

What does it take to be a great communications professional in our 'global' world?

Let us start at the beginning.

Why do our jobs exist in the first place?

Professional communicators are there to help organisations work more efficiently. We act as both navigators and engineers.

We help steer a smooth and steady course, and use the business plan as our guide. With this comes the burden of carrying the 'moral compass' of the firm, an ever more challenging task in our multi-cultural world.

These responsibilities fall to everyone in our industry, not just those with 'global' in their title. With the inherent cross-border nature of all modern communications channels everyone has a responsibility to look at the implications of their actions beyond their locality.

Hence the formulae for success as a professional communicator are now more complicated than ever before.

So what does it take to be, not just good, but the best?

How can we analyse the talents we need using what we know of our world?

At the most basic level there are two things every communicator should have: a toolbox of collateral, and the skill and brain power to use those resources most effectively.

What do I mean by toolbox? This would include everything from the means to create wikis at will, to wiz-bang CRM systems; and detailed research on every stakeholder in every market around the world.

The need for brain power is more obvious, I do not necessarily mean a high IQ, but more the skills to use the tools at your disposal effectively.

But these two core elements alone are not sufficient.

The use of tools alone will give a short term fix to a communications problem if you are lucky, if unlucky they will store trouble for the future. Tools and skills together can also be like "...a little knowledge..." which is as we know is "...a dangerous thing...".

So there has to be something else, in popular parlance an X-factor, to be added to the mix to give us the essential skill set for a global communicator. But how can we define it a little more academically.

If we can understand a little more about the nature of the global communities around us, those that we are paid to communicate and interact with, will help.

Let us pause and turn to science for help, looking at this whole area with rigour, and structure.

We must enter the world of futurology - and hence use one of the tools in our box.

Futurology is the science of what will happen in the future. If we can understand better the environment our stakeholders are moving in then we will clearly be able to make decisions that ensure we communicate with them more effectively.

Futurologists seek to divide the world first into bite-sized chunks.

The divides you choose for your business will depend at the micro level on your product or service; yet everyone in communications must still consider the macro level of futurology in our world of globalised media channels.

The UK Government's 2020 Teaching and Learning Review Group chose to divide future change into five categories: Demographic, Social, Technological, Economic and Environmental.

The EBRD recently talked of four groups: Science & Technology, Climate Change, Governance and Demography. The choice of groups will always depend, to some extent, on the *raison d'être* of your organisation. For communicators around the world I would recommend the first five categories as a starting point.

With the changing world around us divided up into some sort of order it quickly becomes apparent that the future has only one certainty: change itself.

This of course is nothing new, Heraclitus around 500BC observed "Nothing endures but change".

Understanding change itself is not only a science, but an art form. Every week new treatises appear on the subject. My own work a few years ago concentrated on the mind-set required for a leading communications director working within the senior management team.

I found from my work, validated by both Cranfield & Aston Business schools, the importance of balancing decisions between three limbs: the need to still run the

business through a period of change, managing the CSR and legacy issues for the firm to avoid storing problems for the future, and at all times appreciating that every individual who was part of a stakeholder group would be going through their own emotional journey brought about by the changes.

This emotional journey means that there is no single communications solution for each stakeholder group.

Within my model these three limbs operate within a structure that is created to nurture and maintain control using clear business planning along with a pragmatic acceptance of outside influencers.

Others may want to use their own management model though it is important to have one to fall back on in times of chaos. The successful use of academic study on change, as with futurology, lies as much in understanding what will work for you in your environment, as understanding why it worked for others in theirs.

This brings us to the final element of trying to understand 'what does it take'. Understanding ourselves.

There are a multitude of ways of achieving self knowledge. There are academic models such as Myers-Briggs. Others may prefer a more simple 'task to process' continuum on which one could place ones self and ones colleagues.

I for one know that I am task heavy in my profile: keen to make progress at every turn, whilst needing the support of more process-orientated colleagues to plot our progress. Others will prefer a similar continuum between individuals who are more partnership, and more dictators-like, in their workings.

All this though leaves one final piece of the jigsaw. Not what do we want, but what do our leaders want from us.

There is useful research on this thanks to the London Business School. They set out to find what senior executives from global companies, across a variety of industries and geographies, felt were the characteristics of a great global leader of the future.

The result was a table of 39 wide ranging capabilities divided into three categories: knowledge, skills and attributes.

To quote the LBS: "We can teach knowledge, but we need to train people in skills, and we can only develop attributes". Attributes are the individual qualities, characteristics or behaviours found in leadership itself.

Looking at the table in detail it is obvious that no-one will ever be able to offer every capability to their employer. It is also important not to dismiss capabilities just because they do not appear relevant.

A communicator does need to know something about competitive microeconomics for example, even if it is just that it exists, is relevant to performance management and as a result has attributes associated with it.

So where does this leave us in the quest for discovering 'what does it take'?

Looking through the list of attributes I see a common thread. A thread that answers our question. They all reflect one word – empathy.

Empathy in the dictionary is defined as “the ability to share, understand and feel another person’s feeling; the power of entering into the spirit, or feeling, of something: from the Greek ‘empathia’, passion or affection”.

If you take our toolbox of knowledge, add our trainable skills, we have an automaton, someone still way short of having what it takes to cope with the exciting, changing world around us.

Add the overall attribute of ‘empathy’ and we have the ultimate skill set to face the changing world that we as global communications professionals inhabit.

Maybe sometimes it is not just empathy, maybe it is also passion and affection – a deep love for the cosmopolitan people driven world that we operate within.

How would a dose of empathy reveal itself in a communicator? Two examples:

Do you check <http://english.aljazeera.net> every time you also check <http://news.bbc.co.uk/> ?

At the time of the selection of the site for the 2012 Olympics, did you seek out all the entries and consider how they were attempting to empathise, beyond just communicating, with the rest of the world?

The more we empathise with our audiences, the better able we will be to assist our organisations in achieving their goals.

This will also give us the strength, and ammunition, to advise our leaders on the appropriate direction of our organisation; set to both a financial, and increasingly moral, compasses.

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