



The Ipsos Reputation Council Report 2026

Nineteenth Sitting

Perspectives from communications leaders
at the world's largest and most influential organisations



BEFORE YOU ASK AI TO SUMMARISE THIS REPORT...

Read this overview: What's new, what's still true, and what you need to do.

Five New Realities:

The forces reshaping the communications environment

Volatility is now the environment, not the disruption

Geopolitical shocks, regulatory shifts, political polarisation and economic uncertainty are now permanent features of the operating landscape rather than temporary crises.



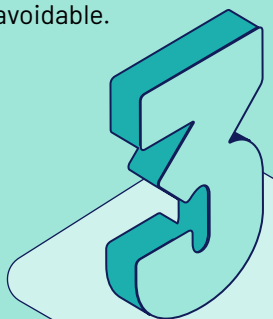
AI has become an intermediary between organisations and stakeholders

AI is filtering and interpreting information about organisations and relaying it to their stakeholders.



Consensus is disappearing

Different stakeholders expect different, and often contradictory, things from organisations. Alignment is becoming harder and trade-offs unavoidable.



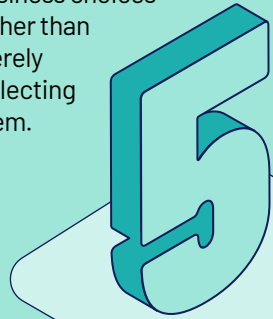
Strategic Silence is entrenched

Organisations are taking political factors into consideration and staying quiet on potentially divisive issues – even when they could authentically speak up.



Reputation is moving closer to the centre of decision-making

As trust becomes harder to build and easier to lose, reputation is shaping business choices rather than merely reflecting them.



About this report

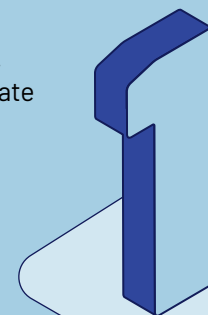
The Reputation Council Report is the output of 200 one-to-one conversations between Ipsos Corporate Reputation and senior communications and corporate affairs leaders. Operating inside of one of the world's largest market research companies, Ipsos Corporate Reputation is a diverse and multi-functional team of researchers, consultants, and strategic advisors who help organisations understand and manage reputation as a strategic business asset. We bring stakeholder intelligence into critical business decisions, helping leaders navigate change, strengthen trust, manage risk, and drive sustainable growth.

Five Enduring Truths:

What hasn't changed, despite all the disruption

Trust remains the ultimate currency

When uncertainty rises, stakeholders still gravitate towards organisations they trust.



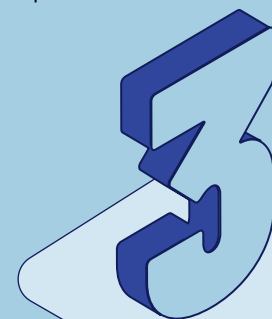
Audiences matter more than messages

Success still depends on understanding stakeholder needs before crafting communications.



Actions speak louder than declarations

Whether discussing ESG, DEI or corporate purpose, proofpoints are more important than promises.



Consistency matters more than agreement

Organisations may not be able to satisfy every audience, but they can still earn credibility by acting consistently with their principles.



Human judgement remains indispensable

Technology can accelerate decisions, but it cannot replace experience, context, instinct and accountability.

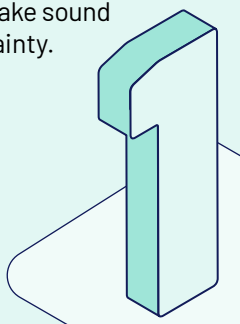


Five Implications:

What communicators should do next

Invest in judgement, not just content production

As AI makes content creation faster and cheaper, the real differentiator is the ability to interpret complexity, weigh trade-offs and make sound decisions amid uncertainty.



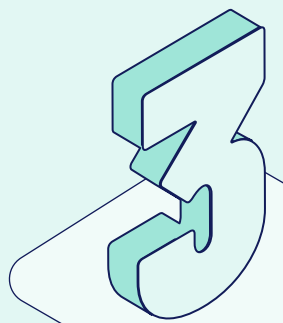
Turn your communications function into an intelligence capability

Strengthen horizon scanning, stakeholder intelligence and issue monitoring so your team can identify risks, connect dots and support better business decisions before issues emerge.



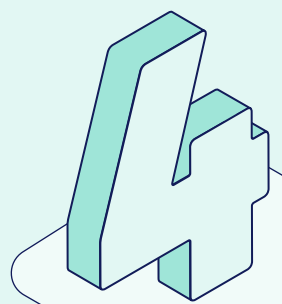
Get comfortable with trade-offs

Help leaders identify which stakeholder tensions can be managed, which principles are non-negotiable, and what backlash the organisation can afford to absorb.



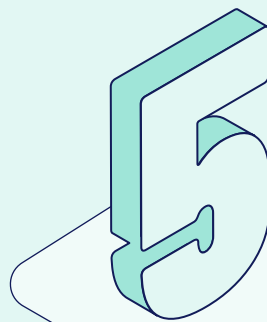
Re-skill for the next era of communications

Prioritise AI fluency, data literacy, commercial awareness and resilience alongside traditional strengths such as storytelling and relationship building.



Earn a seat in decision-making, not just message-making

Position communications as a source of strategic counsel by helping leaders navigate ambiguity, understand stakeholder expectations and assess the reputational consequences of business decisions.



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FOREWORD

THE JUDGEMENT ECONOMY

Last year's Reputation Council report, ***The Eye of the Storm***, described an operating environment defined by persistent turbulence. One Council Member described waking up in the morning and wondering, "What fresh hell is this?" A notable contrast in interviews for the latest sitting is how little alarm turbulence now generates. As another Council Member put it this year, "Nothing surprises me anymore."

Developments that would once have been considered extraordinary are no longer viewed as interruptions to business-as-usual – they are business-as-usual.

Artificial Intelligence, too, has become business-as-usual. Council Members are using it daily and using it meaningfully. But AI is also reshaping how reputations are formed, mediating what stakeholders learn, believe and share about organisations. When misinformation can spread at warp speed, trust becomes more valuable to build up in case of crisis, but harder to earn.

The transformative nature of AI underpinned almost every conversation we held during the Nineteenth Sitting of the Ipsos Reputation Council. This report is built on conversations with a record 200 senior communications leaders from around the world. Their willingness to share candid reflections, practical experiences and hard-earned lessons gives the report a

depth that would not otherwise be possible. We are enormously grateful to every Council Member who contributed their time and perspective to this year's research.

Last year was about navigating persistent turbulence. This year's findings suggest that organisations have adjusted to the new normal, but predictability has not returned. Our hope is that this report helps make sense of that reality. By bringing together the collective experience of communications leaders across markets and industries, we aim to provide practical insight into how organisations are adapting to life after predictability.

As uncertainty becomes a permanent feature of the operating environment, a new premium is emerging. When information is abundant, content is cheap and answers are machine-generated, the scarce resource becomes judgement: leaning on years of experience, knowing what to trust, which signals matter and how to act when certainty is unavailable.

This is the Judgement Economy. And in that economy, the value of communicators lies not in what they say, but in the quality of decisions they help organisations make.

Milorad Ajder

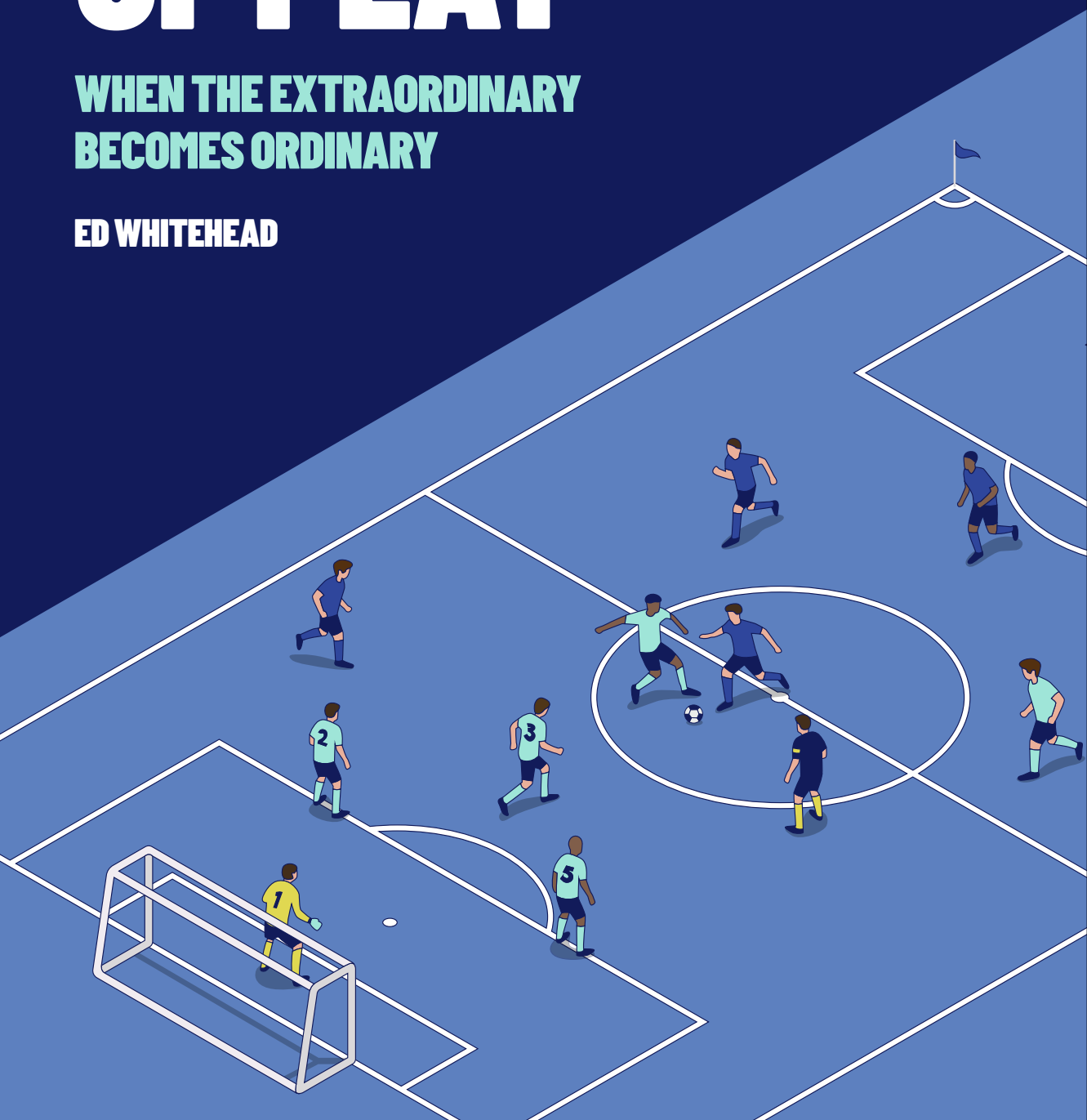
Global Service Line Leader,
Corporate Reputation – Ipsos



THE STATE OF PLAY

WHEN THE EXTRAORDINARY BECOMES ORDINARY

ED WHITEHEAD



Recent years have forced organisations to navigate overlapping political, economic, technological and societal disruption. Our findings suggest that communicators have adapted to this reality, with their role evolving from responding to turbulence to helping organisations operate and make decisions within it.

The communications landscape has entered a new phase. For several years, organisations have grappled with the polycrisis¹: overlapping geopolitical, economic, technological and societal disruption. What once felt exceptional now feels routine – wars, regulatory change, trade tensions, political polarisation and technological breakthroughs have become part of everyday business reality.

Conversations with Council Members suggest that their priority has evolved from responding to disruption, to leading through it. The turbulence of recent years has, if anything, intensified. The wars in Ukraine and the Middle East continue to reshape energy markets and geopolitical alliances, tariffs have become a recurring feature of the global economy, and political polarisation remains deeply embedded across many markets. Meanwhile, artificial intelligence has emerged as both the defining opportunity and the most significant challenge, moving from novelty to infrastructure and influencing everything from stakeholder expectations to information discovery and organisational decision-making.

What stands out most clearly from this year's interviews is the CCO's adaptation to this situation. Members are not discussing volatility as an interruption to business-as-usual – in 2026, volatility is business-as-usual. As one Council Member observed, *"Nothing surprises me anymore... the extraordinary has paradoxically become ordinary."*

In this 'Uneasy Decade', with no end in sight to uncertainty, the CCO's role has evolved again – from navigating through turbulence to helping businesses operate, decide and lead within it.

¹ Ipsos, Navigating Through Turbulence, 2024

A notable feature of interviews for this year's sitting of the Reputation Council is the absence of shock. Many Council Members sound remarkably pragmatic about conditions that would once have seemed exceptional:

“Things that come out of the blue [have] become the new normal.”

Perhaps the clearest evidence that organisations have adapted to uncertainty is the way communicators now describe their value. Rather than acting primarily as responders to events, they describe their role as enabling organisations to interpret a rapidly changing environment, identify developing risks and opportunities, and understand developments that can often span politics, economics, technology and society.

Several Members described their role using remarkably similar language, speaking about “connecting dots”, “bringing the outside-in perspective”, and ensuring their organisations can “see around corners”. When uncertainty prevails, the value of communications grows, from helping organisations react to disruption to helping them understand disruption before deciding how to respond.

The Force Shaping Everything

Organisations have spent the past few years adapting to uncertainty. But just as organisations have become accustomed to operating in conditions once considered exceptional, Artificial Intelligence is fundamentally changing how information is discovered, how opinions are formed, how reputation is assessed, and how decisions are made.

In 2026, AI is part of government decision-making, media production and information-gathering, and embedded in the systems through which people work, learn, shop and consume content. It should therefore come as little surprise that AI appeared in almost every conversation with Council Members about the future of corporate communications.

If previous technological innovations changed how communicators worked, AI is transforming how communications itself functions. Websites, search engines, social media and smartphones transformed how narratives reached stakeholders; AI shapes how those narratives are understood once they get there.

Public attitudes suggest that AI has reached a genuine inflection point. Ipsos AI Monitor 2026 found that **54%** of people globally say products and services using AI have profoundly changed their daily lives over the past three to five years, while **66%** expect AI to do so in the next three to five years. Consumers in many markets report equal levels of optimism and concern, highlighting the “Wonder and the Worry” of AI.²

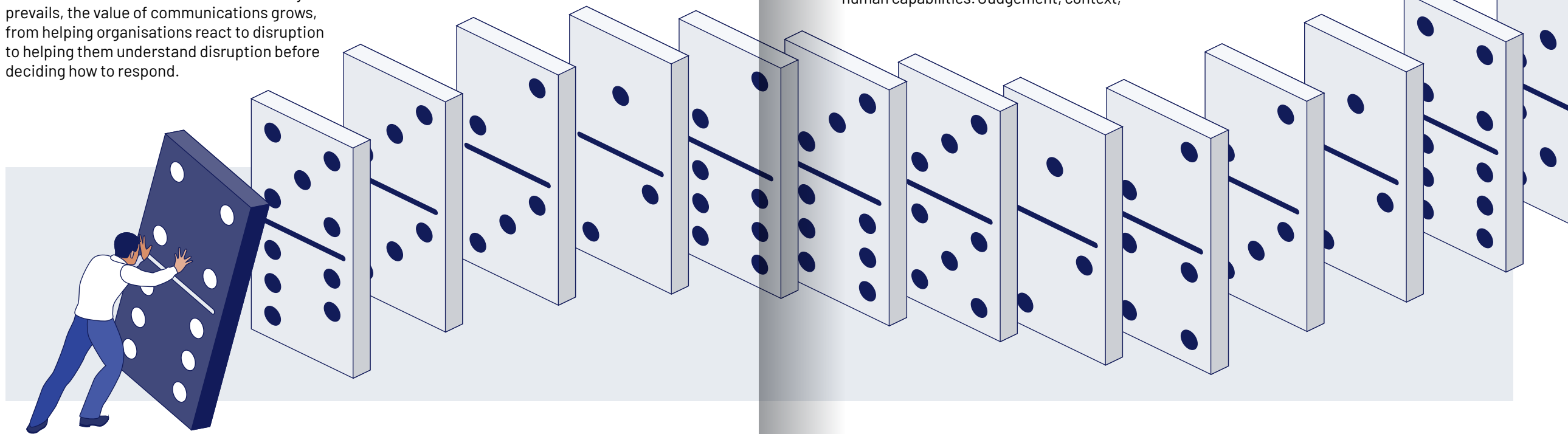
Council Members express a similar ambivalence, describing AI as “one that can be viewed as a threat or an opportunity,” “the biggest challenge – and simultaneously the greatest opportunity,” and “exciting, but... also concerning,” but even the cynics acknowledge they can't fight the momentum: “I feel very conflicted about AI, but I feel we have to embrace it at this point.”

Given its capabilities, organisations are beginning to ask which communications tasks and roles AI may ultimately replace. One Council Member mentioned “colleagues who think that communications teams effectively can be replaced by AI tools.” Yet rather than diminishing the value of communicators, many Members believe AI increases the importance of distinctly human capabilities. Judgement, context,

curiosity, relationships, creativity and instinct are seen as the qualities organisations will rely upon as AI becomes more deeply embedded. This point was neatly captured by one Council Member, who reflected: “I don't think you can automate instinct,” while another felt that AI presents a stimulating opportunity for communicators:

“Creativity... can't be done by AI... we need to challenge ourselves for creative thinking and new language every six months or so.”

With AI's deeper integration, communicators now find themselves interpreting its implications as much as implementing its capabilities. While becoming proficient in the use of AI will allow communicators to compress timelines, more valuable still is the ability to support leadership teams in understanding what these technologies mean for stakeholders, reputation and society. With a surfeit of machine-generated content, many Council Members believe the value of human judgement will only increase.



Working at Machine Speed

Acceleration is one of the themes running most consistently through this year's interviews. Council Members describe developments occurring faster, expectations shifting more rapidly and the time available for reflection continuing to shrink. They attribute this acceleration to a combination of factors including geopolitical volatility, media fragmentation, information overload, rapid technological change and the growing pace of business transformation itself.

One Council Member characterised the last twelve months as *"the most VUCA [Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous] moment ever seen... because of the acceleration – how fast things happen now"*, while another observed that *"AI is not only making us more productive... it also raises the expectation of what we should be delivering."*

The consequence is a shrinking window in which to assess what matters. Political developments rapidly create commercial implications, stakeholder reactions emerge immediately, and leadership teams expect answers before complete information is available. One Council Member noted *"the world changes faster than organisations can,"* while another said that due to *"the ever-increasing volume of data generated by AI... we no longer have enough eyes and ears to see and hear everything."* A third Council Member warned: *"The challenge here is the ability to move at pace... If you fail to keep pace today, you either become too slow or you end up executing initiatives that are no longer useful to anyone."*

With organisations operating at increasing speed, the ability to prioritise, identify signals amidst noise and understand the wider implications of events becomes considerably more valuable. Rather than simply responding faster, success depends on ensuring decisions remain informed by careful judgement.

Beyond Prediction

If unpredictability is now permanent, traditional planning becomes more difficult. Several Council Members described moving away from linear forecasting and towards scenario-based decision making, recognising that world events, technological change and political developments can rapidly reshape operating conditions.

Rather than attempting to predict a single future, organisations are preparing for several plausible futures simultaneously. This reflects a broader shift in the role of communications, away from reacting to events and towards helping leadership teams anticipate a range of possible outcomes.

One Council Member explained, *"The organisation must navigate an ambiguous global environment and prepare for multiple scenarios,"* and another noted, *"There's so much more impact of geopolitical events on the function that offers challenges and opportunities, so we need to make sure we're on top of everything happening here in a way that allows us to respond quickly."*

// The challenge here is the ability to move at pace... If you fail to keep pace today, you either become too slow or you end up executing initiatives that are no longer useful to anyone."



Trust, Reputation and the Value of Credibility

Faced with mounting scepticism, fragmentation and information insecurity, Council Members recognise that credibility has never been more important. Four in five Council Members (**78%**) believe that fake news and disinformation pose a material threat to their business. While concerns about misinformation are not new, several Council Members described an environment in which false narratives spread more quickly, stakeholders increasingly operate within fragmented information ecosystems, and trust is harder to establish than ever before.

Many expressed concern about deepfakes, synthetic media and declining confidence in trusted sources, with one calling out *“the glamourisation of misinformation... more and more intentionally radical or exaggerated content because platforms reward engagement.”*

The rise of AI-generated content adds a further layer of complexity, increasing both the volume of information and the difficulty of verifying it. In this context, a strong reputation is becoming more than a competitive advantage – it is a source of organisational resilience, helping companies maintain the faith of their stakeholders when facts themselves become contested.

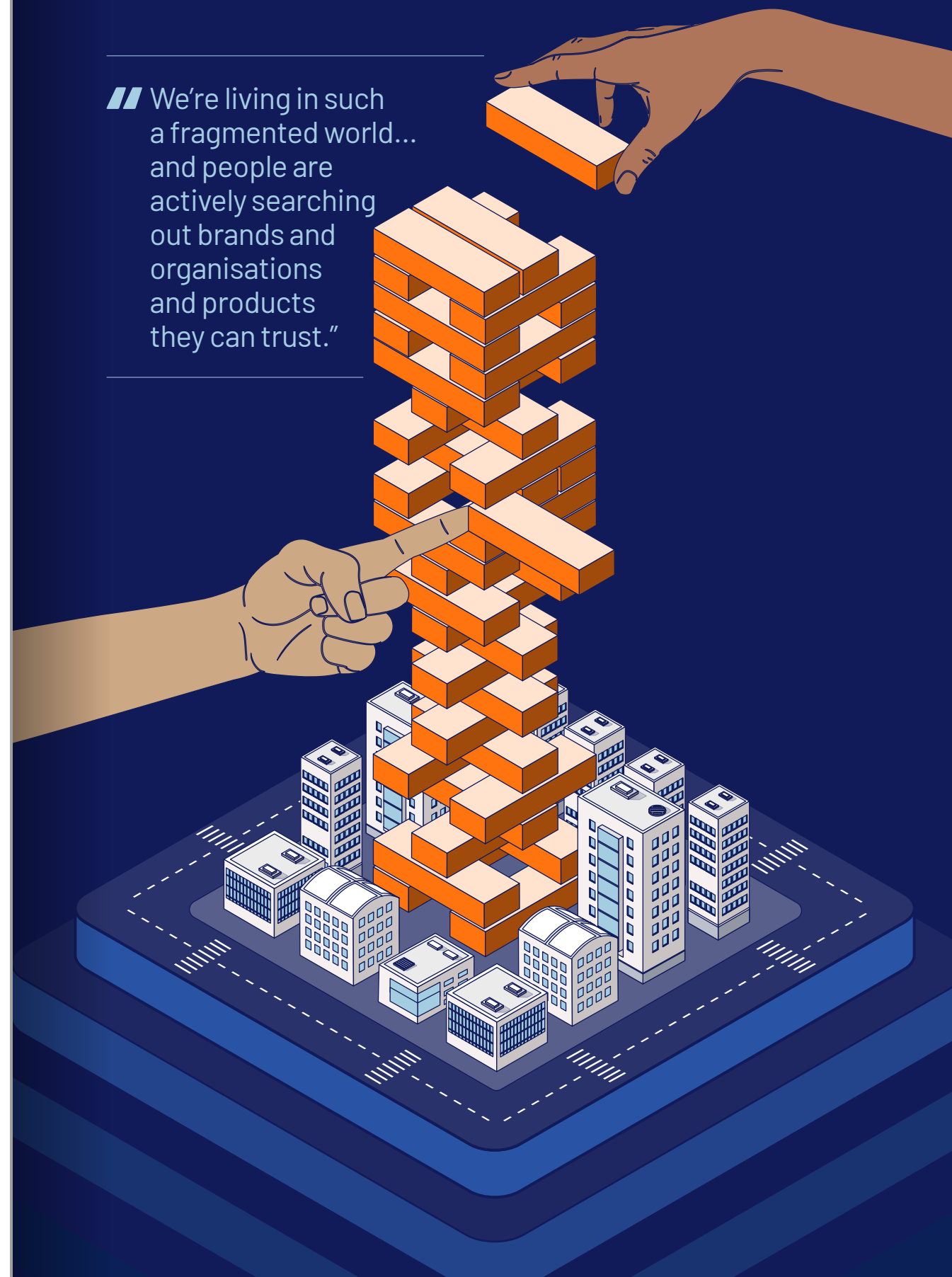
One Council Member observed: *“We’re living in such a fragmented world... and people are actively searching out brands and organisations and products they can trust.”* Another identified trust as *“a key battleground”* for businesses, given the proliferation of mis- and disinformation: *“How do you get your company in a place where, when someone’s faced with a headline or a deep fake of your CEO saying something, they go, ‘that’s not the company I know’.”*

Stakeholder trust gives organisations the confidence that they will get the benefit of the doubt when information is incomplete, inaccurate or inconsistent, and when they find themselves under scrutiny. As trust becomes harder to earn and easier to lose, reputation moves closer to the centre of organisational decision-making.

That shift is also solidifying the elevation of the communications function, whose ubiquity was summarised by one Council Member, who said: *“We have this unique role where we are kind of involved in everything.”* Interviews consistently underscore stronger executive access, earlier involvement in strategic decisions and growing recognition that communications directly affects business outcomes.

Uncertainty has become permanent and AI is mediating how information is discovered and interpreted. Communicators, therefore, are not only valued for what they say, but for what they know. Their role is to help organisations navigate competing priorities, conflicting stakeholder expectations and difficult trade-offs without losing sight of long-term objectives.

“We’re living in such a fragmented world... and people are actively searching out brands and organisations and products they can trust.”



STAKEHOLDER FRAGMENTATION

WHY YOU CAN'T PLEASE EVERYONE

RACHEL PHILLIPS



As political polarisation and stakeholder fragmentation intensify, organisations face growing pressure from audiences that increasingly want different things. Rather than finding messages that satisfy everyone, communicators are focused on maintaining coherence and credibility amid competing expectations.

Volatility is creating a challenge that surfaced throughout interviews with Council Members: it is becoming harder than ever to reconcile competing stakeholder expectations.

Customers, employees, regulators, governments, investors and local communities view the same issues through different lenses, often expecting different – and sometimes contradictory – things from the same organisation. Actions welcomed in one market may provoke criticism in another, while decisions designed to satisfy external audiences can create tensions internally. The question for communicators is how to maintain coherence when audiences, geographies and political systems are pulling in different directions.

'Glocal' under pressure

Many CCOs prioritise a unified, coherent and consistent global narrative across their organisations. A common strategy that appeared in interviews with Council Members, and one that we have explored in several Reputation Council reports over the years³, is to give local markets 'freedom within a framework'; the autonomy to articulate messages that land well within their communities that also ladder up to a consistent global narrative.

The approach becomes harder when expectations diverge across markets. Council Members describe fragmentation – differences between the US and Europe, within the Middle East, and across China and other major markets, all requiring different communication strategies, with one explaining that *"It's often more difficult to get alignment now... than it used to be because of the geopolitical context."*

The communicator's job has changed – from adapting a global narrative for local markets, to managing situations where different stakeholder groups, markets and political systems hold vastly different expectations of the organisation. Core values remain, but how organisations communicate them is becoming more variable.

46%

agree that populism represents a material risk to their organisation

Fragmented audiences, fragmented realities

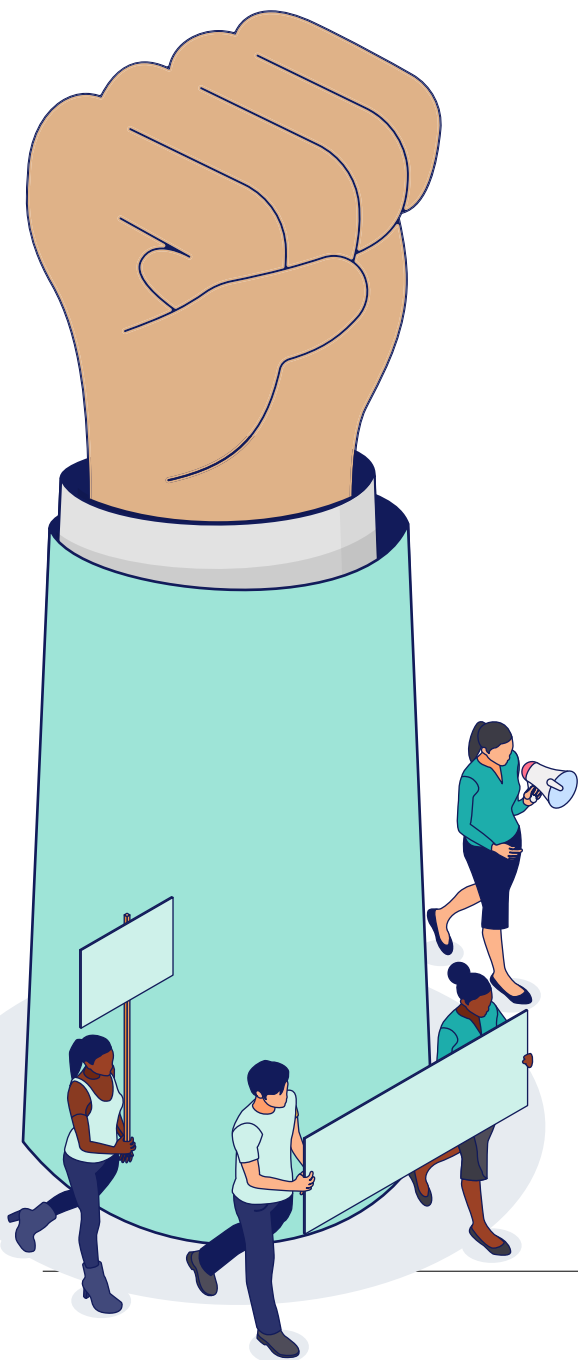
When Council Members speak of fragmentation, they don't only mean the conflicting views held in different territories. They are also grappling with political polarisation within markets, both among the public and at the political level. With audiences inhabiting different political, media and information environments, devising communication strategies that cut through is a knotty issue for Council Members.

Several Council Members described a world in which audiences interpret corporate actions through political lenses. This is not simply a communications challenge in theory. Nearly half (46%) of Council Members agree that populism represents a material risk to their organisation, highlighting the extent to which political dynamics are now shaping corporate decision-making.

Issues that might once have been viewed as broadly uncontroversial – including sustainability, diversity and inclusion, or corporate citizenship – can now generate sharply different reactions from different stakeholder groups. As a result, communicators are finding that messages often resonate with one audience while alienating another. As one Council Member observed, *"The main issue is the current environment of intense polarisation, both globally and locally. This makes communication complex as there's pressure to take a side."*

In this environment, stakeholder analysis becomes as important as message development. Understanding not simply who an audience is, but how they are likely to interpret an issue, is becoming a critical communications capability.

// The essence of good communications is understanding who your audience is and what they are seeking in terms of value, and communicating there first. So being audience-led, value-led is critical always, and more so in a fragmented world."



35%

say in the last twelve months that their organisation has stayed quiet on issues that it previously would have spoken out about

Societal divisions are also reflected in how audiences consume information. Understanding those platforms and how to optimise them is a skill communications teams need to master. Council Members describe audiences *"dispersed across a variety of platforms and exposed to a variety of messages,"* changing how stakeholders discover information.

Several Council Members described AI as a new intermediary between organisations and stakeholders, fundamentally changing how corporate narratives are accessed and understood. Council Members are using their corporate websites to *"feed the AI"*, to ensure they are *"flooding content into what the LLMs are going to scrape"*, and reassessing channels previously thought to be in decline. As one Member remarked, *"People sort of declared the death of the press release. Well, guess what? That's really important now... Earned media is actually sexy again. Local media is sexy again."*

Strategic Silence in practice

The rise of Strategic Silence challenged the received wisdom that not commenting on issues, political developments or societal debates would create a vacuum to be filled by critics, competitors or commentators. One Council Member told us, *"The trend of strategic silence is ongoing. My main points are to choose your battles and have selective courage."*

A third (35%) of Council Members say in the last twelve months, their organisation has stayed quiet on issues that it previously would have spoken out about – indicating the continued political pressures that organisations are feeling. One Council Member admitted that their organisation had stayed quiet on *"almost everything"*, while others acknowledging greater restraint on DEI and ESG comms.



/// *We have been a little more silent on Pride than in the past, with a reduction on DEI."*

/// *We're saying less about net zero."*

Those who have stayed quiet cite a mixture of strategic and defensive reasons, although some did experience negativity as a result. In those cases, the communications functions took steps to engage with those stakeholders directly to explain why these decisions had been made, usually citing 'safety' as a reason.

/// *We have had stakeholders say "You've been quiet on this issue. Why?" Those are specific conversations with those stakeholders to explain where we do or don't stand."*

For many, Strategic Silence isn't about not engaging on these issues, but focusing on core elements of business functionality or ensuring strict alignment with business purpose.

/// *Our decision-making process is entirely guided by one core criterion: alignment with our business principles. If a situation or an external event directly touches upon one of our core corporate principles, there is no hesitation or fear... However, if an issue does not intersect with our core values and is merely a potential business opportunity to speak up, we weigh the decision and the potential risks much more carefully."*

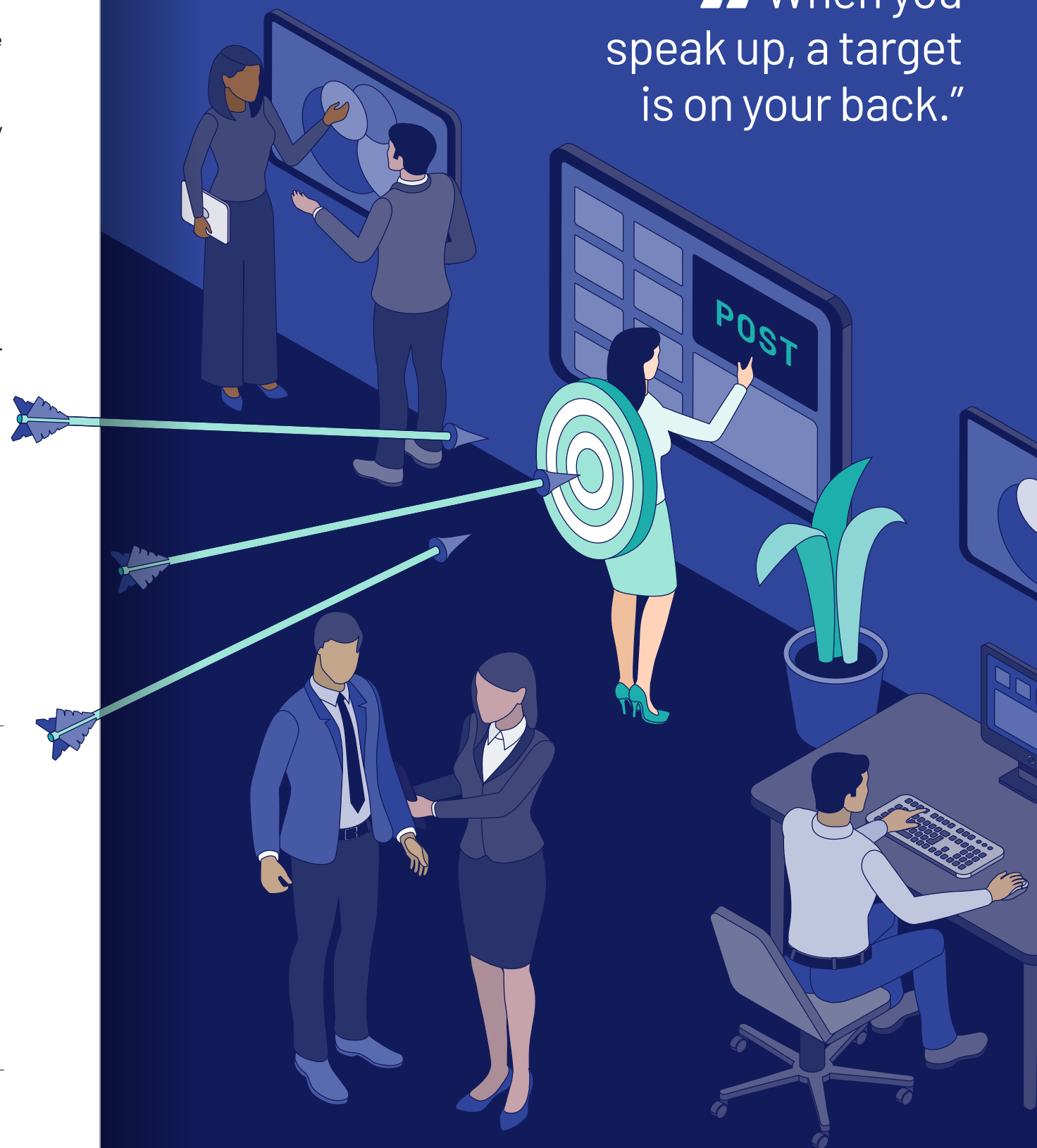
Frameworks, purpose, and credibility to talk on an issue lead the decision-making. Having said that, it is clear communicators are feeling the pressure in the current geopolitical climate – so much so that silence has become the dominant professional norm. This year, **61%** of Council Members agreed that even if their organisation could authentically speak up, they preferred to stay quiet on potentially divisive issues, and only **17%** agreed that Strategic Silence is corporate cowardice. The vast majority (**84%**) said their organisation takes political factors into consideration when deciding whether to speak up about an issue.

The pressure is not felt equally across markets. US-based communicators report significantly greater caution than their European counterparts. More than half (**53%**) of US communicators say their organisation has stayed quiet on issues it would previously have spoken about, compared with **28%** in Europe. Similarly, **71%** of US respondents say they would rather stay quiet on potentially divisive issues, versus **55%** in Europe. The findings suggest that while Strategic Silence is a global phenomenon, it is shaped by very different political contexts.

Council Members tell us that commitments to more polarising topics like DEI remain, but organisations are less likely to communicate when goals are achieved or 'shout loudly' about DEI and ESG topics when they might have done in the past.

/// *Actions in the US about having restrictions on companies prioritising DEI hasn't changed our conviction, but we're very outcome oriented and ensure that we have business outcomes on the how, and what the outcomes are through that."*

/// *When you speak up, a target is on your back."*



“What has changed is now we talk about what we’re doing, even though we’re continuing to pursue the same goals. The amount of space we’re dedicating to ESG in comms, reports, websites, has dropped a little.”

Generative AI has introduced a new complication for communications leaders. With an estimated **50%** of online searches now involving AI-generated responses⁴, the rules of discovery have been rewritten. LLMs construct narratives from information already present in the public domain, blending owned content, earned media, third-party commentary, regulatory material and criticism into a single response. Strategic Silence may remain an effective approach to engagement around issues, but organisations cannot afford to be absent from the information ecosystem altogether.

You can’t please everyone

Communicators have accepted that some stakeholder expectations cannot be reconciled. The key is to understand which trade-offs are acceptable, and decide what backlash you can afford; any position will receive some.

“To act in one way in one geography can then create a vulnerability in another.”

Customers remain the stakeholder group most frequently identified as critical to organisational success, but interviews suggest the greatest communications challenge often lies elsewhere. Employees, regulators, governments and investors frequently place competing demands on organisations, particularly around politically sensitive issues. And this is where the rub is, because not only do these three audiences often want very different things from the same organisation, but there can also be conflict within audiences. Employees are often where these tensions become most visible.

“Half our employees agree with the [US] administration and half our employees don’t. We’re operating in a no-win situation.”

As organisations adapt their positions on ESG, DEI and other politically sensitive issues, many Council Members described a growing need to explain decisions internally and reassure employees that changes in messaging do not necessarily reflect changes in commitment.

Council Members described a range of approaches for managing tensions between internal and external audiences, including tailored messaging, greater explanation of decisions and more proactive engagement with employees.

“The strategy of silence strictly applies to external communication. Internally, it is a completely different story.”

“It may not be sensible to be communicating as much about DEI in certain parts of the world externally, but it is still an incredibly important topic internally.”

Employee engagement has become a growing priority amid geopolitical uncertainty and AI-driven change. Ipsos’ 2026 IC Index⁵ found a nine-point decline in trust in leadership teams and CEOs compared to 2025. Council Members described a greater role for communicators in providing reassurance and explaining difficult business decisions, and adopting “a tone that’s a bit more truthful and humble.”

“Amidst macro uncertainties, employees look to employers for confidence. Employers must be transparent, sharing good and bad news as early as possible without sugarcoating realities.”

One way communications teams are tackling this is bringing internal communications into the function to further balance and control the messages; making sure internal and external communications are aligned.

“Over the past year, we have significantly multiplied our internal touchpoints. Our primary goal is to ensure strict alignment between what we communicate externally and what we share with our people.”

Most Council Members point to the interconnectedness of the audiences, thereby highlighting the challenge of not being able to always please all. Indeed, many Council Members are aware of the important role employees can play in signalling how a customer base will respond or how wider communications will be perceived.

This is a critical role of the corporate communications function – to navigate and balance the messaging across the different groups and functions internally (e.g. marketing, investor relations), managing the trade-offs and holding accountability for the core corporate narrative.

“I take absolutely everything into consideration. A company needs a single, coherent corporate narrative that speaks to everyone, not just its customers.”

Reflecting the growing need to manage multiple tensions without losing sight of an organisation’s core principles, we are seeing the rise of the ambidextrous communicator, one who can hold competing realities at once: global and local, bold and prudent, transparent and protective, employee-focused and customer-centric. Success will depend less on satisfying every stakeholder and more on maintaining consistency of principle when different audiences demand different things.



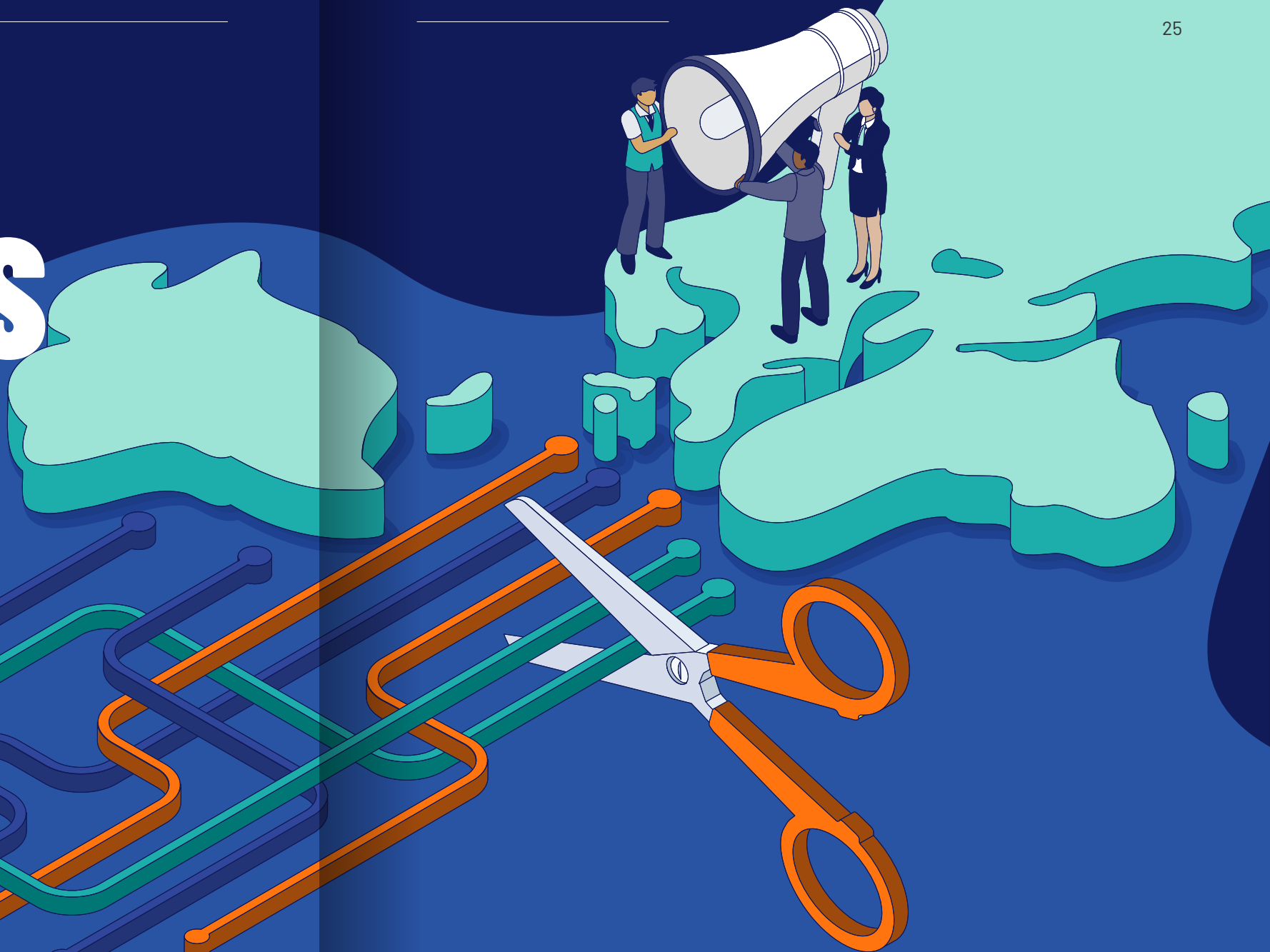
⁴ McKinsey AI Discovery Survey, 2025

⁵ IC Index 2026: The Reality Check, Ipsos Karian & Box, May 2026

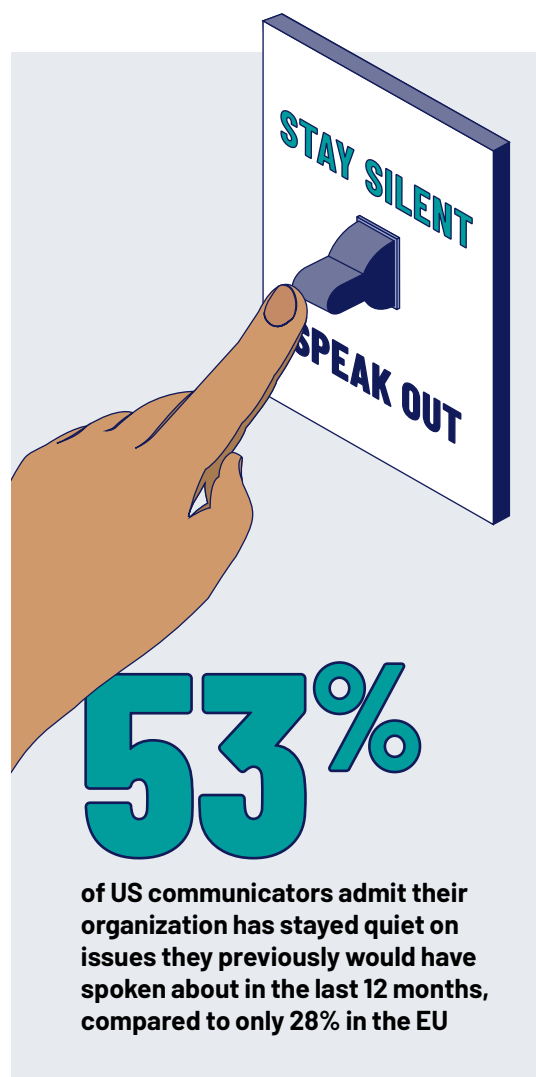
US-EU TENSIONS

HOW THE TRANSATLANTIC DIVIDE
IS REWRITING THE CORPORATE
COMMUNICATIONS PLAYBOOK

ILARIA UGENTI AND TRENT ROSS



The widening divide between the United States and Europe is creating new challenges for multinational organisations. As political, regulatory and societal expectations diverge, global communications strategies are giving way to more locally responsive approaches.



The era of the “borderless” global corporate narrative is over. In 2026, multinational corporations are caught in a perfect storm of geopolitical volatility, with the relationship between the United States and Europe acting as a primary fault line.

Political headwinds emanating from the US on tariffs, political polarisation, the pushback on sustainability, and foreign adventurism are meeting countervailing trends from Europe on free trade, stronger support for sustainability and multilateral cooperation.

For communications leaders, this creates challenges that go well beyond localisation. Global organisations now find themselves operating across markets with diverging political priorities, regulatory philosophies and expectations of business.

Issues that once sat comfortably within a common corporate narrative now carry very different interpretations depending on where stakeholders are located, and the political climate in which they operate.

The Great Divergence

Communications are being made even more complex by a widening chasm between US and European regulatory philosophies.

In the United States, organisations continue to navigate a highly charged climate. Sustainability, DEI and ESG remain politically contested subjects, while shifts in federal policy can rapidly alter the communications landscape. At the same time, state-level regulation can move in a different direction. California’s SB 253, for example, is forcing thousands of companies into mandatory missions reporting.

One Council Member reflected: “The word ESG became politicised... everyone has moved to sustainability.” Another noted the direct impact of political developments on communication decisions: “We’ve had to take account of the executive orders in the USA. The exec orders related to DEI did have an impact on us... What has changed is how we talk about what we’re doing.”

In Europe, despite simplifications, the core architecture of mandatory, audited disclosure remains firmly in place. Sustainability remains closely linked to compliance, investor expectations and market access. One Council Member explained: “ESG is still very much core to our narrative. The evolution would be that, first of all, the regulations that are coming in, such as CSRD, require us to be compliant. So compliance has gone right up the agenda.”

This divergence forces multinational organisations to operate across different expectations, different regulatory frameworks and different political realities, often simultaneously.

The Return of Sovereignty

Beyond regulation, Council Members pointed to a broader shift shaping stakeholder expectations on both sides of the Atlantic: the return of sovereignty. Trade disputes, tariffs, defence spending, energy security and industrial policy are influencing corporate decisions in ways that would have seemed unusual a decade ago.

Energy and Defence are among the most scrutinised sectors. European companies are walking a tightrope between long-term transition commitments and the immediate, US-influenced realities of energy security and rearmament.

Technology sits at the centre of many of these discussions. Council Members highlighted growing European and UK anxiety over reliance on US technology, including digital payment systems, cloud infrastructure and AI platforms.

The specific unease surrounding technology, AI and the European pushback against US corporate dominance surfaced repeatedly in interviews. Questions that once focused on innovation now also encompass resilience, dependency and strategic autonomy.

The End of American Exceptionalism?

These shifts are also changing how multinational corporations are perceived. Several European Council Members described a broader shift in attitudes towards American companies and brands. In the not-too-distant past, American companies and brands were seen as aspirational in much of Europe. Now, quantitative work with consumers indicates there is a penalty for being perceived as “too American.”⁶

Political volatility, tariffs, technology dominance and wider geopolitical concerns have altered the context in which multinational organisations operate. Brands are being tarred with a political brush over which they often have little control, meaning that being a US-headquartered company in Europe can create reputational and communications challenges that were largely absent a decade ago.

Today, US players must demonstrate local impact through jobs, tax contributions, research and development, investment and community engagement to overcome perceptions that their objectives may be misaligned with European national interests. Global scale alone is no longer sufficient proof of legitimacy.

Communications as Geopolitical Risk Management

The growing schism between the US and Europe has transformed corporate communications into a vital instrument of geopolitical risk management.

Given the push and pull of domestic and international politics, top-down directives no longer work. Headquarters can set global guardrails and a universal ‘purpose,’ but must grant extreme local autonomy to regional teams to navigate their specific political minefields.

In 2026, the most successful global companies are those that know exactly when to speak, where to localise, and how to let their actions do the talking in an increasingly fractured world.

ESG RECALIBRATED

FROM PURPOSE TO RESILIENCE

MARCUS BURKE



The politicisation of ESG has changed how organisations talk about sustainability, but not necessarily what they are doing. Council Members tell us that sustainability remains a strategic priority, increasingly framed in terms of resilience, competitiveness and long-term business performance.

The broad ambitions that once sat beneath the ESG banner have not disappeared. Instead, they are being judged through a different lens. At a time of geopolitical instability, energy insecurity, resource constraints and economic pressure, sustainability initiatives are expected to demonstrate their contribution to resilience, competitiveness and long-term business performance.

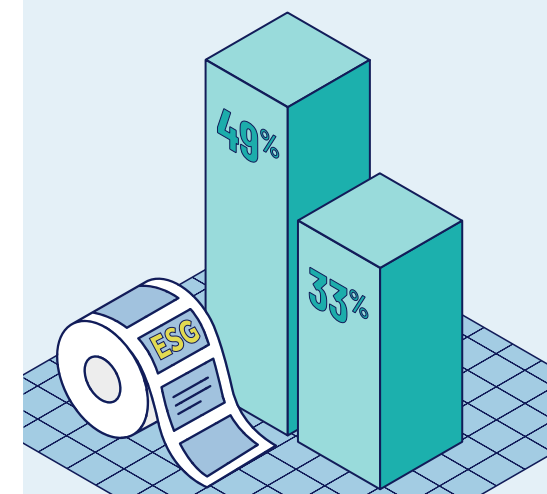
The result is that organisations are less likely to describe ESG in terms of purpose, and more likely to describe it in terms of continuity, risk management, energy security and operational effectiveness. Sustainability has survived politicisation because it can be justified through resilience.

Beyond the ESG label

One clear sign of this strategic shift is the corporate world's declining use of the term "ESG" itself. A full **49%** of Reputation Council members now disagree that the acronym accurately describes what their company is doing, with only **33%** still finding it useful.

Why are fewer people talking about ESG? Political polarisation is one explanation. Once a convenient shorthand for investors, it is now a magnet for criticism, having been *"weaponised and turned on its head. It's made to represent something that is not credible, not relevant, not for today's times."* Another Council Member noted that it has become *"fodder for political purposes and dilutes authenticity."*

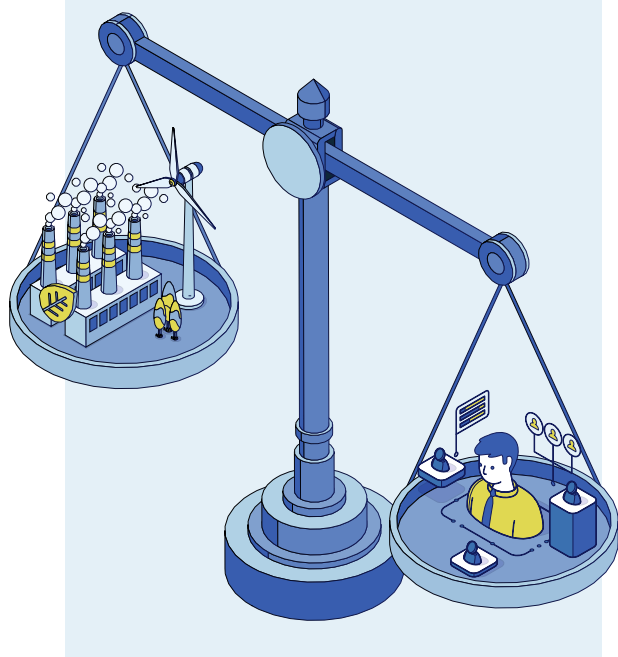
49% of Reputation Council members now disagree that the acronym "ESG" accurately describes what their company is doing, with only 33% still finding it useful.



However, ESG is also seen as too broad and analytically blunt for the data-driven demands of sophisticated stakeholders. And, most importantly, it has lost its usefulness because the term no longer reflects how many organisations think about these issues. In its place, a new, more pragmatic lexicon has emerged, grounded in resilience.

31%

of Council Members say that “doing business in an environmentally responsible manner” is a top corporate priority, compared to 66% who identified “doing business in a fair and ethical manner,” and 48% who chose “treating workers fairly.”



Resilience wins the argument

Across the interviews, sustainability was frequently discussed through the language of energy security, talent attraction, resource efficiency, regulatory preparedness and long-term operational resilience. As one Council Member put it, *“We position the environmental initiatives as ensuring we are creating a deeper resilience within the organisation, not just green targets for green targets’ sake.”*

Many Council Members now prefer terms like “sustainability,” “corporate responsibility,” or even more specific phrases like “sustainable inclusive growth” because they feel more grounded. One executive explained their rationale for dropping the acronym:

“ESG is a purely technical term understood only by industry insiders – the business community, technicians, and specialised media... We are talking about heavy, meaningful words: human rights, environmental protection, and respect for people. The acronym ‘ESG’ completely strips away this ethical weight. Frankly, it gets on my nerves.”

Several Council Members linked this shift directly to a more volatile landscape. The energy shock following the Iran War, for example, transformed decarbonisation from a long-term climate goal into a short-term business continuity imperative. One member confirmed this, noting that in the face of “soaring energy costs,” their company was looking at “expediting renewable energy investments in order to mitigate some of those costs.” Sustainability has a new, more tangible business case – driven not by purpose, but by the need to survive in a turbulent world.

This shift is also reflected in perceptions of corporate impact. When considering the impact an organisation can have, Council Members place greater emphasis on doing business in a fair and ethical manner (**66%**)

and treating workers fairly (**48%**) than on environmental impacts (**31%**). The findings suggest that stakeholder expectations have not disappeared, but have become more grounded in operational reality, responsible business practices and tangible outcomes.

How to Communicate in a Minefield

Consumers demand authenticity, but the burden of proof has never been higher.

As the language has become more operational, the communication strategy has become much more precise. The data shows that **61%** of communicators agree their ESG communications are more targeted than ever. This is not the “Strategic Silence” we identified last year; it is a deliberate and defensive reallocation of resources. As one member described it, the goal is to be *“more thoughtful with the audience and what ESG information is relevant to their business.”*

The paradox of 2026 is that many companies are communicating less in public while disclosing more in private. The strategy is to avoid the public minefield while delivering verifiable proof points to the audiences that hold material power: investors, regulators, and employees. This explains why a commanding **68%** of Council members deny that they have consciously under-communicated credible ESG progress. For the majority, the strategy is not to go silent, but to speak with extreme precision. One executive described their approach: *“We’ve definitely got quieter, both internally and externally on ESG. But that doesn’t mean that we’ve stopped doing the significant work behind the scenes. We’ve reached a couple of our sustainability targets recently but chosen to not be as loud on them as we would have done in the past.”*

This approach is often mislabelled as green hushing. The **22%** of leaders who admit to under-communicating represent a specific, risk-mitigation tactic. The broader trend is one of careful calibration. One Council Member explained, *“The shift that we’re seeing is moving from talking about it and storytelling to proof. People are expecting some form of demonstration of impact and accountability.”*

Connecting the dots

Communicators must help organisations understand how sustainability intersects with the forces reshaping the operating environment: geopolitical instability, energy security, resource constraints, technological change and shifting stakeholder expectations.

In this respect, the sustainability agenda mirrors the wider evolution of the communications function itself, becoming one of the clearest tests of communicators’ capability to connect dots, understand complexity and see around corners. Picking a course through the minefield requires them to interpret emerging risks, identify long-term opportunities and help leadership teams navigate an increasingly interconnected world. Just as importantly, communicators must decide who needs to understand what. That requires a deep understanding of stakeholders, an appreciation of the political and regulatory contexts in which they operate, and the ability to distinguish between information that is merely interesting and information that is genuinely material.

The organisations that succeed will not be those that communicate the loudest about sustainability, but those that understand most clearly how it contributes to resilience and long-term value creation – and can demonstrate that value to the stakeholders who matter most.

AI'S AWKWARD ADOLESCENCE

WHY JUDGEMENT MATTERS MORE THAN EVER

JAMIE LETVINCHUK



AI has rapidly become part of the communications toolkit, but adoption is outpacing understanding. The next phase of maturity will be defined by how effectively organisations govern its use and apply human judgement.

Artificial Intelligence has grown up fast. In a few short years, it has moved from parlour trick to workplace infrastructure, from drafting passable copy to summarising reports, generating imagery, interrogating data and handling ever more complex workflows. Along the way, it has produced moments of brilliance, moments of stupidity and plenty in between. For corporate communicators, AI has left its infancy behind. It is now in the more awkward, more consequential stage that follows. AI is powerful enough to be useful, unpredictable enough to require supervision, and confident enough to be dangerous when badly handled.

Daily AI use has risen among Council Members from **57%** in 2025 to **76%** in 2026, while the share of communicators saying they use AI meaningfully has risen from **43%** to **76%**. AI has come of age in corporate communications, but maturity is another matter. After a first phase defined by speed and experimentation, the next phase will be defined by alignment. The test for organisations is not to use AI everywhere, but to know where it belongs, where it does not, and how human judgement should govern the space between efficiency and trust.

The Hype Meets the Workflow

The first phase of enterprise AI was marked by a rush to adopt. That was understandable. The tools were suddenly available, visibly powerful and apparently cheap. They promised to remove drudgery from knowledge work, allowing stretched teams to do more with less. For communicators facing fragmented audiences, shrinking newsrooms, hostile information environments and rising internal demands, the appeal was obvious. A function built on words had been given a machine that could produce them endlessly.

The result is that AI quickly became part of the operating rhythm of communications. Council Members describe using it for research, first drafts, briefing notes, summaries, meeting preparation, content refinement, tone checks, translation, media monitoring and workflow support. One respondent captured the shift neatly: *"There were the unique users before but now everyone is using it."* Another described AI moving from episodic use into *"the workforce and DNA"* of the organisation. In some teams, the frontier is already moving beyond simple productivity, with custom agents supporting stakeholder planning, executive briefings, policy drafting, campaign development, and reputation tracking.

But adoption tells us very little about capability. If anything, the data suggests a more complicated story. In 2025, **89%** of Council Members believed AI would fundamentally transform business operations. In 2026, just **59%** agree that it has done so. That is still a majority, but it clearly falls short of expectations. AI has arrived, but it has not magically fulfilled every promise made on its behalf. The hype has met the workflow. What remains is harder, duller and far more important: deciding how the technology should actually be used.

Can vs Should

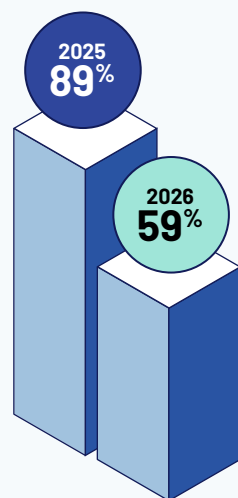
This is where the next phase begins. Communicators are using AI – that is not up for debate. The question is whether they can use it well. AI has commoditised some of the outputs that once defined communications value, so as production becomes easier, judgement becomes the differentiator: deciding what should be said, when it should be said and whether it should be said at all.

That distinction matters. There is a world of difference between asking, “*Could AI do this?*” and asking, “*Should AI do this, under what conditions, with what evidence, and with whom accountable if it goes wrong?*”

One Council Member put the point plainly: “*Meaningful [use] is first to think about the challenges you have in your work processes, and then see if AI is a good solution. It’s not just saying we need this AI tool with no idea what it solves.*” That should become the test of AI maturity. Not novelty, scale or the number of licences deployed across the organisation. The test is whether AI is being matched to real problems, governed according to real risks, and used in ways that improve the quality of decisions rather than merely the speed of output.

Has AI changed business operations?

In 2025, 89% of Council Members believed AI would fundamentally transform business operations. In 2026, just 59% agree that it has done so.



The Governance Gap

For communications leaders, the question is not merely operational, but reputational. AI excels at producing communications material, but it struggles to know if anything should be produced in the first place. It can draft an apology, but it cannot know whether the company has earned the right to make one or if making one will inflame the situation. It can generate a statement on a sensitive issue, but it cannot judge whether silence would be wiser. It can produce a CEO quote in seconds, but it cannot feel when the words are technically correct and reputationally disastrous.

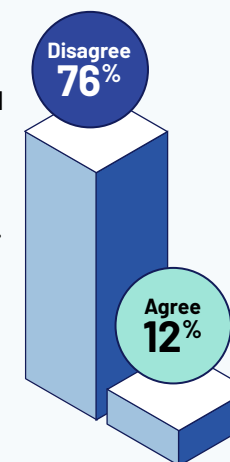
That distinction emerges repeatedly in the Council findings. As one member observed, “*You will never be able to out-compute computers in AI, but you can out-human them. There are things human beings are good at, like reading a room, making a judgement based on imperfect information, and being a business partner.*” AI may be becoming more capable, but the importance of stakeholder knowledge and contextual understanding is rising rather than falling.

That is why communications needs to be more than a user of AI. It needs to be part of how AI is governed. Technology and operations teams will always be better placed to show what AI can do. Communications and reputation leaders need to be in the room to ask what it should do. A use case can be technically impressive, commercially efficient and reputationally foolish all at once. The fact that a tool can generate synthetic audiences, automate customer responses, produce executive content or personalise messages at scale does not mean it should be allowed to do so without guardrails.

The data suggests that communicators believe AI adoption has significantly outpaced governance. Only 12% of Council Members agree that existing ethical policies in business are sufficient for the adoption of AI, while 76% disagree. The level of agreement is consistent with 2025 and 2 points down from 2023.

Has AI adoption outpaced governance?

Only 12% of Council Members agree that existing ethical policies in business are sufficient for the adoption of AI, while 76% disagree.



Rather than signalling hostility towards AI, the findings suggest that organisations recognise the implications of getting it wrong. Ethical anxiety tends to grow when a technology moves from novelty to consequence. A tool used to polish a sentence can be managed informally. A tool used to draft crisis responses, simulate stakeholders, brief executives or shape reputation strategy cannot.

Many organisations are beginning to respond. Council Members describe responsible AI committees, enterprise steering groups, internal guidelines, prompt training, proprietary tools, limits on confidential data, quality checks and rules for AI-generated images. But maturity remains uneven. Some teams are building agents and embedding AI into strategic workflows. Others are still asking basic questions about what can be put into a system, who can see it, whether it can access sensitive information, and who is watching over it. One respondent recalled AI tools simply appearing in workplace systems, prompting obvious but unanswered questions, such as what are the rules, what are the limits, and who decides?

The ‘Human in the Loop’ Fallacy

This is where “*human in the loop*” needs to mean more than a slogan. Council Members repeatedly stress the importance of human review. “*Human judgement; human review needs to exist,*” said one. Another explained that while AI supports daily activity, “*the human element always remains central to oversee, guide, and validate the process.*” That is the right instinct. But a human in the loop is not a safeguard unless the loop has been designed. A junior employee approving an AI-generated statement they cannot verify is not governance. Nor is a senior leader glancing at a machine-written briefing without understanding its sources, assumptions or limitations.

Good AI design requires purpose, risk tiers, evidence discipline, escalation points and accountability. A social caption, an internal summary and a CEO response to a crisis should not sit under the same rules. Nor should AI-generated research, synthetic data, creative content, and stakeholder communications be treated as equivalent simply because the same tool can produce them. The absence of visible catastrophe should not be mistaken for proof of readiness. The absence of evidence is not evidence of absence – it may simply mean that failures have been contained, that AI has so far been kept to relatively low-risk work, or that organisations have not yet looked hard enough.

The Intelligence Layer

The more AI improves, the more consequential this becomes. Early use cases were relatively modest and restricted to basic tasks including summarise this, rewrite that, make this sharper, and translate this into a different tone. In the next wave, AI is becoming an intelligence layer. It can help survey the landscape, identify emerging risks, stress-test messages, challenge assumptions, and compare stakeholder narratives. One Council Member argued that AI’s “*true strategic value lies in its extraordinary research capabilities.*” Another imagined an AI agent linked to a reputation tracker, able to flag when a draft missed key reputation attributes and suggest improvements.

The Judgement Premium

AI can free communicators from lower-value production and give them more time for judgement, counsel, and strategy, but it will not do that evenly. The benefits will accrue to teams that already know what good looks like. Strong communications functions will use AI to move up the value chain. Weak ones will use it to create more average content at greater speed.

That may be AI's most uncomfortable effect on the profession. It will not replace corporate communicators. It will expose which communications functions were strategic, and which were merely productive. If a team's value lies mainly in producing words, slides, summaries, and plans, AI will compress that value. If its value lies in judgement, business fluency, stakeholder understanding, ethical reasoning, and knowing when not to speak, AI will amplify it. As one Council Member put it, meaningful AI as augmentation maintains the human role in *"creativity, judgement, strategic thinking."*

The future communicator will need different capabilities as a result: more analytically literate, more commercially aware, more comfortable with data, and more confident challenging technology-led decisions. They will need to understand enough about AI to use it well, and enough about reputation to know when not to. AI puts a premium on discernment.

AI's adolescence will not be tidy. There will be overreach, correction, experimentation, and embarrassment. Some organisations will give it too much freedom. Others will constrain it so tightly that they miss its value. The winners will sit between those extremes. They will neither worship the technology nor fear it. They will design its use.

AI has come of age. What happens next depends less on the technology than on the decisions, governance and accountability wrapped around it. The next advantage in corporate communications will not come from having AI. It will come from knowing when to use it, when to question it, when to overrule it, and when to leave the work to humans.

Synthetic Data – Useful, But Not Evidence

Synthetic data is a useful test of AI maturity because it captures both the promise and the snake oil risk.

On one hand, it allows communicators and researchers to do things that once seemed difficult or impossible. With synthetic data we can now simulate audiences, test scenarios, explore message reactions, and generate hypotheses at speed. Used carefully, it can be a powerful tool for strategy, planning and creative development.

But simulation is not reality. In the Reputation Council data, **40%** say their communications function has used synthetic data, but only **18%** agree that the insights generated from synthetic data are robust and comparable to traditional market research. That gap matters. It shows experimentation without full confidence.

The right conclusion is not that synthetic data is useless. It is that its role needs to be defined honestly. At Ipsos, we see synthetic data as a potentially useful tool for framing questions, testing hypotheses, exploring scenarios and identifying areas for further investigation. The risk arises when simulation is mistaken for observation, or when synthetic outputs are treated as equivalent to evidence gathered from real stakeholders.

Synthetic data can tell communicators what a model thinks people might think. That is not the same as knowing what people think.

GEO – When Machines Become the Audience

GEO is not just SEO with a new acronym. It is reputation management for a machine-mediated information environment.

As large language models become answer engines, companies are not just communicating with employees, investors, customers, regulators, journalists, and policymakers. They are also being interpreted by machines that summarise, rank and re-present corporate information to those audiences. One Council Member put it starkly: *"There's now an intermediary between me and my stakeholder and it's a machine,"* and another said, *"Our reputation and brand are now being shaped by AI outlets. It's no longer just search engines."*

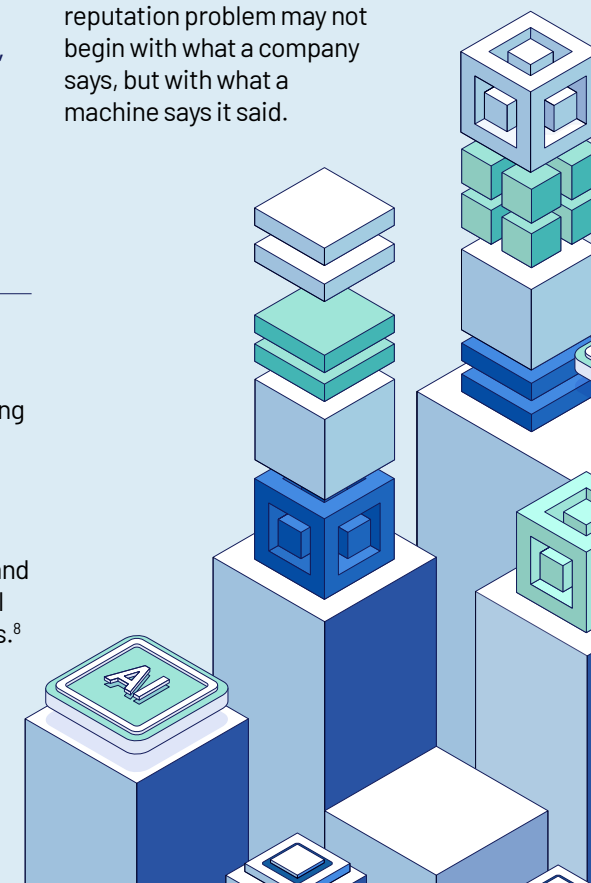
// We're going to move away from a push model where we write, send press releases, post on social media, get listed in search results, and push everything out – to a pull model where people will say I'm interested in this topic, come and get me the information. We want the agents to consider and prefer our information."

The implications stretch beyond consumer search behaviour. Influential stakeholders are using AI as a research tool. Ipsos research among UK MPs found that **68%** use AI for research at least sometimes,⁷ while around one in three do so often. Journalists are also encouraged to incorporate AI into their research workflows – in a recent Ipsos survey, **37%** of UK business and finance journalists said they used Generative AI tools / LLMs when researching business stories.⁸ As AI-generated summaries become part of how information is gathered and interpreted, communications teams are saddled with yet another responsibility: ensuring machines represent their organisation as accurately as they would want stakeholders to understand it.

There is not yet a settled GEO playbook.

That is part of the point. The field feels open because everyone is learning at once. Some organisations are auditing what AI systems say about them. Others are adapting owned content, strengthening websites, reviewing Wikipedia, and testing different engines to see which sources are being cited. One respondent described trying to understand *"the eating habits of the LLMs"* so that content could be made more visible to generative summaries.

This will not remain a level playing field for long. Companies that understand how machines describe them will hold an advantage over those still optimising for yesterday's SEO ecosystem. The decline in website referrals and rise of answer-based search suggest that visibility is being determined before a stakeholder ever reaches a corporate website. The next reputation problem may not begin with what a company says, but with what a machine says it said.



⁷ Ipsos UK Syndicated Survey of MPs, Summer 2026

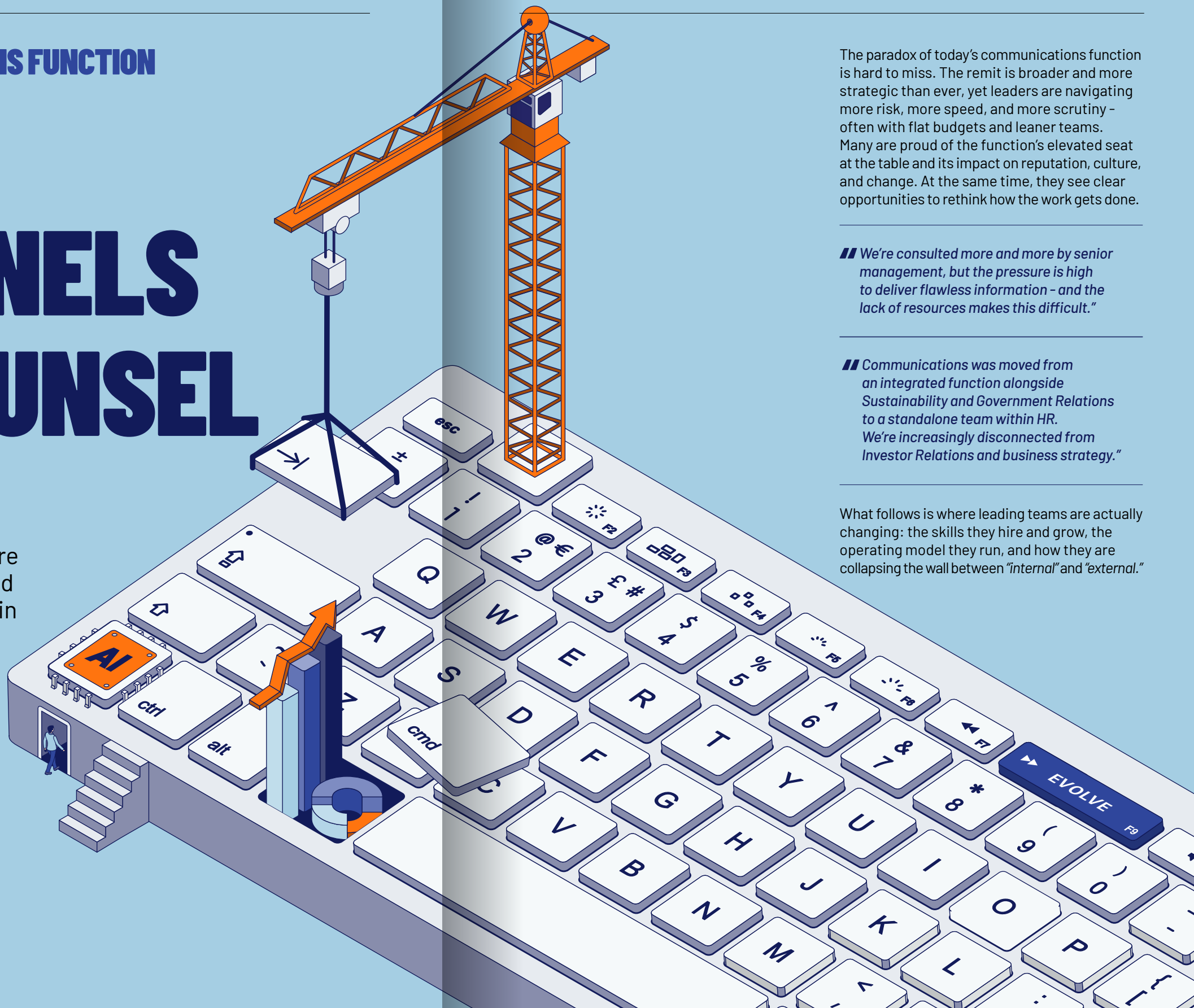
⁸ Ipsos UK Syndicated Survey of Business & Finance Journalists, Summer 2026

THE COMMUNICATIONS FUNCTION

FROM CHANNELS TO COUNSEL

JASON MCGRATH

The communications function is becoming more strategic, more integrated and more influential within organisations. To meet expanding expectations, Council Members are rethinking the skills, structures and operating models that will define the next generation of communicators.



The paradox of today's communications function is hard to miss. The remit is broader and more strategic than ever, yet leaders are navigating more risk, more speed, and more scrutiny – often with flat budgets and leaner teams. Many are proud of the function's elevated seat at the table and its impact on reputation, culture, and change. At the same time, they see clear opportunities to rethink how the work gets done.

“We’re consulted more and more by senior management, but the pressure is high to deliver flawless information – and the lack of resources makes this difficult.”

“Communications was moved from an integrated function alongside Sustainability and Government Relations to a standalone team within HR. We’re increasingly disconnected from Investor Relations and business strategy.”

What follows is where leading teams are actually changing: the skills they hire and grow, the operating model they run, and how they are collapsing the wall between “internal” and “external.”

What the next generation needs to be great at

The skills profile of the communications function is changing. Writing and storytelling still matter, but when describing the skills and traits they look for in a new hire, Council Members describe a need for communicators who combine strategic judgement with business acumen, who can simplify complexity, advise leaders and connect communications activity to organisational outcomes.

Data literacy and AI fluency are becoming expected capabilities rather than specialist ones. The ability to interrogate evidence, evaluate AI outputs and integrate technology into workflows now sits alongside more traditional communications skills. At the same time, leaders continue to place a premium on adaptability, resilience and curiosity, particularly in environments defined by ambiguity, rapid change and competing stakeholder expectations.

None of this diminishes the importance of craft. If anything, it increases it. As AI makes content creation easier, the ability to write clearly, tell compelling stories and build trusted relationships becomes more valuable, not less.

“Future-proofing is not just about the skill set; it's about the mindset. The team needs data literacy and AI fluency, but more importantly, they need to operate with speed while showing judgment and an instinct for the organisation's strategy.”

How the operating model is changing

Leaders are also redesigning the function around strategic counsel, partnership and measurable outcomes. More communications teams are embedding experienced advisers within business units and leadership teams, bringing reputation, culture and stakeholder considerations into decisions earlier. At the same time, data and intelligence capabilities are becoming core functions rather than specialist additions.

Several Council Members describe a shift towards more integrated content operations, combining channels, issues management, measurement and content creation within a single operating model. Others point to growing investment in AI, not as a replacement for communicators, but as a tool for augmenting research, planning, monitoring and execution. What unites these approaches is a desire to move communications further upstream in organisational decision-making.

The capacity challenge

The pressure to evolve is not happening in a vacuum. Across the Council, two-thirds (67%) agree that their job responsibilities have become harder to manage over time, although 62% remain satisfied with their work-life balance.

The impact of resourcing cuts is nuanced. The increased expectations of the comms function are more difficult to absorb where capacity has been reduced – Council Members who reported reductions in team headcount are particularly likely to say their responsibilities have become harder to manage, with 61% agreeing.

Budget pressures appear to manifest differently. While communicators experiencing budget reductions are no more likely than average to say their responsibilities have become harder to manage, they are noticeably less satisfied with their work-life balance. In Europe, three in ten (29%) communicators whose budgets have declined report dissatisfaction with their work-life balance, compared with 20% across the full sample.

Talent and structure are evolving to match the new expectations of the function. Job descriptions now emphasise multi-format digital skills, behavioural science, and personalised, insight-driven engagement. Teams are upskilling in AI, data, and financial acumen while doubling down on enduring strengths – clear writing, empathy, and relationship-building. Internal-agency models are gaining traction, flexing specialist capacity through selective outsourcing. Several leaders anticipate further restructuring: fewer in-house, purely tactical roles as AI scales production; more senior advisory weight on top.

“We are transforming from news creators to strategists who can put issues into context for leaders, employees, and external stakeholders.”

The collapse of “internal” vs “external”

The line between employee and public audiences has effectively vanished. Most leaders work from one set of facts, adapting depth, tone, and timing by audience. Inside-first sequencing for people-impacting news, synchronised FAQs and talk tracks, and leak-ready internal memos are becoming standard.

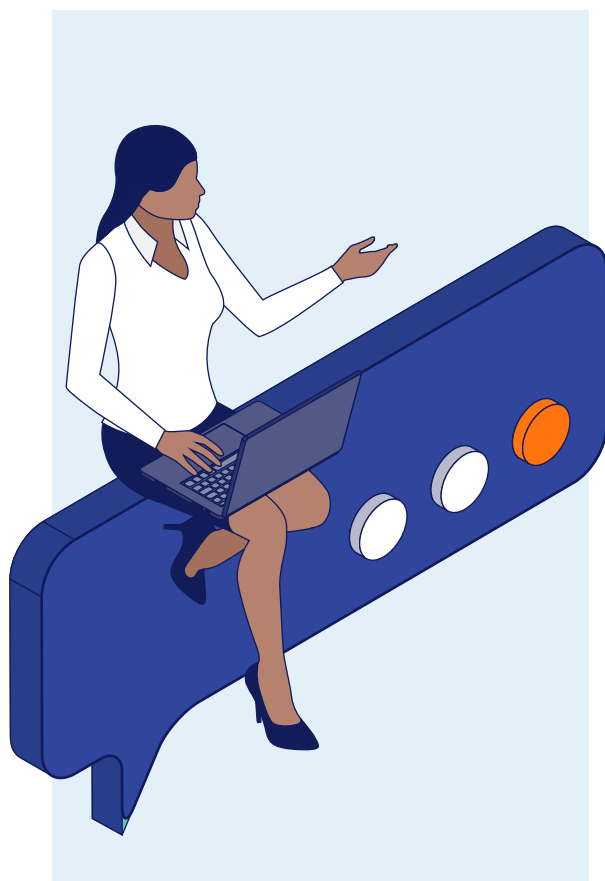
“Employers must be transparent, sharing good and bad news as early as possible without sugarcoating realities.”

“There is a golden rule: no external news that affects our teammates should ever be published before they are informed.”

67%

of the Council members agree that their job responsibilities have become harder to manage over time





Tensions still emerge, particularly around financial disclosure, politically charged issues and the different expectations of internal and external audiences. Yet most Council Members describe these as variations in emphasis rather than entirely different narratives. The prevailing view is that audiences may require different levels of detail, but they should not receive fundamentally different versions of reality.

Private or non-listed firms often share more detail internally, but the working assumption is that anything can leak – so messages stay aligned.

“For the past four or five years, I’ve operated under the firm belief that any internal message can – and likely will – become external. I always calculate that risk because I never want the company to be caught in a contradiction.”

“We are observing leaks all the time. So we have to communicate internally what we want to say externally.”

Organisations are responding by strengthening governance and simplifying content architectures. Several Council Members describe closer coordination between Communications, HR, Legal, Investor Relations and Operations, often through regular editorial or risk-management forums. Message architectures are becoming more disciplined, with stronger manager enablement so employees hear from leaders they trust, while measurement is evolving beyond opens and clicks toward understanding, trust and behavioural outcomes.

AI is accelerating some of these changes by improving personalisation, translation and content production. At the same time, it introduces new risks around accuracy, consistency and oversight, reinforcing the need for stronger governance.

Time allocation is shifting accordingly. In many teams, effort spent on internal and external is approaching parity; the rough average lands around **40–50%** internal. That spikes to **60–75%** during major transitions or transformations, and dips to **10–25%** in externally oriented or listed-company roles where HR still owns most employee comms.

How the communications function is evolving

Future-fit communicators are “T-shaped” narrative architects who operate across stakeholders and channels, with depth in change, issues/crisis, and reputation risk. They pair editorial judgment with content operations, facilitation, and manager enablement; they’re data-literate and comfortable linking communications to business and people outcomes; and they’re fluent in finance, legal/regulatory constraints, and scenario/leak planning. Segmentation and personalisation at scale, omnichannel distribution (including reaching employees on external platforms), and AI fluency move from nice-to-have to core.

The function is moving from producing messages to ensuring coherence – aligning what the company says and does, and enabling others to share. Teams that win will combine an effective content operation with deep advisory capacity, listening at scale, and credible proof of outcomes: resilience of reputation, employee advocacy, policy permission, and commercial impact.

As the direction of travel becomes clear, Council Members are focusing on three priorities: Re-skill, Re-architect and Re-measure. To Re-skill is not to replace one skillset with another, but to combine them, building new capabilities alongside traditional communications strengths. Effective use of AI tools, data interpretation skills and commercial understanding are becoming more important, but so too are judgement, storytelling and stakeholder management.

Re-architect reflects changes in how communications functions operate. More teams are embedding advisers closer to decision-making, strengthening intelligence and measurement capabilities, and integrating communications more closely with public affairs, sustainability and other stakeholder functions.

Re-measure acknowledges growing pressure to demonstrate value. Communications leaders are looking beyond outputs and activity metrics towards measures that better capture trust, understanding, reputation and organisational impact.

Taken together, these shifts point to a broader evolution. Communications isn’t just telling the story anymore, it’s how the enterprise earns the right for its story to be believed, inside and out.



How Communications Leaders Learn – Where Council Members Find Inspiration, Insight and Advice

Rather than simply consuming content, today's communications leaders are curating their own intelligence network. Their information habits reflect a broader shift in the profession: from managing communications to helping organisations make sense of complexity.

01 They trust peers more than pundits

Council Members were far more likely to cite peers, former colleagues and professional networks than individual commentators. In a complex environment, trusted conversations often carry more weight than public thought leadership.

“Smaller, peer-level forums can be more informative than big stages, because people share what's working and what's not.”

02 They look beyond communications

The most frequently cited sources were The Financial Times, The Economist, Wall Street Journal, Bloomberg and Foreign Affairs alongside business leaders, economists, academics and policymakers. Leading communicators increasingly learn from the forces shaping business rather than communications itself.

“The best ideas often come from outside your category.”

03 They actively challenge their own assumptions

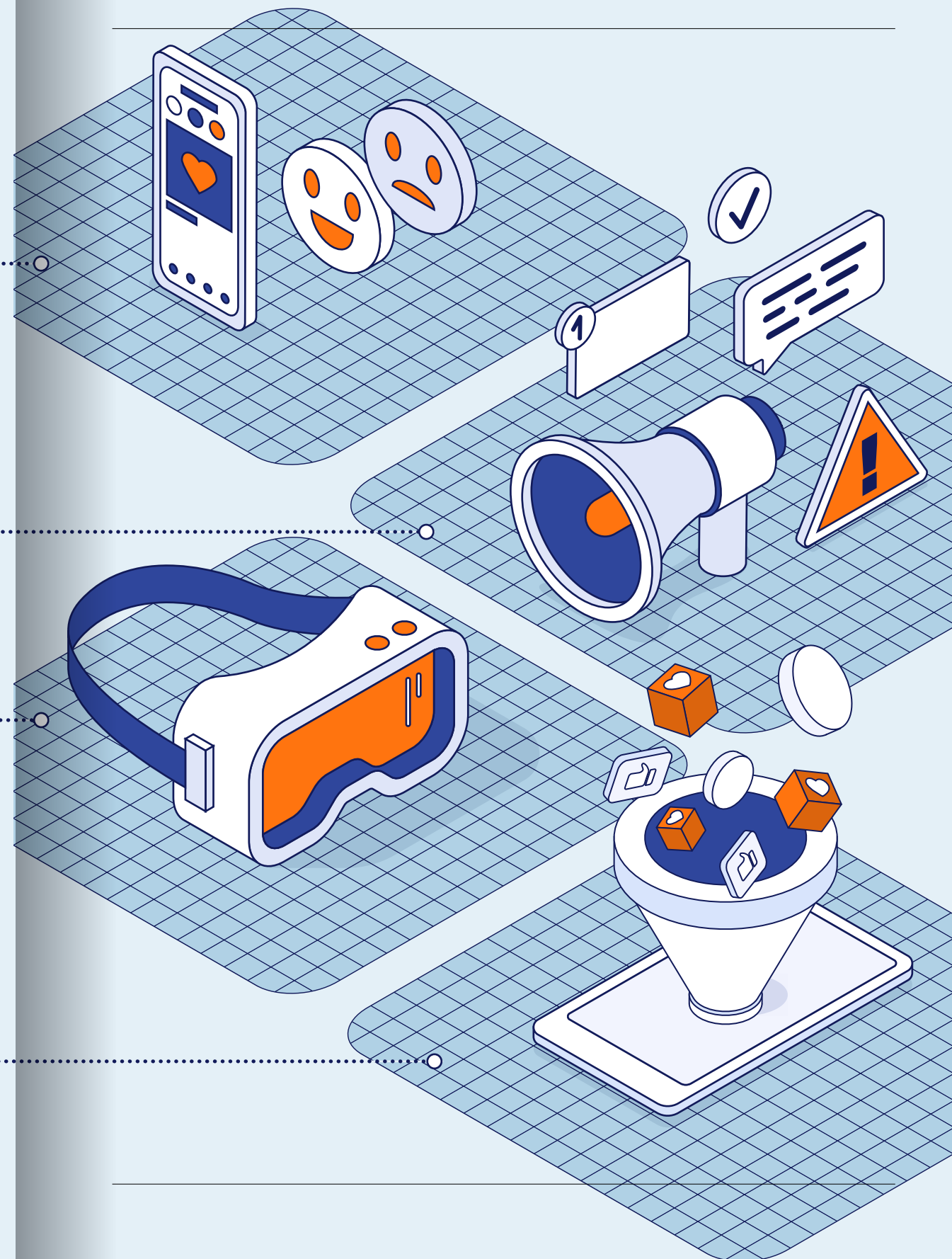
Many Council Members deliberately consume information from different political, ideological and geographic perspectives to avoid becoming trapped in media or algorithmic bubbles.

“You need to read multiple sources, otherwise you... just reinforce your own views.”

04 They prioritise signal over noise

Podcasts, newsletters, long-form journalism and trusted media brands featured heavily in responses. Faced with information overload, communicators increasingly favour depth, context and credibility over speed.

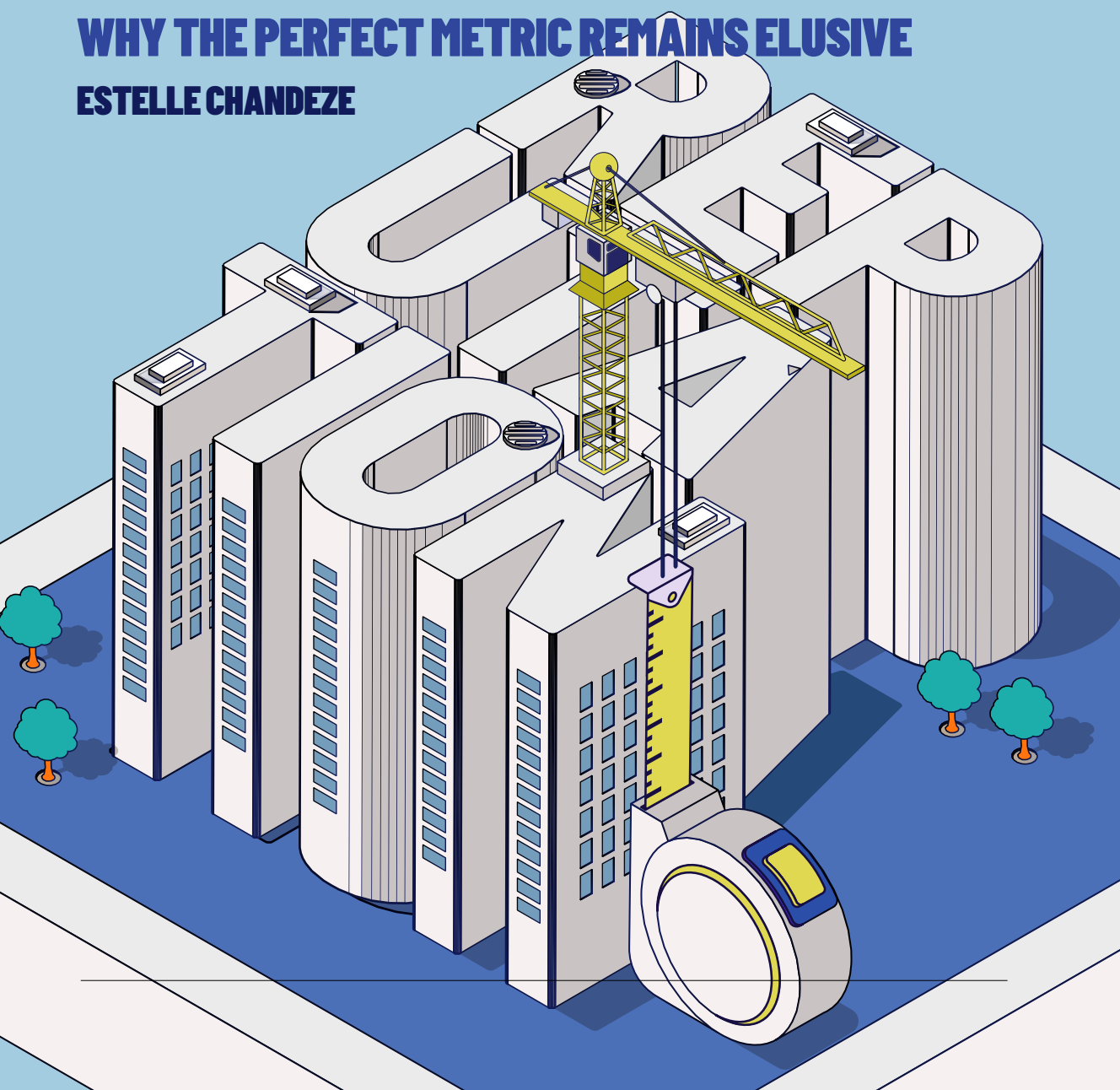
“I'd rather be right than first.”



REPUTATION MEASUREMENT

WHY THE PERFECT METRIC REMAINS ELUSIVE

ESTELLE CHANDEZE



Few organisations doubt that reputation creates value, yet many struggle to define precisely what it is or how it should be measured. As reputation becomes increasingly central to resilience, companies are searching for better ways to understand, manage and demonstrate its impact.

Council Members describe reputation as both a licence to operate and a source of competitive advantage. What was once a communications outcome is now viewed as a strategic asset that supports growth, resilience and stakeholder trust.

Council Members agree that reputation is built gradually, monitored continuously and can deteriorate surprisingly quickly. For organisations that have faced reputational crises, the connection between reputation and business performance is particularly clear.

“We had all these reputational issues in the past, and so everybody is very aware of how big the effect of reputation for your business is.”

The definition problem

Despite agreeing on the importance of reputation, Council Members often define it in very different ways. The absence of a shared definition creates challenges downstream when organisations attempt to measure or manage it.

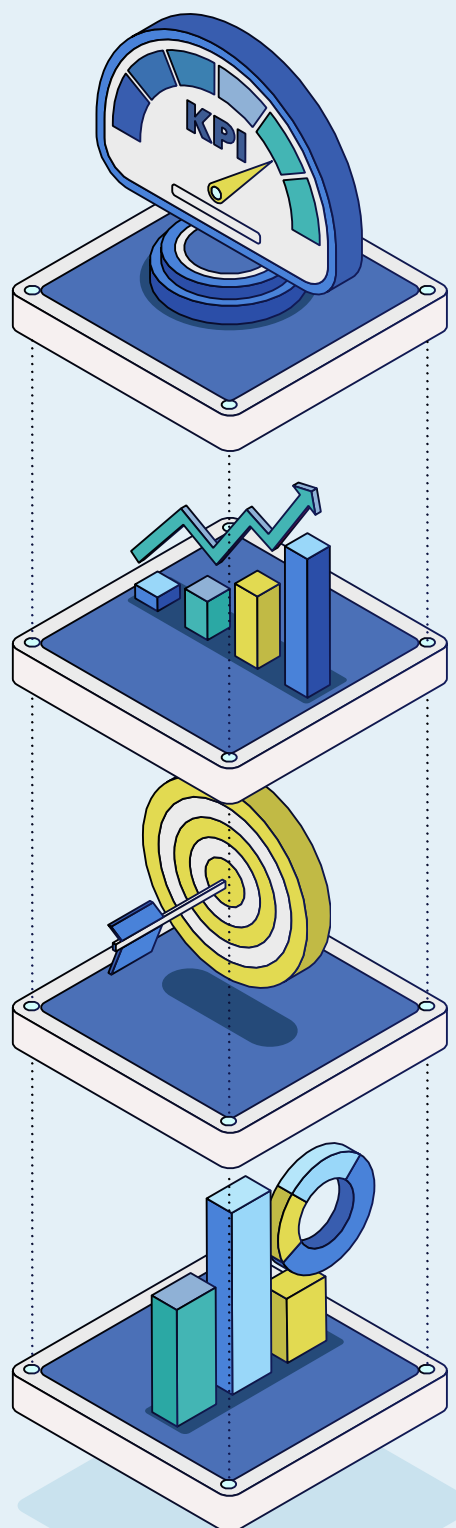
“Reputation does get thrown around a lot. And I don’t think necessarily people always think about what it means.”

“There is no single definition of reputation within our company because every department views it through the lens of their own objectives.”

“I think it’s critically important [but] I think we don’t really have a very good framing and definition of it.”

Trust is the most common indicator mentioned by Members when thinking about reputation, as something that needs to be built, measured and protected. It’s usually associated with other KPIs like NPS, favourability or recommendation, but trust is the foundation of reputation.

A second characteristic is that reputation is shaped by multiple stakeholders simultaneously. Council Members take a real 360-degree view of reputation, with each stakeholder group important for different reasons.



Looking for the perfect measurement

While most Council Members use formal measurement systems, few express complete confidence in them. Different sources are used to measure reputation, with most companies using a mix of quantitative research, qualitative, social or other sources.

“We quantify it through a mix of leading and lagging indicators: stakeholder trust and familiarity measures, brand/reputation tracking, employee engagement and advocacy, partner/customer preference, and crisis resilience. We also look at tangible business proxies—share of positive voice, regulatory outcomes, talent attraction/retention signals, and the cost of capital environment.”

“We tend to track our reputation scores against our share price because I think there is a strong correlation in a financial market space between the two.”

“Ultimately, we rely on a mix of standardised international tools provided by the Group and local, experimental AI-driven ideas aimed at proving the true value and impact of our communication efforts.”

The challenge is not a lack of measurement, rather a lack of consensus around which measures matter most, and how they should be interpreted.

Linking reputation to value remains uncertain

If reputation measurement presents one challenge, demonstrating commercial value presents another. One Council Member described their inability to quantify the value of a good reputation inside their organisation as “one of the things that irritates me the most,” adding, “I haven’t found a meaningful way to put a number on it that is comparable, stays comparable over time, and gives you insights that you can derive actions from,” while another told us they were “waiting for someone to find the magic formula to put an exact number on it.”

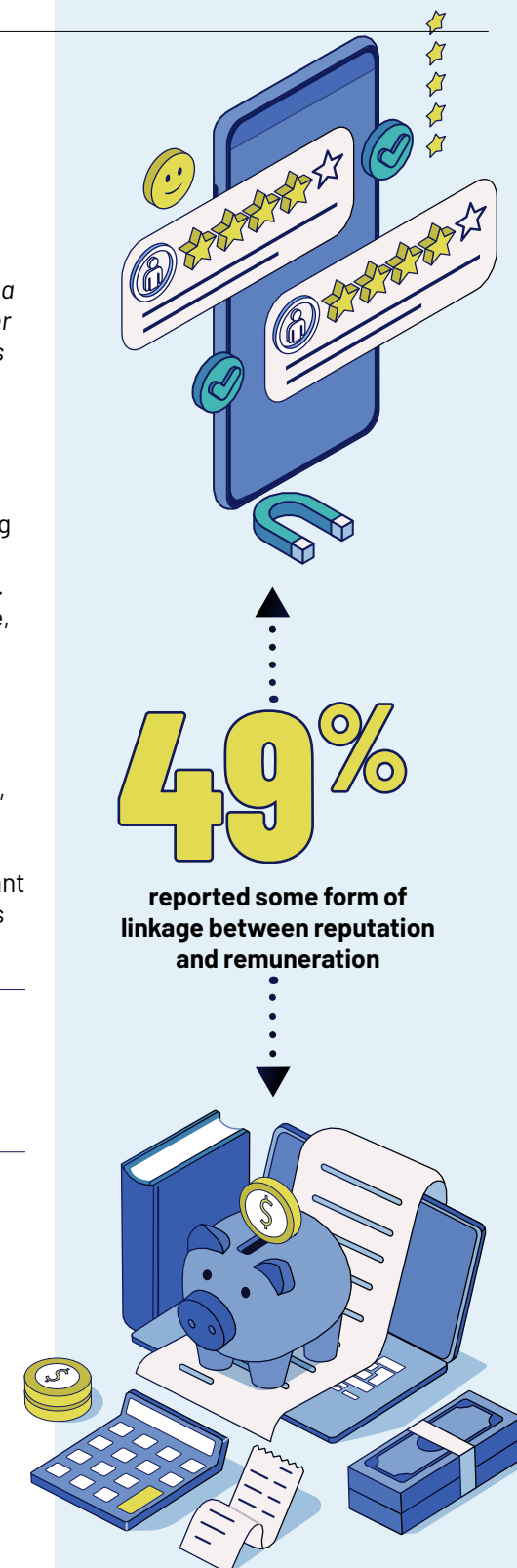
Ipsos research shows that for every point of trust gained, companies see measurable gains in marketing efficiency, purchase intent and loyalty,⁹ and Council Members broadly agree that reputation creates value. The difficulty lies in proving precisely how much value, and through which business mechanisms.

Remuneration and reputation: accountability without full ownership

Just under half of respondents (**49%**) reported some form of linkage between reputation and remuneration, including **29%** with a direct link and **20%** with an indirect one. However, **38%** reported no link at all, demonstrating that many organisations remain hesitant to tie compensation directly to a metric they regard as difficult to define, isolate or measure consistently.

“Yes, there will be performance related KPIs in there relating to reputation. Will that as a whole drive my bonus? No. It’s one of a number.”

Another challenge is that many of the factors shaping reputation sit outside the communications function. Product quality, customer experience, financial performance, operational resilience and leadership behaviour all contribute to reputation, creating a familiar tension: communicators are expected to help manage reputation, but do not control all of the factors that shape it.



/// I think about reputation as the basic operating system of the company. It's dispersed. It's not a communications function; it's in everyone's hand... Reputation management should be very close to the CEO, very close to the leadership of the company. It could be enabled and led by communications, but it's definitely a corporate function."

The inconsistent approach to remuneration ultimately reflects a broader reality: reputation is widely regarded as strategically important, but many organisations remain unconvinced they can measure it with sufficient precision to tie it directly to compensation.

One reputation, many audiences

Reputation becomes even harder to measure because it is shaped by multiple stakeholder groups simultaneously.

When asked to identify the single most important audience to maintain a strong relationship with, Council Members most frequently prioritised customers, clients and end users. **40%** identified customers as their primary stakeholder audience, reflecting the close relationship between reputation, demand and revenue generation.

/// Clients. Our business depends on them."

Government, regulatory and policy-making audiences ranked second (**19%**), particularly among organisations operating in highly regulated sectors where reputation directly influences an organisation's licence to operate, and opinion leaders, media and NGOs ranked third (**16%**), highlighting the role of intermediaries in shaping stakeholder perceptions and organisational legitimacy.

Perhaps the most surprising finding concerns employees. Across interviews, Council Members described employees as ambassadors, culture carriers and a vital source of trust, engagement and resilience. Internal communications featured prominently throughout discussions of leadership, strategic silence and organisational alignment, with several participants describing employee communication as one of their most important responsibilities.

However, only **13%** of respondents identified employees as their single most important stakeholder audience. This apparent contradiction suggests that employees are viewed differently from other stakeholder groups. Rather than being considered in isolation, employees are often seen as connected to the wider reputation ecosystem: they shape customer experiences, influence advocacy and trust, and frequently act as the first audience to react to corporate decisions.

Many Council Members ultimately resisted the idea that any stakeholder group could be prioritised entirely on its own.

/// I don't dare to prioritise. Clients are fundamental, regulators are transcendental, and employees are also very important."

/// It is impossible to prioritise one stakeholder over another because they function as an interconnected chain. Every link is equally essential."

Strong perceptions among one stakeholder audience do not automatically translate into trust among another, making a single reputation score difficult to construct and even harder to interpret. This complexity helps explain why organisations continue to rely on multiple signals and measurement approaches rather than a single reputation score.

From measurement to intelligence

Managing reputation is like piloting an oil tanker – it is slow to move but can fail quickly if you encounter a hazard. Constant monitoring of hazards is important, but this doesn't mean constant research.

Rather than searching for a single perfect metric, Council Members are combining multiple sources of evidence – research, stakeholder feedback, trust measures, business performance indicators and digital intelligence – to build a more complete understanding of reputation. A strong

reputation framework therefore turns reputation from something that is protected into something that can be deliberately strengthened over time.

As communications becomes an organisation's intelligence function, success depends less on collecting more data and more on identifying meaningful signals, understanding different stakeholder perspectives and translating insight into action.



CONCLUSIONS

FROM SENSEMAKER TO STEWARD

TOM FIFE-SCHAW

Across this year's findings runs a common theme: uncertainty is no longer a temporary condition but a permanent operating reality. In that environment, the communicator's role is evolving from shaping messages to helping organisations make better decisions

When thinking about reputation over the past decade, many of us have been convinced that turbulence was temporary. Crises would pass, markets would settle, politics would calm down a tad and technology would find its place. Many seasoned Council Members and those of us who choose to spend our days trying to decode corporate reputation have experienced (or should that be endured?) many crises over decades. But we've also enjoyed long – probably highly unusual – periods of relative stability. Surely, it's a case of being patient and things will soon return to normal?

Perhaps it's time now to face reality. The striking lesson of this year's Reputation Council is that permacrisis and polycrisis – whatever you want to call it – is normal. We are now in the interregnum between the relative calm of the post-Cold War consensus, and a complex web of large-scale technological transformation, climate shifts, societal fragmentation and profound geopolitical unpredictability, all factors making sound business decision-making extremely difficult.



The consequence is profound for those in Corporate Affairs and Comms. Gone are the days of simply helping organisations respond to events or to shape the narrative around them. The job is now to help organisations operate within uncertainty itself. That sounds like a subtle distinction. It is not.

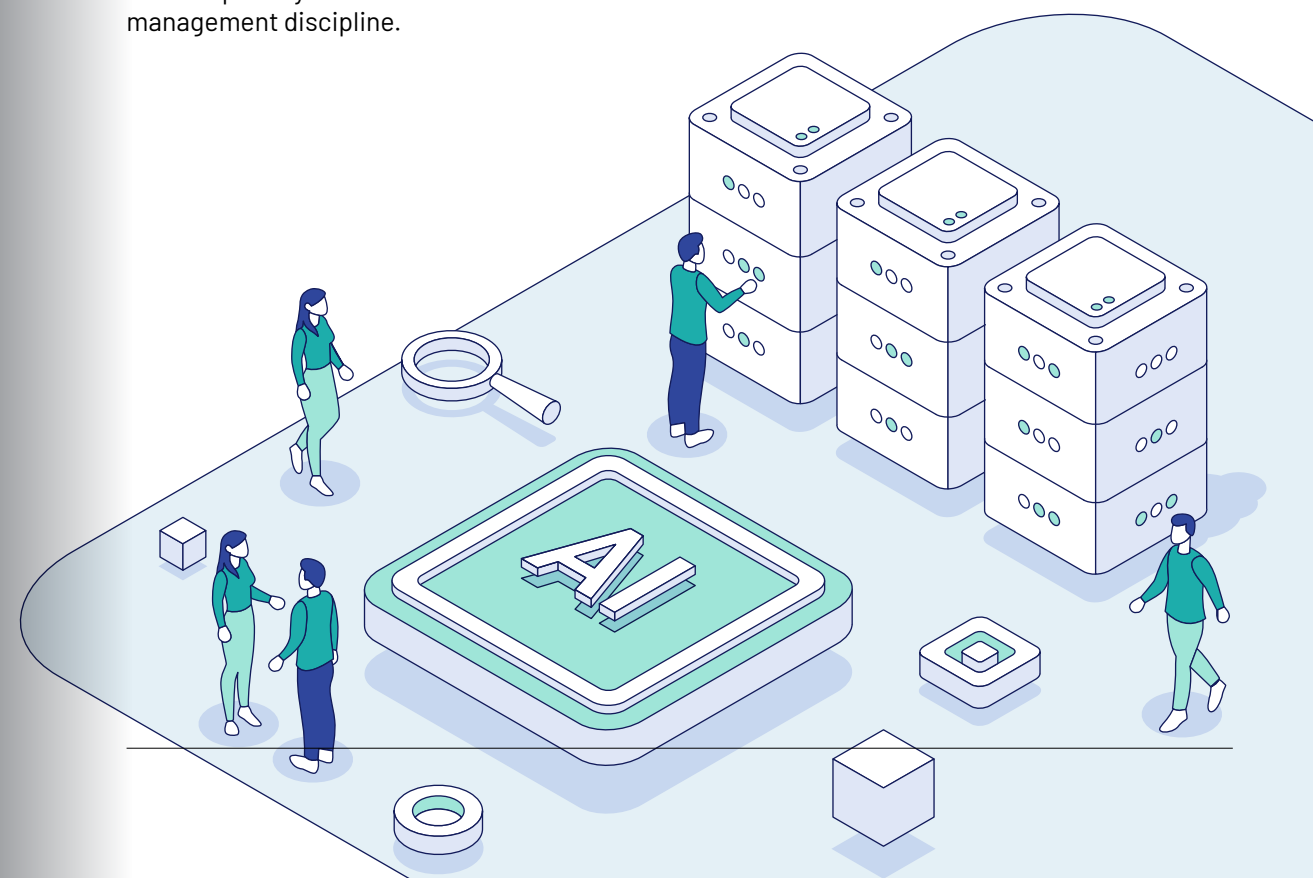
For years, communicators were called upon when something happened. Today, they are expected to help leaders understand what might happen next, what matters, what doesn't, and what the organisation should do about it. Reputation, communications, public affairs and stakeholder engagement are converging into something bigger: organisational intelligence. We saw this emerge in last year's Council. This now appears to be the day-to-day reality rather than an evolution.

In this context, prediction is losing value. Preparation is gaining it. Horizon scanning, scenario planning, resilience, and adaptability have become more valuable than certainty. In a polycrisis, strategic flexibility is the new competitive advantage. And it goes beyond crisis capability. This is now a core management discipline.

Wisdom as currency

AI looms large again this wave. It is 2026 after all. This isn't because communicators are worried about whether AI will arrive – it already has. The conversation has moved on. The real question is what becomes valuable once everyone has access to the same extraordinary tools. Council Members arrived at the same conclusion: sound judgement. AI may automate production, but it elevates the value of wisdom.

AI can draft a statement faster than any communications team. It can analyse sentiment, summarise documents, monitor issues and generate content endlessly. What it cannot do is understand consequences. It cannot sense when a statement is technically correct but strategically disastrous. It cannot distinguish between a moment that requires a response and one that rewards restraint. It cannot recognise the difference between information and wisdom. The irony is hard to miss. As machine intelligence becomes abundant, human discernment becomes scarce.



Throughout the report we see evidence of this shift. Communicators are being asked questions that extend beyond capability and into accountability. Should we? Who is accountable? What happens if this goes wrong? The function is moving closer to stewardship.

The organisations that thrive will not be those using the most AI. They will be the ones exercising the most judgement around it. AI fluency will become expected. Strategic thinking, commercial understanding and ethical instinct will become indispensable to those you hire to be your successors as custodians of reputation.

Making friends and alienating people

One uncomfortable truth runs through much of this year's research: the age of broad consensus is over. Polarisation is not a new feature in society, but its visibility is.

Many organisations now operate across multiple realities simultaneously. What earns praise in one market attracts criticism in another. Employees often expect different things than investors. Regulators can pull in one direction while customers pull in another. Even within stakeholder groups there is growing fragmentation.

The most noticeable shift is that communicators do not seem surprised by this. Instead, they are developing greater comfort with trade-offs.

The popular concept of "freedom within a framework" captures this neatly. Global principles remain constant. Their application becomes local. Uniformity gives way to coherence.

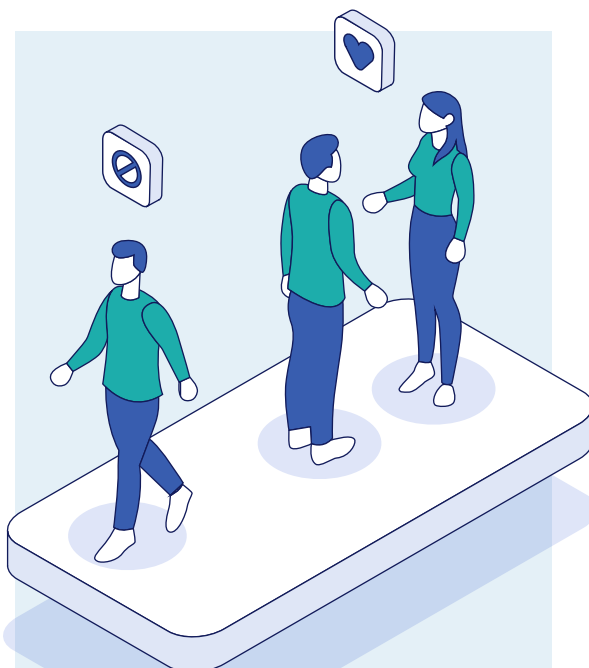
Many find themselves managing tensions rather than resolving them. This is where a long-standing principle of reputation management comes into its own: understanding and avoiding say-do gaps. The challenge is not finding positions that everyone likes. Those positions are a rare beast today. The challenge is making choices that remain consistent with your principles when somebody, somewhere, will object regardless.

Trust still matters

The deeper story behind these findings is trust. AI-generated content. Misinformation. Deepfakes. Political polarisation. Declining confidence in institutions. Each creates the same underlying problem: certainty is becoming harder to establish.

In this environment, trust starts behaving differently, developing from a desirable outcome of good communications to operational infrastructure. A trusted organisation enjoys something increasingly rare: the benefit of the doubt.

When information is incomplete, stakeholders fill gaps using their existing assumptions. If trust already exists, organisations get time, patience and understanding. If trust is absent, they get suspicion. This is why those tasked with managing and understanding reputation are in roles that are more strategic than ever. Not because boards suddenly discovered it. Rather because volatility has made its value more visible. Reputation helps organisations navigate crises, attract talent, maintain regulatory goodwill and withstand inevitable mistakes.



Yet this year's findings are enigmatic.

Reputation has become one of the most important assets businesses possess, while remaining stubbornly difficult to quantify – the elusive "magic formula" continues to evade even the most sophisticated organisations.

Perhaps that is because reputation is less like a metric and more like a weather system. It cannot be reduced to a single number. It can only be observed, interpreted and managed. This means spending less time searching for the perfect score and more time building the intelligence capability to spot risks, shifts and opportunities before everyone else does. This is, of course, where comprehensive insight systems come into their own.

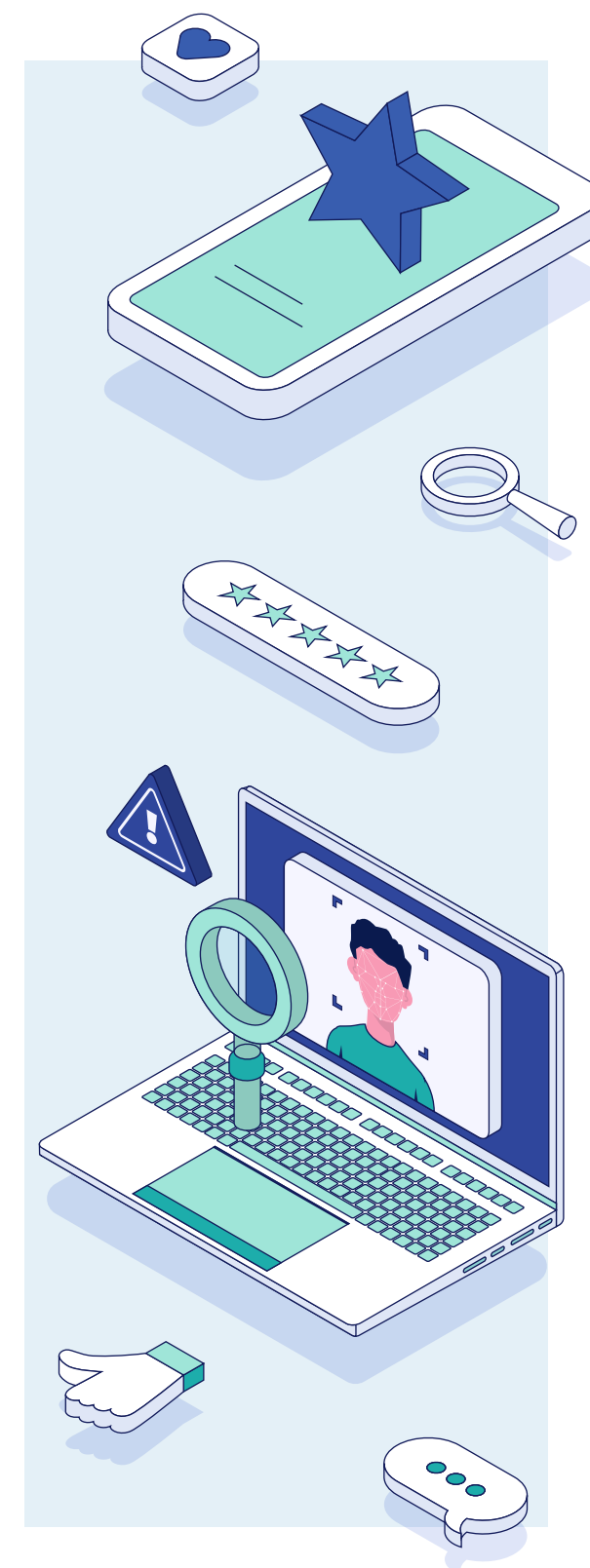
What next? From storyteller to steward

Viewed collectively, this year's findings point towards a profession in the middle of a quiet reinvention. The old communications function specialised in messages. The modern communications function specialises in meaning.

The best practitioners are no longer primarily storytellers, media operators or content creators. As guardians of organisational intelligence, they are interpreters of complexity, translators of ambiguity and advisers on trade-offs. They help leaders connect dots that others cannot see and understand consequences before they arrive.

In an era defined by volatility, fragmentation and machine-generated abundance, their most valuable contribution is not what they communicate. It is how they help organisations think.

And in a world where everybody has a voice, the organisations that win will be the ones that exercise judgement. The future belongs not to those who speak the loudest, but to those who know when to speak, when to stay silent, and above all, what is actually worth saying.



ABOUT IPSOS CORPORATE REPUTATION

Ipsos Corporate Reputation has been a leader in reputation research for over 40 years and we work for some of the biggest corporations in the world. Our mission is to provide critical insights and advice to help our clients build resilient reputations and stronger stakeholder relationships. We deploy a unique blend of traditional and digital research techniques delivered by dedicated reputation research specialists across the world.

This support helps organisations strengthen their reputation capital – the ability of a brand to command preference in the marketplace.

How We Measure Reputation Performance:

- Measuring overall reputation performance and identifying the drivers that create reputational value
- Defining the stakeholders that influence reputation and shaping engagement strategies
- Building communications campaigns and measuring impact
- Understanding future opportunities and risks
- Measuring the impact of a crisis, and responding to it
- Clarifying the actions necessary to deliver on strategic objectives

About the Ipsos Reputation Council

Established in 2009, the Ipsos Reputation Council brings together senior communicators from some of the most respected corporations in the world.

The Reputation Council's mission is to increase the understanding of the issues and challenges facing communicators in the corporate environment, as well as capturing expert views on key trends, issues and events in the wider world.

Each sitting of the Reputation Council provides a definitive guide to the latest thinking and practice in the corporate communications world. The nineteenth sitting of the Reputation Council involved 200 senior corporate communicators based in 21 global markets.

Our sincere thanks to our Reputation Council members for contributing to our latest edition – without your participation this report would not have been possible.

Please get in touch if you think we can help

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Methodological Note

200 in-depth interviews were carried out with Reputation Council Members between March and June 2026 either in person, by telephone or video call. Data may not total **100%** due to rounding.

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