoring with more experienced communicators is seen as helpful as is getting involved in management development programmes to look at a wider set of skills around leadership, budgets and understanding the business we are in.

I am grateful to everyone who served on and was interviewed by the Commission and hope that this report serves as the foundation to build a new generation of successful heads of communication.

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Introduction

Background

Council communications teams are faced with a picture of declining informed ratings in local government. Between 2003/4 and 2006/7, the proportion of residents saying that they feel informed by their council has fallen from 51% to 42%. The LGA are saying that local government communications is not delivering the expected improvements in corporate reputation, despite the advent of tools such as the Reputation Campaign and Connecting with Communities toolkit.

Equally, 'The Frontiers of Performance in Local Government 4' (MORI 2007) shows that the difference between resident satisfaction with services and resident satisfaction with councils remains significant. Just three local authorities have council satisfaction scores which are higher than their average service satisfaction scores.

MORI's regression analysis, in the same study, also shows that 'feeling informed' remains the single most significant attribute for predicting resident satisfaction with councils. The more informed people feel, the more satisfied they are with their council. MORI's research also identifies the importance of 'value for money' as a second highly predictive variable.

It is also important to recognise that this picture of satisfaction and communications takes place in an environment of increasing expectations from the public and stakeholders and that improving council reputations is a work in progress.

Two key challenges for communications and councils are to raise resident informed ratings and to close the gap between council and service satisfaction. Both these endeavours should improve council reputation levels and council satisfaction ratings.

Objectives of the commission

LGcommunications has set up an independent commission following the government's white paper 'Strong and Prosperous Communities' to provide a practical analysis of how communications can best contribute to the reputation and success of councils. This commission produced the 'Chief Executives' Challenge' report.

The commission's objectives are:

- to define the scope of what constitutes effective local government communications
- to describe how communications can become a more strategic tool in order to deliver the business plan of the council
- to identify the impact of communications on customer satisfaction (from voting patterns to formal research and BVPI scores)
- to identify what values drives a council's brand and the effect communications has on 'the brand'
- to define what excellent local government communications looks like and provide a framework for rating individual council communications departments
- to assess the current level of training and professional development and describe what skills practitioners need in order to move from communications technicians to strategists
- to critically appraise how authorities recruit, train and develop local government communicators

Findings from the Chief Executives' Challenge

In April 2008 the Commission published the Chief Executives' Challenge – a quantitative and qualitative analysis of Chief Executives and Leaders of councils' perceptions of and requirements of heads of communications. The report looked specifically at why senior communications professionals were seen predominantly as effective channel managers rather than business strategists.

The report identified five main issues for local government communications professionals to address in order to become influential strategic advisors to councils rather than excellent channel managers.

1. Meeting the Chief Executives' Challenge
2. Becoming business experts
3. Proving worth through evaluation
4. Getting skills for future leadership role
5. Delivering excellent communications

Core competencies for strategists – Meeting the Chief Executives’ Challenge

The commission has built on the evidence gleaned from the Chief Executives’ Challenge and drilled down into what core competencies and qualities are needed in strategic heads of communications.

The objective therefore of this research is to focus on identifying the core competencies and qualities of excellent, strategic professionals.

The commission also examines ways to embed these core qualities in working practices and professional development of local government communicators. This will enable LGcommunications to become pro-active in taking forward practical actions, informed by industry leaders, in order to help the sector improve and for heads of communications to become more influential in their roles.

Focus of the research

This research study aims to answer the following questions:

- What competencies and qualities do strategic communicators need?
- What defines an excellent strategic communicator?
- How do strategic communicators acquire these qualities?
- Is it possible to develop and teach these qualities?
- How would you develop these qualities?
- How do heads of communication look to develop their careers?

Methodology

Given the focus on detailed explanation of the core qualities that create excellent strategic communicators, it was proposed that the research should be conducted through a series of in-depth interviews.

In order to gain a rounded picture of the qualities required for excellent communicators, LGcommunications commissioned The Research Unit (TRU) to conduct interviews with:

- strategic communicators to understand what they were doing
- professional bodies, communications consultants and academics for their perspective on what strategic communications required and training and development around these issues
- recruitment specialists to examine what personal development and what the political and managerial leadership are looking for

These interviews lasted between thirty minutes to an hour and were conducted either using video, face-to-face, or by telephone depending on the preferences of the interviewee. These interviews were conducted between 1st April – 1st May 2009.

These research findings will then be examined by an expert challenge panel in order to fine-tune the contents of this report and to provide a set of proposals and actions to take forward these findings.

The Research Unit (TRU) is extremely grateful to the following experts for giving their insight and time for this important research on local government communications.

Strategic Communicators

Alex Aiken, Westminster City Council

Paul Baverstock, Bell-Pottinger

George Eykyn, Director of Communications, Communities and Local Government

David Holdstock, Chairman, LGcommunications

Cormac Smith, London Borough of Richmond upon Thames

Carl Welham, Head of Communications and Customer Service, Buckinghamshire County Council

Ed Welsh, LGA

Professional bodies, communications consultants and academics

Mark Fletcher, Reputation

Carol Grant, Grant Riches

Rafael Gomez, LSE

Francis Ingham, PRCA

Trevor Morris, University of Westminster

Paul Willis, Leeds Metropolitan University

Recruitment specialists

Jonathan Flowers, Veredus

Rachel Mackenzie, VMA

In addition the National Committee of LGcommunications contributed to this report.

Executive Summary

Chief executives' challenge report 2008

Chief executives identified four key deficiencies in current communications leads:

- a lack of pro-active media
- insufficient political nous
- insufficient understanding of the business of local government
- not enough ability to persuade or influence those around them

Core competencies report 2009: what makes a strategic head of communications?

When TRU spoke to strategic communicators, recruitment consultants and academics there was considerable agreement about the competencies and qualities needed to be an excellent, strategic communicator in local government.

We would suggest that there are six competencies and qualities that will help heads of communications to become more strategic and to gain credibility with the political and managerial leadership of their organisations:

1. Strategic communications
2. Leadership, influence and experience
3. Excellent communications/ effectiveness
4. Truthfulness, integrity, honesty
5. Resilience
6. Political nous

Interestingly, but perhaps unsurprisingly, the qualities that experts identify in top communicators are the qualities that meet the leadership challenges: top communicators produce pro-active media, understand the business, possess leadership, influence, and political nous. It is important to recognise that these qualities apply for all types of local authority.

The following section now looks at expert opinion around each of these qualities that heads of communication should be looking to develop.

1. Strategic communications

By strategic communications, we are identifying a number of core competencies, skills and behaviours. This can be summarised as follows:

- **Connecting communications to the vision of the organisation**
Strategic communicators are able to connect the vision for the organisation and the business strategy to the delivery of communications for the organisation.
- **Understanding business strategy and the corporate discussion**
Historically heads of communications have not paid sufficient attention to knowing about business strategy and understanding local government finance. In the post-credit crunch world, with the focus on value for money and prioritising services, it means that the need to develop an understanding of this area has never been more acute. Equally, if heads of communications do not understand the language of the senior management board then this will affect their ability to influence outcomes.
- **Understanding the business of local government**
It is also important for heads of communications to be experts in local government and what matters to members in terms of national and local policy.
- **Understanding and engaging with the stakeholder community**
Strategic communicators need not only to be in touch with their own organisation but attuned to other stakeholders and the public.
- **Horizon scanning and creativity**
The best communicators anticipate the changing landscape, are in harmony with changing opinions on issues and are creative in their development of ideas to meet new challenges or overcome obstacles. A lot of this is anticipating what direction the council and the public are moving in but also picking up the national stories, central government policy and local policy initiatives and thinking how they play out.

2. Leadership, influence and experience

Leadership, influence and experience have a number of important facets that relate to being an excellent head of communications.

Recruitment experts identified qualities of gravitas and confidence as essential in gaining and having credibility with the leadership. It is the responsibility of the head of communications to be the conscience of the organisation and to help the leadership to distil what it wants to 'be famous for'.

This means in essence that the head of communications must have an excellent understanding of the business and goals of the Chief Executive, the political imperatives of the Leader, and have the trust and confidence to steer the organisation in the right direction in reputation terms and enough credibility that the course recommended will be supported by the leadership.

To achieve this, the importance of influencing skills cannot be underestimated in terms of working with colleagues or the relationship with the political and managerial leadership of the organisation.

'[It is the] responsibility of the senior communications person to say: what is it you wish to achieve chief executive, what is it you want to be famous for Leader?'

Alex Aiken, Westminster City Council

However, the ability of heads of communications to influence is fundamentally connected to their ability to deliver what they promise.

It is also important to act in such a way that inspires confidence and reinforces your right or capability to be operating at the highest levels of the organisation as well as in your own team. This requires the utmost professionalism both in terms of actions and behaviours.

3. Excellent, effective communications

The credibility of communicators is grounded in excellent, effective communications that deliver what the leadership of the council is looking for. Communicators have to show that they are exceptional practitioners in their field of expertise.

'A great head of communications is someone who is well respected and positioned at the very heart of their organisation, driving forward reputation. By understanding the strategic needs of the business, they will demonstrate clear leadership, delivering measurable results.'

David Holdstock, Chairman, LGcommunications

The Chief Executives' Challenge report showed just how important effective media management is to the reputation of heads of communications. It is therefore imperative that heads of communications can illustrate deep understanding of how the media works and affects reputation. This should not be built upon experience alone but also on empirical evidence. Another part of this is being pro-active with the particular media relations landscape they find themselves in. Heads of communication need to appreciate how differently they may need to deal with media scrutiny in a city council, a London borough or a rural district council. Heads of communications should also be at the forefront for new and innovative research into the effects on reputation of media and new media.

Communicators need to demonstrate action as well as strategy and understanding and they must be able to clearly demonstrate to the leadership (and to their teams) how business objectives are delivered through strategic communications.

The industry has been speaking for over 25 years of the need to improve evaluation and base communications on solid research of audiences and issues. However, as was highlighted in the Chief Executives' Challenge, if this discipline does not improve then gaining credibility and trust for Heads of Communications will be an unattainable goal.

4. Truthfulness, honesty, integrity

These qualities are essential to all heads of communications and the loss of reputation in any one of them is likely to irreparably damage the reputation of the practitioner.

'Honesty is an important quality for communicators and allied to that being trusted. It is very difficult for communication to work with a lack of honesty as this noises up the signal.'

Rafael Gomez, LSE

Externally these qualities should be the basis of the relationships built between the head of communications, stakeholders, media and other channels.

Internally the head of communications must be trusted by the whole organisation in order to be an effective manager and custodian of reputation. In a crisis it is important that the head of communications has the credibility and trust within the organisation to enable officers and members to freely impart all relevant information and act on his/her advice and judgement as to the effects of the crisis on the reputation of the council so that it can confidently pursue the right strategy to cope with the crisis.

‘So much depends upon relationships. Senior staff must trust you and you must be seen as being worthy of trust. In some circumstances, where something has gone badly wrong, you will need to ask people to tell you everything there is to know – the inside story from the beginning – and you’re not going to be able to do this without a relationship with them.’

Mark Fletcher, Reputation

5. Resilience

This is a key attribute of an excellent head of communications. Effective senior communicators need to be able manage both conflict with other professionals within their organisation and with external agencies such as the media. They need the resilience to withstand conflict and the strategic capability to look at the bigger picture and maintain and build long term relationships. There is also the challenge that so much of what communications does happens very quickly in the public domain. Heads of communications need to be capable of dealing with these kinds of risks and issues and be aware of the effects of them on key stakeholders.

‘Resilience – The ability to withstand conflict at a local level – with councillors, with individual departments, with other organisations. It is important to be able to ride out short-term conflicts and build long-term relationships. A head of communications also needs to show that they can communicate in a crisis.’

Carol Grant, Grant Riches

Heads of communications must also be resilient in crisis. They are often the bearer of unpleasant news and must take decisions to defend reputation that others in the organisation simply will not immediately understand.

‘As the inevitable storms blow up as well as the day to day information management requirements of handling communication in a managerial position especially in a political organisation, you need to be able to stay calm so that you can address those immediate requirements but at the same time keep focus on your long term plan that you are driving forward to implement.’

Paul Baverstock, Bell-Pottinger

‘You’ve got to be able to juggle and prioritise. You’ve got to listen and advise, and be a problem solver. I think this requires stamina and resilience, and the ability to sustain a high work rate.’

George Eykyn, DCLG

6. Political nous

Heads of communications must deal with the peculiarities of local government in terms of working with the administration and the executive. Those that do not have a full grasp of how politicians work and the importance of policy decisions will fail to gain the confidence of the council leadership. There also needs to be a recognition of how communicators balance the different pulls on them between different member groups and the chief executive. This can be a challenging part of the role especially in situations where there is no overall political control of the council. It is important to emphasise that leaders and chief executives may have different objectives and that the head of communications should be trying to find a narrative line through these sometimes conflicting aims. In this regard, it is important to emphasise not only political nous but emotional intelligence in these complex relationships.

'A head of comms will never be effective unless they have the confidence of the senior people, the principals. And, in the world we work in, local government, half the principals at least, if not more, are politicians and if you don't understand their world, if you don't understand the importance of a policy position as an expression of political identity and you don't understand the fine lines that they can't cross then you will never have their confidence.'

Ed Welsh, LGA

Background: where do the best heads of communications come from?

The experts were asked whether any particular backgrounds had any advantage in becoming a head of communications. In almost every case, the experts said that the qualities of the person, leadership capabilities and their experience were the most important things. Experts tended not to think it mattered whether a person came from a journalistic, marketing, PR or political background.

'I don't think background per se is important, what you want is a mixed team and to build a mixed team. One person cannot have all those things. A great manager/ leader will see that and build a team with the length and breadth of skills and abilities needed.'

Trevor Morris, University of Westminster

However, the type of experience you gain is important. Working for large organisations, having handled crises and managed a busy national media profile from outside the world of local government would help develop the kind of competencies and qualities required.

'I don't think you can become a head of communications simply by going through the ranks in Local Authorities unless you work for a major Local Authority which is continually in the news such as Manchester or Birmingham or the Greater London Authority, you need experience outside the sector.'

Cormac Smith, Richmond upon Thames

While it is not about background as such, one thing that some experts point to is that it is important to have an interest in politics.

'The top communications advisers in any sector particularly in local authorities must understand the broad political context- they must have good collateral knowledge of politics at a national and at a local level...They must also have an understanding of the commercial imperatives that the chief executives work to.'

Trevor Morris, University of Westminster

'Obviously I think you're always going to struggle if you're going into Local Government and you don't really have an interest in politics.'

Ed Welsh, LGA

Meeting the challenge: can you teach these competencies and qualities?

The Chief Executives' Challenge to heads of communications includes a mixture of harder and softer skills: learning strategy and about the business, and political nous and influencing skills. It is possible to improve people's knowledge of strategy and engender a greater corporate understanding of how local government works.

However, it is much harder to develop softer skills, though not impossible. These softer skills are linked to experience: working in different organisations, managing crises and working in large organisations outside of local government.

'I think you can teach people a strategic appreciation. I think you can give people an exposure to the basic elements of what thinking strategically is about, that is a basic business and management and leadership education. So, you can absolutely. I'm not saying everybody is going to be receptive to it but you can certainly teach it. The other two elements, political nous and being an effective influencer are, I was going to say God given but that's perhaps too generous.'

Paul Baverstock, Bell-Pottinger

Meeting the challenge: Where should communications sit?

An important issue for strategic communications is whether it can be effective for organisations without being represented on the senior management team. On this issue, what experts agree on is that the most important factor is to have effective influence with the organisation's leadership. However, experts are split on the necessity for heads of communications to sit 'on the board'.

'We used to rant and rave about being at the top table. I don't think there's a need to be at the top table as long as one of the directors has overall responsibility for communications. I think directors now have a much better understanding of communications and marketing than they used to. What I do think is important is to have Caesar's ear to have close links with the leadership; I don't think this means necessarily being on the board.'

Ray Jones, The Chartered Institute of Marketing

'I think they also need to be around that board room table. Too often, the people who head up comms don't have a seat by right at the table where decisions are being made, and that is a major flaw. Until our people start pressing for that permanent position there then they are always going to be playing catch up and they're always going to be seen as slightly second rate in terms of the hierarchy within the organisation...I think we need to showcase the examples of where you do have top level Comms people around the table, the enormous benefit that delivers to the organisation in terms of reputation, efficiency and the delivery of top quality services to local people.'

Francis Ingham, PRCA

Development: how can we develop excellent heads of communications?

There is a considerable amount of personal development available to heads of communications that is focussed on particular communications disciplines like media relations, crisis management or marketing. However, there may be a deficiency in the kind of development that would strengthen the soft skills highlighted previously.

‘There is a huge amount of learning that the sector provides and I think that there’s a lot of on the job learning and reading that potential and actual heads of communications can do to improve their skills. But fundamentally there isn’t an effective management or talent development programme for comms managers seeking to become heads of communications. So, typically what happens in a crisis, crisis communication is essential for any head of communications, is that the crisis happens and dealing with that crisis is outsourced to an external PR agency or similar because the head of comms has just never been through it, never done it, doesn’t really feel comfortable doing it.’

Alex Aiken, Westminster City Council

In addition, graduate degree courses tend not to focus on the wider set of skills a communicator will require to lead a strategic communications team. This developmental background may also in part help explain why so many communicators tend to adopt a ‘channel manager’ approach as opposed to being strategic communicators. Many of the experts identify that strategic communicators need to develop a wider set of business skills.

‘I think to get to that position they have to partly skill up, they have to see themselves as being board level directors, they have to be able to emphasise their own credibility with an overview of the whole organisation. They need to have the skills therefore that aren’t just about communications, and I think that’s one of the gaps really. If you looked at the professional development programme of a Finance Director or of a Director of Social Services, it isn’t just about the operational detail of their own department, it’s about taking a broader outlook on their role and responsibilities. Too often, Comms people just don’t press for that kind of professional development.’

Francis Ingham, PRCA

'There isn't, if we're honest with ourselves, much of a framework for people to develop their skills at whatever point in their career they first come into Local Government. There isn't a clear progression ladder, there isn't a clearly defined set of skills and qualities that somebody at this level needs or at that level needs and that goes all the way up to heads of comms, Directors of Comms, Chief Exec.'

Francis Ingham, PRCA

Recruitment

Recruitment specialists put great emphasis on the competencies and qualities highlighted in this report when placing senior communications specialists.

It is the possession of these key qualities, experience, confidence and passion that single out the best heads of communications even over and above qualifications in PR/Marketing.

'Heads of communications come from a variety of backgrounds – there is no set route into the role or specific academic qualifications required. However, talented heads of communications often share a common background which includes exposure to the public sector, crisis and issues management, people and budget responsibilities, and often substantial change management. The most important criteria above all are personality and passion.'

Rachel Mackenzie, VMA

'The best candidates have all these qualities I have identified. However, over and above, something that the political and managerial leadership are looking for, something I am looking for, is that positive impact. When they walk in the room, they show desire for the role, they are positive, passionate, enthusiastic and can demonstrate the qualities I have outlined.'

Carol Grant, Grant Riches

Recommendations

LGcommunications should consider current career progression in communications and opportunities to encourage wider business learning.

LGcommunications should consider developing a programme to support and develop strategic communicators.

LGcommunications should consider developing a programme with chief executives to make sure that they are receiving strategic communications and gaining the most from the function.

Some also suggested that this should form a professional qualification.

A process of 360 degree evaluation was proposed by several experts as a way of understanding how others see you in order to influence outcomes.

Developing a learning package which is delivered in different parts of the country and digitally.

There is a challenge to local government communications in undertaking more high-quality evaluation of their work. Evaluation mechanisms are important for understanding public and stakeholder perceptions, value for money and communicating impact back to the corporate centre. LGcommunications should consider how it can improve evaluation.

Credibility with leadership

The Chief Executives' Challenge

In order to understand why local government communications is as it is and how it can become better, it is important to recognise the four key challenges that chief executives and leaders place on communicators:

- a lack of pro-active media
- insufficient political nous
- insufficient understanding of the business of local government
- not enough ability to persuade or influence those around them

Perhaps the first question to ask is why these challenges? Why not others? Communicators need to understand the terrain: local councils are political, often large organisations, with many local stakeholders. The sheer number of council services, often dealing with the most intimate aspects of human life, combined with the complexities of a democratically led organisation, offer significant potential for reputational challenges and crises.

Seen in this light, TRU would argue that these four challenges are the leadership's way of asking communicators to focus on the reputation of the organisation. The political and managerial leadership are attuned to their organisation's reputation and their challenges to heads of communications reflect this focus. Meeting this reputational challenge requires strategic, integrated communications. TRU would also argue that the descent into 'channel managing' by heads of communications reflects an inability to deal with the challenges set by the leadership and by the type of organisation a local authority is.

'Reputation is critical and therefore that link [between head of comms and] the Chief Executive and leader should be the starting position of any authority that's serious about improving public perception.'

Cormac Smith, Richmond upon Thames

When TRU spoke to strategic communicators, recruitment consultants and academics there was considerable agreement about the qualities needed to be an excellent, strategic communicator in local government.

We would suggest that there are six qualities that will help heads of communications to gain credibility with the political and managerial leadership of their organisations:

- Strategic communications
- Leadership, influence and experience
- Excellent communications/ effectiveness
- Truthfulness, integrity, honesty
- Political nous
- Resilience

Interestingly, but perhaps unsurprisingly, the qualities that experts identify in top communicators are the qualities that meet the leadership challenges: top communicators produce pro-active media, understand the business, possess leadership, influence, and political nous.

The following section now looks at expert opinion around each of these qualities that heads of communication should be looking to develop.

Strategic communications

By strategic communications, we are identifying a number of core competencies, skills and behaviours. This can be summarised as follows:

- Connecting communications to the vision of the organisation
- Understanding business strategy and the corporate discussion
- Understanding the business of local government
- Understanding and engaging with the stakeholder community
- Horizon scanning

These core competencies will encourage effective communications in whatever kind of council communicators are working in. The key is that communicators need to focus on these qualities and consider how they are reflected in local circumstances.

Connecting communications to the vision of the organisation

Strategic communicators are able to connect the vision for the organisation to the business strategy and then plan and deliver communications for the organisation.

'A strategic communicator always is able to walk into the office of the principal people in an organisation, has the ear of the Chief Executive, has the trust of the leader, is always invited to the top table when the big decisions are made. So it's about primarily influence. Secondly it's about helping the organisation to plan better to understand how all decisions are going to have a communication context.'

Ed Welsh, LGA

'Heads of communications need to instil confidence through their knowledge and their ability to deliver. Heads of communication should be providing advice that is authoritative and assertive – strategic advice about communications – not just the big picture, the narrative but on the implications of this on reputation.'

Carol Grant, Grant Riches

Understanding business strategy and the corporate discussion

Another key message from experts about being a strategic communicator is that historically heads of communications have not paid sufficient attention to knowing about the business and knowing about finance. In the post-credit crunch world, with the focus on value for money and prioritising services, it means that the need to develop an understanding of these areas has never been more acute. Equally, if heads of communications do not understand the language of the senior management board then this will affect their ability to influence outcomes. Heads of communications need to find ways to communicate that council services are providing value for money to the public.

'Be a business strategist rather than a communication strategist. You need to have an understanding of the language of the board and business strategy. Part of this is an understanding of the different levels of strategy that are operating within an organisation. One way to do this is to think about four key strategic levels: first, the level of Enterprise Strategy which is essentially stakeholder orientated and is about the role of the organisation within society. What values and principles does it represent? What obligations does it have? The Corporate Level tends to be financially orientated and is where the senior management team consider how the organisation's resources should be used to meet the objectives set at Enterprise level. The focus at Service User Level will be on 'customers', delivery partners, regulators and employees: the point at which corporate intentions and plans are made real. Finally, the Functional Level is where the communication team's expertise is used directly

to implement programmes of activity, such as media relations campaigns, lobbying, production of publicity materials, etc. Communication should - and often does - get involved in considering the organisation's vision and ensuring its license to operate and societal mandate is maintained. However, I think that heads of communications are neglecting the corporate level. This is where a lot of decisions are made and increasingly so given the impact of the credit crunch. Heads of communications need to plug into this level of strategy to help shape this debate...If you can't speak the language of business, you're not a business strategist and you will not therefore be able to influence at that level.'

Paul Willis, Leeds Metropolitan University

'I would suggest that any high level, strategic communicator needs at a bare minimum to have read Michael Porter's 'Five Forces' theory of strategy so they understand how an organisation or a business needs to navigate its way to success.'

Paul Baverstock, Bell-Pottinger

Understanding the business of local government

Strategically, understanding the business objectives of councils is also important in terms of developing campaigns for the organisation and building connections with the organisation's leadership.

'Understanding the business is very important. You need to be tuned in. If you don't understand things like CAA, you won't understand what drives the chief executive.'

Mark Fletcher, Reputation

'It is really important that heads of communication have a good understanding of how local government works and what matters to members. They need to understand local political realities: what are the drivers for local councillors? Related to this, heads of communications need to be able to anticipate and exploit trends - horizon scanning – looking for opportunities and threats.'

Carol Grant, Grant Riches

Understanding and engaging with the stakeholder community

Strategic communicators need not only to be in touch with their own organisation but attuned to other stakeholders and the public.

'It is essential that you are asking yourself about the external perspective. What's going on? How's this likely to play? It is a vital role of communications to be "bringing the outside in" to the organisation. At the same time, you have to be acquiring corporate knowledge – know how the organisation ticks. This will help you to help your organisation and your boss achieve their objectives.'

George Eykyn, DCLG

'[Head of communications] need to provide reliable advice based on a firm and empirical understanding of what the audience is that the council serves are looking for from a public authority.'

Alex Aiken, Westminster City Council

Horizon scanning

The best communicators anticipate the changing landscape, are in harmony with changing opinions on issues and are creative. A lot of this is about anticipating what direction the council and the public are moving in but also picking up the national stories, future policy initiatives and thinking how they play out. Communications teams can also play a vital intelligence role for the council in terms of picking up the latest hot issues inside and outside the council. Feeding this information back to the political and managerial leadership will help communications gain credibility. Equally, heads of communications should be thinking about how the impact of pressure on the public purse will play out in terms of value for money for council services and how their messages can meet this challenge.

'When you're sitting at a management table and you're tasked with communicating a particular management decision, strategy, goal or objective, you're going to have to think forward beyond tomorrow, beyond the immediate transaction of a media announcement and understand to who you are trying to communicate and through which channel, and that takes in my view a great deal of vision and forward thinking.'

Paul Baverstock, Bell-Pottinger

'Innovative ideas – heads of communications have to be able to demonstrate value for money and how they can creatively cut costs for the council. They need to be able to analyse broader issues at a local, regional and national level and support the Chief Executive, politicians and the senior management team to address any likely issues.'

Rachel Mackenzie, VMA

‘Obviously creativity is important, the ability to generate ideas, and I don’t mean by creativity the ability to just create a pretty newsletter, I mean creativity of ideas.’

Ed Welsh, LGA

‘As you drive forward your communication, draw upon as much creativity as possible from both yourself and indeed your team in being able to give life to the path that you have chosen.’

Paul Baverstock, Bell-Pottinger

There are also words of warning from experts that for strategic communications to work it helps to have a clear vision and that good judgement is required especially when it is time to change what you are doing.

‘Communications professionals are messengers; it’s no good conveying ideas that haven’t been thought out. They need to know what they want to communicate and they need to know what they want, policy and objectives. You need to know where you are going – a common view of what they [the leadership] want. If there are no objectives, how do you know what you want to convey?’

Ray Jones, The Chartered Institute of Marketing

‘You need two things: you need a strategy and you need a plan that implements that strategy. People often mistake the two. You have to view your strategy as organic i.e. the strategy that works today might not be the strategy that works tomorrow. So as you implement your plan you’ve got to ensure that you monitor the progress of your plan against your strategy, if you need to change you must not be afraid do to so.’

Paul Baverstock, Bell-Pottinger

Leadership, influence and experience

Leadership, influence and experience have a number of important facets that relate to being an excellent head of communications. Interestingly, recruitment experts identify qualities of gravitas and confidence as essential in gaining and having credibility with the leadership.

‘[It is the] responsibility of the senior communications person to say: what is it you wish to achieve chief executive, what is it you want to be famous for Leader?’

Alex Aiken, Westminster City Council

‘Gravitas, a head of communications needs to exude confidence, and keep the promises they make.’

Jonathan Flowers, Veredus

'Gravitas, trust and leadership are the fundamental qualities and characteristics of any successful head of communications in order to inspire confidence and credibility with the Chief Executive. Without these basic characteristics, heads of communications will often struggle to ensure they have the ear of the leadership team.'

Rachel Mackenzie, VMA

Leadership skills are also associated with realising vision, showing the organisation where it is going and being someone people are drawn to and want to work with.

'The fundamental quality is they have to be seen to be leaders. And by that I mean that they can set goals both for their teams and within the organisations that they serve, and say this is where we are, this is where we're going to get to and these are the steps we are going to take to get there.'

Alex Aiken, Westminster City Council

'Leadership – Heads of communications need to command respect from their team, senior officers, and members. Be someone partners want to work with. They need to be able to explain the vision and the end point - connect with people.'

Carol Grant, Grant Riches

The importance of influencing skills cannot be underestimated in terms of working with colleagues or the relationship with the political and managerial leadership of the organisation. However the ability of heads of communications to influence is fundamentally connected to their ability to demonstrably deliver.

'Any head of communications needs to be a strong negotiator and mediator. Working in a political environment with many different challenges, it is vitally important that the head of communications can persuade and influence at all levels. They must build a strong and easy rapport with their Chief Executive which will undoubtedly prove the most important relationship in their role.'

Rachel Mackenzie, VMA

It is also important to act in such a way that inspires confidence and reinforces your right or capability to be operating at the uppermost levels of the organisation as well as in your own team.

'Authority is an important requirement for communications. The old Robespierre maxim: 'Dress like a banker, think like a radical'. To be taken seriously you have to look the part. Equally, in persuading and influencing people, lots of academic research shows that dressing appropriately, having symmetrical features, the ability to create social validation and to project group feeling play an important part in believability...sincerity is important. The best ones are believers, they believe in what they are doing. They have passion and empathy.'

Rafael Gomez, LSE

'In my view, the most important quality that you need in order to have credibility is to be seen as being of board level quality. The problem is that too many heads of comms, in the eyes of the leaders and chief executives, are more interested in the day to day management of the press team, rather than taking a strategic overview as part of the leadership team of the authority.'

Francis Ingham, PRCA

'You have to be a great manager to get your team to hold those tough positions. It's not always the head of communications that is out there delivering the message and the team have to have faith in what you are doing.'

Paul Willis, Leeds Metropolitan University

Excellent, Effective Communications

The credibility of communicators is grounded in excellent, effective communications that deliver what the leadership are looking for. Communicators have to show that they are assured in their field of expertise and this means being able to work pro-actively with the media. Communicators have to analyse what are the challenges that face them as districts, counties or single tier authorities in terms of delivering effective communications.

'Another key area is knowledge based around communications and the environment: knowing the media, knowing the local people, local issues.'

Jonathan Flowers, Veredus

'There is the necessity, particularly in politics it seems to me to have a deep understanding of how the media works, how the media operates, the way that media transactions are arrived at, what is the likely outcome of a particular story.'

Paul Baverstock, Bell-Pottinger

Communicators need to demonstrate action as well as strategy and understanding.

'Deliver on promises or learn not to make them. Be realistic about the political environment that you're working in. Don't promise things that are utterly dependent upon others – or upon getting permission from people whom you may only be able to influence. You may be only one of a number of players and recognising this will help you to not over-promise.'

Mark Fletcher, Reputation

'Often underrated but hugely important, there needs to be a work ethic. I see too many heads of communication who like to sit in their offices and scheme and come up with grand ideas but won't pick up the phone and brief journalists, win friends and make things happen. You are, at the end of the day a communications officer for your organisation and you've got to demonstrate to your team and to the people that you work to that you are able to do the basic communication job as well as the strategy and the delivery and the management.'

Alex Aiken, Westminster City Council

This also requires a focus on results and being able to communicate the impact that communications has made.

'Can-do attitude – Heads of communications need to focus on solutions not problems. Need to produce tangible, measurable results and set high standards for themselves and others. In short, they need to be an excellent performance manager. Sometimes communications can appear fluffy, with unclear outcomes – heads of communications must show how it contributes to business aims.'

Carol Grant, Grant Riches

A key part of effective communications still remains taking the formalistic language of organisations and engaging the public and stakeholders with the issues.

'Communications people are interpreters turning jargonised language into understandable English. They need the ability to understand complex issues and objectives and convert simple issues.'

Ray Jones, The Chartered Institute of Marketing

'I'm a great believer that the reason communications have got such a bad rap, particularly in government, is that it's taken in an arena where people lie anyway and then wrapped it in an impenetrable language, often an invented language with jargon...Speak clearly. Speak in short sentences. Choose your words carefully. Speak slowly...Think about pacing and communication. And think about weight of words. Words are weighed by impact, they're not weighed by volume. And challenge as a communicator everybody to be strong crafters of the English language.'

Paul Baverstock, Bell-Pottinger

Finally, there is also an expectation that communications should be conducted in a professional way.

'Professionalism is paramount for any head of communications through exemplary conduct and resilience. The role can be stressful – keeping on an even keel is vital. Professionalism often encompasses an ambassadorial role for the organisation in the council's affairs with other organisations.'

Rachel Mackenzie, VMA

'I think as communicators we are professional and it doesn't really matter what sector we are working in, we provide a service or an input that makes a difference. It doesn't matter whether we're selling chocolates, Jaguar cars, water, local government; we are doing the same thing. I said earlier about having one foot in the organisation and one foot out. I think a certain distance can help.'

Ed Welsh, LGA

Truthfulness, honesty, integrity

These qualities are extremely important to a head of communications to be an effective strategic communicator. Trust is a key component of an organisation's reputation. Therefore it is vitally important for an organisation that its communications are credible and trusted.

'Honesty is an important quality for communicators and allied to that being trusted. It is very difficult for communication to work with a lack of honesty as this noises up the signal.'

Rafael Gomez, LSE

'Honesty and tact are very important for communicators to gain credibility with leaders and chief executives.'

George Eykyn, DCLG

'Journalists having a sufficient degree of confidence that you are not just spouting a line, that you are honest with them, that if they ask you a direct question, you will be able to give them something close to a direct answer, and that you do represent the authority rather than one political party within the authority....people who are impartial but understand the political subtleties of local government are far more likely to have credibility with journalists across a variety of administrations.'

Francis Ingham, PRCA

Integrity is also important because expedient decision-making around the reputation of an organisation can be extremely damaging.

'Honesty really is the best policy. Lots of examples like Intel's experience with the first Pentium chip show that the short-term pain of admitting that mistakes have been made, will in the long-run pay off with larger dividends. People value that - they value honesty and it makes it much harder to communicate in the future if you damage your credibility, your reputation.'

Rafael Gomez, LSE

Telling the truth and being trustworthy are integral to providing those around you with the insights about how their proposals may play out.

'I often think that the role of the communicator is to have one foot squarely in the organisation and the other foot squarely planted outside of the organisation and what you're doing is you're effectively feeding back to the organisation how the rest of the world might see that organisation, and sometimes that message is not really very pleasant.'

Ed Welsh, LGA

'So much depends upon relationships. Senior staff must trust you and you must be seen as being worthy of trust. In some circumstances, where something has gone badly wrong, you will need to ask people to tell you everything there is to know – the inside story from the beginning – and you're not going to be able to do this without a relationship with them.'

Mark Fletcher, Reputation

Integrity also relates to the conduct of the head of communications in relation to the politics that they need to deal with as part of their role. It can be very damaging to the reputation of a head of communications if they are seen as being a political appointment.

'For the Council which is putting a whole deal of money behind this function for it to communicate effectively it needs to think of [a head of comms] as a professional non-partisan appointee rather than as a political appointee in the pocket of the leader of the council and whatever party happens to be in power at the time.'

Paul Baverstock, Bell-Pottinger

Resilience

Part of the resilience required by heads of communications is in their relationships with senior staff and councillors. Heads of communications will have to say things that are unpopular and provide appropriate challenge and yet also, foster relations with all these stakeholders.

'A lack of fear [is a quality heads of communication] need. They have to be comfortable with being the bearer of disagreeable news.'

Rafael Gomez, LSE

'Bosses appreciate constructive challenge, they appreciate people making an effort to tune in to what they're focussing on...it is also important to be an enabler for the organisation – it's part of your job to be the 'conscience' of the organisation.'

George Eykyn, DCLG

'Resilience – The ability to withstand conflict at a local level – with councillors, with individual departments, with other organisations. It is important to be able to ride out short-term conflicts and build long-term relationships. A head of communications also needs to show that they can communicate in a crisis.'

Carol Grant, Grant Riches

Part of this resilience also relates to insight and intuition. Sometimes the head of communications will be the first to understand the implications of a decision which will take the rest of the organisation time to reach.

'Resilience is important because often you're taking very tough decisions that other people don't understand and the reason they don't understand is because often you're getting there before other people.. You have to be resilient and put up with people not liking you bringing bad news home.'

Ed Welsh, LGA

Resilience is also important because heads of communications need to be able to manage in a crisis situation when the reputation of the organisation is challenged. It is important for communicators to hold a line when there can be a clamour to do something else.

'As the inevitable storms blow up as well as the day to day information management requirements of handling communication in a managerial position especially in a political organisation, you need to be able to stay calm so that you can address those immediate requirements but at the same time keep focus on your long term plan that you are driving forward to implement.'

Paul Baverstock, Bell-Pottinger

'You've got to be able to juggle and prioritise. You've got to listen and advise, and be a problem solver. I think this requires stamina and resilience, and the ability to sustain a high work rate.'

George Eykyn, DCLG

Political Nous

A political understanding, political nous, knowing how things really fit together inside and outside the organisation are fundamental to be a top communicator in local government. Experts stress the importance of this political understanding to connecting with members and understanding the organisation but that this is not the same as being party political. A key challenge for communicators is the electoral landscape. Many communicators will be working in hung councils which can heighten the complexity of reaching a view of communicating messages and connecting to the vision of the organisation. A significant part of the communicator's role is to use political nous and emotional intelligence to create coherent communications messages in this kind of environment.

'I'd say that it's very important to have political nous, to be able to move between the administration and its leading elected members, but also to be able to deal with the opposition and to be able to deal with the peculiarities of Local Government.'

Francis Ingham, PRCA

'A head of comms will never be effective unless they have the confidence of the senior people, the principals. And, in the world we work in, local government, half the principals at least, if not more, are politicians and if you don't understand their world, if you don't understand the importance of a policy position as an expression of political identity and you don't understand the fine lines that they can't cross then you will never have their confidence.'

Ed Welsh, LGA

'I think they need to have political understanding, not a party political understanding but understanding of the politics of the parties that are properly elected to serve local people. So that means understanding the party's philosophy, New Labour, New Tory, the major policies in terms of where the party is going and what motivates people to serve. I'm often surprised that council officers are clueless in terms of why people run for election and what they want to achieve.'

Alex Aiken, Westminster City Council

'The critical thing in the relationship between the head of communications and the chief executive is knowing where the boundaries are, particularly when it comes to dealing with politicians. Things can get sticky if the head of communications becomes political.'

Mark Fletcher, Reputation

Political nous is not only about understanding how a political organisation works but also understanding the ramifications of policy decisions.

'The ability to understand what could go wrong before it happens and to which groups of people matters. Understanding the whole idea of hostages to fortune helps. Plan before taking action. Rushing to judgement can look like action but can equally make things much worse. And always think of the impact of the worst case scenarios the people whose support you need.'

Mark Fletcher, Reputation

Background skills

The interviewees were asked whether any particular backgrounds had any advantage in becoming a head of communications. In almost every case, the experts said that the qualities of the person and their experience were the most important things. Experts tended not to think it mattered whether a person came from a journalistic, marketing, PR or political background.

'People need to remember that the task of communications is bigger than any single professional background. All have strengths and weaknesses and qualifications and training matter less than good experience. Heads of communications require a breadth of experience on big issues and different issues – working in different organisations certainly helps in developing expertise.'

Carol Grant, Grant Riches

'I don't think background per se is important, what you want is a mixed team and to build a mixed team. One person cannot have all those things. A great manager/ leader will see that and build a team with the length and breadth of skills and abilities needed.'

Trevor Morris, University of Westminster

Breadth of experience is generally seen as more important than the other factors, with many emphasising the importance of working in communications outside local government.

'Local Authorities generally need to look outside the sector to bring in new skills and different experiences. I was fortunate that I worked for a political party that was going through a particularly tough time because the mistakes I saw being made by government and then by opposition were a useful if, in some ways unfortunate learning experience, because you understood how an organisation properly presented could succeed and how an organisation not properly presented could fail. But fundamentally that was just a different background and a very high profile environment and that was good training ground for a head of communications. I don't think you can become a head of communications simply by going through the ranks in Local Authorities unless you work for a major Local Authority which is continually in the news such as Manchester or Birmingham or the Greater London Authority, you need experience outside the sector.'

Alex Aiken, Westminster City Council

'I don't think there is a background that has particular advantages over others. It doesn't really matter whether you're from a journalistic background or a marketing background. What matters much more is your experience and how this is tailored to the particular authority's needs.'

Jonathan Flowers, Veredus

However, it may be helpful to reflect on the different backgrounds that heads of communications have and to think whether these might pose any wider developmental requirements.

'Journalists tend to be strong on the media, good at finding stories but sometimes lack a broader range of skills around people management and planning.

Those from a marketing background tend to be very good strategic planners but sometimes are not so strong on pro-active media. Those from more political backgrounds tend to have strong relationships with the members, they may sometimes end up not being focussed on the outcomes. These are generalisations but I think it is important that people understand the backgrounds they come from and how this may influence their effectiveness in communications.'

Carol Grant, Grant Riches

While it is not about background as such, one thing that some experts point to is that it is important to have an interest in politics.

'The top communications advisers in any sector particularly in local authorities must understand the broad political context- they must have good collateral knowledge of politics at a national and at a local level...They must also have an understanding of the commercial imperatives that the chief executives work to.'

Trevor Morris, University of Westminster

'Obviously I think you're always going to struggle if you're going into Local Government and you don't really have an interest in politics.'

Ed Welsh, LGA

Meeting the challenge

The chief executive challenge to heads of communications includes a mixture of harder and softer skills: learning strategy and about the business, and political nous and influencing skills. Our experts tended to be more positive about the ability to improve people's knowledge of strategy and a greater corporate understanding of how local government works.

'I think you can teach people a strategic appreciation. I think you can give people an exposure to the basic elements of what thinking strategically is about, that is a basic business and management and leadership education. I'm not saying everybody is going to be receptive to it but you can certainly teach it. The other two elements, political nous and being an effective influencer are, I was going to say God given but that's perhaps too generous.'

Paul Baverstock, Bell-Pottinger

'You can teach local government experience, what you can't teach is attitude, and skills and the motivational need that people have in terms of being able to do a good job.'

Alex Aiken, Westminster City Council

However, there is recognition that it is much harder to develop these softer skills, though not impossible. These softer skills are also linked to experience: working in different organisations and working in large organisations.

'Influencing and negotiating are something that you have to be very conscious of and I think that we as a group of professionals within a sector should all probably think about how we could improve that and maybe talk to each other more about the kind of mix that we come from, what we could learn from each other.'

Ed Welsh, LGA

'I think in some respects, political nous is about having done it and been hurt by it, having licked one's wounds and then not doing it the same way the next time...it's understanding that in politics what is said and what is meant is not often the same thing...I think you can get political nous from different arenas, certainly from front-line politics but also from having survived and prospered in a large corporation.'

Paul Baverstock, Bell-Pottinger

'I think absolutely, getting a sense of what to do in a crisis is important, nothing can beat the experience. What it has reminded me of all the way through is strategy, strategy, strategy. Because every time in that crisis management, when we were struggling, [we need to think back] what was our position...what would the strategy tell us, what would the narrative in the strategy tell us to say here?'

Ed Welsh, LGA

'We need to have benchmarked, credible standards within this sector, and we need to have those widely accepted by local authority leaders and chief execs. Now, they're not going to accept them just for their own sakes –we need to gain acceptance because they deliver improvements to organisations, and that's really about showing the value that effective, top quality communications advice brings to local authorities.'

Francis Ingham, PRCA

Where communications sits?

An important issue for the effectiveness of communications is whether it can be effective for organisations without being represented on the senior management team. On this issue, what experts agree on is that the most important factor is to have effective influence with the organisation's leadership. Therefore having a seat at the board does not necessarily mean that a head of communications has this influence.

'We used to rant and rave about being at the top table. I don't think there's a need to be at the top table as long as one of the directors has overall responsibility for communications. I think directors now have a much better understanding of communications and marketing than they used to. What I do think is important is to have Caesar's ear to have close links with the leadership; I don't think this means necessarily being on the board.'

Ray Jones, The Chartered Institute of Marketing

'You need regular face time with the chief exec, you need to be a valued advisor to them. You need to have the confidence to go to him or her and say, 'you know this report that's come forward, well these are where the flaws are.' You need to be getting into the actual management of the organisation and going to them and saying, 'these are the problems.' Being their strategic counsellor rather than reacting after the event...proving the values of comms. Proving the direct financial and reputational value to a Local Authority that proper comms delivers, because providing those sorts of solutions is something any chief exec wants.'

Francis Ingham, PRCA

However, perhaps having 'Caesar's ear' is the first part of accomplishing the goals for strategic communications and then a seat at the board is recognition of the value being added by communications.

'Successful local authorities have an absolutely iron link between the leader of the council, the chief executive, and the head of communications, so between reputation, strategy and political delivery not party political delivery but delivery between properly agreed policies of the council as requested by the elected majority group of politicians....the organisational expression of that in terms of the fact that the head of communications will sit at the top table.'

Alex Aiken, Westminster City Council

Others pointed out the challenges of delivering strategic communications without a position on the board.

'I think for communications to be done well it has to be done at the top table, it has to be at board level...you can't shape the strategic communications of an organisation if it's not sitting at the top table...the Director who's responsible for comms needs to be sitting at the top table.'

Ed Welsh, LGA

'I think they also need to be around that board room table. Too often, the people who head up comms don't have a seat by right at the table where decisions are being made, and that is a major flaw. Until our people start pressing for that permanent position, there then they are always going to be playing catch up and they're always going to be seen as slightly second rate in terms of the hierarchy within the organisation...I think we need to showcase the examples of where you do have top level Comms people around the table, the enormous benefit that delivers to the organisation in terms of reputation, efficiency and the delivery of top quality services to local people.'

Francis Ingham, PRCA

Development of strategic communicators

By focussing on the qualities, skills and experience of strategic communicators, it has become clear from speaking to experts, that a considerable amount of the personal development available to heads of communications is focussed on particular communications disciplines like media relations, crisis management or marketing. However, there may be a deficiency in the kind of development that would strengthen the soft skills highlighted previously.

‘There is a huge amount of learning that the sector provides and I think that there’s a lot of on the job learning and reading that potential and actual heads of communications can do to improve their skills. But fundamentally there isn’t an effective management or talent development programme for comms managers seeking to become heads of communications. So, typically what happens in a crisis, crisis communication is essential for any head of communications, is that the crisis happens and dealing with that crisis is outsourced to an external PR agency or similar because the head of comms has just never been through it, never done it doesn’t really feel comfortable doing it.’

Alex Aiken, Westminster City Council

In addition, graduate degree courses tend not to focus on the wider set of skills a communicator will require to lead a strategic communications team. This may also in part help explain why so many communicators tend to adopt a ‘channel manager’ approach as opposed to being strategic communicators. Many of the experts identify that strategic communicators need to develop a wider set of business skills.

‘I think to get to that position they have to partly skill up, they have to see themselves as being board level directors, they have to be able to emphasise their own credibility with an overview of the whole organisation. They need to have the skills therefore that aren’t just about communications, and I think that’s one of the gaps really. If you looked at the professional development programme of a Finance Director or of a Director of Social Services, it isn’t just about the operational detail of their own department, it’s about taking a broader outlook on their role and responsibilities. Too often, comms people just don’t press for that kind of professional development.’

Francis Ingham, PRCA

Equally, there does not appear to be a significant amount of training and personal development opportunities provided for strategic communications at a head of communications level.

‘There isn’t, if we’re honest with ourselves, much of a framework for people to develop their skills at whatever point in their career they first come into Local Government. There isn’t a clear progression ladder, there isn’t a clearly defined set of skills and qualities that somebody at this level needs or at that level needs and that goes all the way up to heads of comms, Directors of Comms, Chief Exec.’

Francis Ingham, PRCA

The experts had a great deal of positive advice about how you develop a programme for strategic communications and heads of communications. As a starting point, LGcommunications should consider current career progression in communications and opportunities to encourage wider business learning.

‘Start with the department, is the department working? Are people motivated, are people successful, are people staying for a long time, are people progressing through the ranks? They’ll only do that if they are going through the ranks, if there is a defined career path and if the organisation helps them to learn skills. So, I think it’s very important to put in place a structure with clear responsibilities, with clear reporting lines and make sure that as you progress up the organisation ... I think the breadth of knowledge ought to be widened beyond that whether it’s a Masters in business administration, whether it’s a public policy degree. All of those things ought to be considered and thrown into the pot so that people are groomed and broadened...I’m actually a believer that people ought to come to Communications as part of a general business rotation. So if councils are thinking of structuring their communications function and delivering career paths for their people, I think they should include the communications directorate as part of a general rotation, so that people who start in communications get exposure to the whole breadth of the council’s business. And likewise, senior communicators I would trust would come from professional backgrounds where they’ve had a broader exposure.’

Paul Baverstock, Bell-Pottinger

In terms of a format for the training, there is a consensus that the training needs to be focussed around looking at practical strategic communications issues in groups and looking to see how these things are done outside the public sector.

‘Action learning sets are a useful way for communicators to learn. It’s helpful to be in the situation and ask questions about how we would react in certain situations. In real life we don’t get many chances to get it wrong. Being honest about what our real impact on a situation has been is vitally important. We can share what went well and learn not to repeat things that went badly. Whilst we may put the best gloss on others’ actions we should never delude ourselves.’

Mark Fletcher, Reputation

‘We deliver everything from short training course to full Masters programmes and our focus is strategic communications. We believe it is important to bring groups of senior communicators together to discuss their issues and consider how best practice and the latest academic research can be brought together for maximum effect. For example, we would ask them what they wanted to explore and then provide a tailored and contextualised academic setting to do that by interrogating relevant communication, business and management theory to see how this might be relevant to their own situation.’

Paul Willis, Leeds Metropolitan University

'We can and should develop a programme for aspiring heads of communications that goes beyond the technical skills around how to run a campaign, into how to deal with management problems, a crisis as occurs in service provision on numerous occasions.'

Alex Aiken, Westminster City Council

Our experts also advise that a programme for strategic communicators in local government should involve mentoring and coaching.

'I think it would be helpful for more heads of communications to shadow senior officers, have learning mentors. Heads of communications have to learn strategic awareness and a lot of this comes through garnering experience from those already doing the strategic stuff. It is not enough to collect news stories from across the council, this doesn't necessarily mean that you have a good grasp of how it all fits together. Communications people are often good at networking, but it needs to be networking with a purpose.'

Carol Grant, Grant Riches

'You need to start with learning more about human behaviour. More about emotional intelligence, wanting to engage with this kind of thinking. It is also about multi-disciplinary learning – heads of communications have to be willing and have the ability to learn about these kinds of things. This is where the art is. The science is learning about the strategy. People can get better, learning by example, learning from experts in the field, learning from the best. Apprenticeship is an excellent way of learning a trade and lots of the best communications effectively had apprenticeships with the best from the previous generation. The problem with teaching communications is that there is so much complexity and so much variability that has to be learned. It is possible to do some in class but most is applied. This can be learning about permutations, the subtle differences that aren't always obvious. The best are acting on instinct which is the accumulation of lots of these things.'

Rafael Gomez, LSE

As has already been suggested, it is useful to look at best practice in and outside the sector, review case studies and recognise that there is also a role for classroom learning about this along with learning about strategy and the business of local government.

'I think it is also helpful for even the very experienced to go back to school or class periodically, just to remind themselves of the things they once knew, but also to look at the new research. I think putting people together works best - there can be a lot of accumulated knowledge that is not articulated and this process of interacting with peers in a classroom setting can bring that out.'

Rafael Gomez, LSE

Some also suggested that this should form a professional qualification.

‘We need to have benchmarked, credible standards within this sector, and we need to have those widely accepted by Local Authority Leaders and Chief Execs. Now, they’re not going to accept them just for their own sakes – we need to gain acceptance because they deliver improvements to organisations, and that’s really about showing the value that effective, top quality Communications advice brings to local authorities.’

Francis Ingham, PRCA

Another significant point that was raised on several occasions was that communicators are often not as effective as they should be at getting their own message across. A process of 360 degree evaluation was proposed by several experts as a way of understanding how others see you in order to influence outcomes.

‘You can discover a lot by understanding what other people think of you. This can be very illuminating and can help you to think about how you manage your relationships with stakeholders.’

Ed Welsh, LGA

There is also a recognition of developing learning packages which are delivered in different parts of the country and digitally.

Evaluating impact

A key challenge for communicators is to be able to demonstrate the value they are adding to an organisation; part of their credibility must arise from demonstrating success and excellence in communications. It is often difficult to evaluate communications and overall impact.

'Evaluating any kind of communications activity is very difficult – firstly, how do you say it was the media relations that was changing the view? Or was it the advertising? Was there some other factor that was in play at the time? It is very difficult to segment out which communications channel or message particularly worked or resonated. There is always that kind of difficulty. If you are looking at media relations coverage for example, you can prove you've got a lot of coverage- it's much harder to prove if you changed attitudes or more importantly behaviour. In some instances it can be proved, if you are promoting giving up smoking and the enrolment to smoking cessation classes increases, it would have appeared to have worked. But if it is broader attitudinal stuff it's harder to measure and some frankness about that would help as well.'

Trevor Morris, University of Westminster

'Quite often the effect of a communications adviser is cumulative- it's often not simply one bit of communication. So if you start to isolate out communications activities often it can be hard to make them stack up; it's a collection of communications activities and the overall confidence that generates in an authority that will determine how the public or the audience you are trying to target feel. Key to all of that is how well the authorities is performing: reputation is not divorced from delivery of service of product, people's happiness with what a local authority does and will in part be determined by the national scene. Now no local communications can control the national mood but what they can do is understand the national mood and how that might influence communications. A good communicator will be aware of a certain climate and preparing for it. As a good communications director/adviser – you need to be out and about amongst the people [finding out what's going on]'

Trevor Morris, University of Westminster

However, good quality research and high quality evaluation are important tools in demonstrating communications impact.

'Awareness, reputation and favourability. Do they know about us, do they like us and in general do they support us? Do they think we're worth backing as an organisation?'

Paul Baverstock, Bell-Pottinger

'There is no agreement on what performance measures communicators should be judged on and to me it is very straight forward, that it is around resident's satisfaction and resident information because we know that the amount of information, good information, that councils provide does positively influence satisfaction.'

Alex Aiken, Westminster City Council

'I think a lot of it has to be qualitative. There ought to be way of qualitatively looking at sector areas by stakeholder groups and evaluating them. I would favour this over some attempt to look at some ROI measure for government.'

George Eykyn, DCLG

'I think you've got to do two things. One - you've got to, as much as it is a combination of art and science, try to put in place a system of measurement of effects, there are tools that you can use to do that but I would suggest that a very minimum requirement is to introduce a system of stakeholder reputation research to track progress over time. And the second element is to see whether or not the coverage that you're getting as a council or as an organisation is growing or diminishing, so that gives you a figure for awareness, and is positive or negative, so that gives you a measure for favourability. Somewhere in there, some combination of that gives you some meaningful measures that you can take to the Chief Executive to describe how you're doing.'

Paul Baverstock, Bell-Pottinger

However, it is also important to recognise the limits of research and what kinds of things work best within a research and evaluation framework and which do not. Research is much weaker when assessing new or radical products; research tends not to perform well with the 'shock of the new'.

'I can give an example of that from the commercial sector, we launched First Direct – the research showed the public did not like the idea (they liked branches). Fortunately [the decision-makers] did not pay too much heed to the research, they believe that once people had experienced it, they'd support it and indeed the evidence showed they did. And there are more extreme examples. In politics, some of what Mrs Thatcher proposed, people didn't like and continued not to like but if you followed the research you'd have advised her not to pursue certain activities and yet she remained in power for a very long time and she was seen as a very strong albeit not always very loved leader. But research doesn't necessarily help you build strong leadership, it has its role, I don't want to decry its value but it's very difficult for research to give a feeling and flavour for what's going on.'

Trevor Morris, University of Westminster

This said, the challenge to local government communications is about doing more high-quality evaluation of their work rather than less. Evaluation mechanisms are also important for understanding whether communications are allocating campaign resources appropriately and for feeding back information to the corporate level of the organisation as well as demonstrating the added value of communications.

'[You] need to provide reliable advice based on a firm and empirical understanding of what the audience is that the council serves are looking for from a public authority...they don't need to be researchers necessarily but they need to understand how to use research and they need to understand how to evaluate the campaigns and activities of projects that they deliver. And I think that there are too many people who pose around their creative skills and not enough people who can do the numbers in terms of understanding the research that informs campaigns and provide the evaluation that shows they worked in which case you can do more of the same broadly speaking or the fact the campaign didn't work then what do we need to change to make it work in the future.'

Alex Aiken, Westminster City Council

Career development

From the perspective of those recruiting to heads of communications roles, it is the possession of these key qualities, experience and passion that single out the best heads of communications. Equally, fitting with the idea of leadership and influence, candidates need to be confident.

'Heads of communications come from a variety of backgrounds – there is no set route into the role or specific academic qualifications required. However, talented Heads of Communications often share a common background which includes exposure to the public sector, crisis and issues management, people and budget responsibilities, and often substantial change management. The most important criteria above all are personality and passion.'

Rachel Mackenzie, VMA

'The best candidates have all these qualities I have identified. However, over and above, something that the political and managerial leadership are looking for, something I am looking for, is that positive impact. When they walk in the room, they show desire for the role, they are positive, passionate, enthusiastic and can demonstrate the qualities I have outlined.'

Carol Grant, Grant Riches

'I'm not sure how standardised communications roles are and people come to communications from a number of different backgrounds what they should be looking for is a good team with good mix of people rather than a uniform background.'

Jonathan Flowers, Veredus

'In choosing the right candidate, it is very specific task and hard to generalise: it tends to be more about the individual and the authority. However, in terms of professional development, heads of communications need to be thinking how they can develop their skills – working in partnership across their areas with other organisations, thinking how they develop knowledge around the big ticket services like education and social services if they want to work for single tier authorities.'

Carol Grant, Grant Riches

The leadership will be looking for experience and especially experience in pro-actively managing the media and crisis management.

'I also think, to an extent, that chief executives and leaders want to see evidence of pro-active media handling and crisis management. I think sometimes candidates present themselves as 'channel managers' rather than being strategically focussed on the vision articulated by the leadership and the reputation of the council as whole. Sometimes candidates can be 'looking back rather than forward and don't talk themselves into the role'.

Carol Grant, Grant Riches

'The tasks of communications are bigger than any single professional background. All have strengths and weaknesses and qualifications and training matters less than good experience. Heads of communications require a breadth of experience on big issues and different issues – working in different organisations certainly helps in developing expertise.'

Jonathan Flowers, Veredus

In contrast, weaker candidates tend to lack confidence and experience and lack conviction.

'On the other hand, those that perform less well, tend to lack confidence, lack impact with the clients. It is a real issue that some candidates don't sell themselves very well. If you can't communicate why you will be an excellent head of communication for this organisation, the chief executive and leader will wonder how you can communicate for the council.'

Carol Grant, Grant Riches

Beyond communications

A key theme in this research has been that if heads of communications wish to be more effective at strategic communications, they have to learn more about things that are nothing to do with communications. A strong understanding of communications is taken as read by the leadership of the organisation when appointing their advisors. Excellent heads of communications need to learn about business strategy, they need experience of working in different organisations, for different services, doing different things and understanding how to evaluate their added value. It is this kind of development that will enable heads of communications in the future to play a much more effective role across their local authority and that will provide the basis for them to move beyond being a head of communications if they wish to do so.

‘I think that as a strategic communicator, to move on you have to have a very good understanding of policy.’

George Eykyn, DCLG

‘It can be helpful to be seen as a fixer – someone who makes problems go away. Deliver first on communications and in time you may find that bigger projects come your way. If you are seen as someone who gets things done you may start to get involved in the real decision-making that shapes an organisation’s future.’

Mark Fletcher, Reputation

The professional challenge for heads of communications is to get involved in managing and re-shaping services.

‘Only a minority have all these qualities; only a few reach this high standard. Some moan about not having a seat at the top table or having the ear of the chief executive but heads of communications have to demonstrate that they are serious – they have to move out of their comfort zone. Get away from channel managing and get a good team to do this – start delegating and get involved in the corporate agenda, re-shaping customer services, and work with partners. Get involved in environmental issues – waste, recycling, dealing with perceptions around crime, health issues etc.’

Carol Grant, Grant Riches

An interesting way at looking at this challenge is that so few heads of communications go on to become assistant chief executives or chief executives when many of the qualities marked out as essential for heads of communications are the same as they are for chief executives.

'My experience of heads of communications is pretty good. I would suggest that part of the reason they are not progressing further up the organisation is that they are not putting themselves forward – they often think they are not going to get it. Often they are within the Corporate Services department and so can get blocked to the role of Director of Corporate Services by the common requirement for that role to be a Section 151 officer. There may be more opportunities where there are Assistant Chief Executive posts. To fulfil this kind of a role heads of communications will need to pro-actively get involved in policy, performance and CAA. They need to show that they can manage these kinds of things.'

Jonathan Flowers, Veredus

