

The future of internal communication



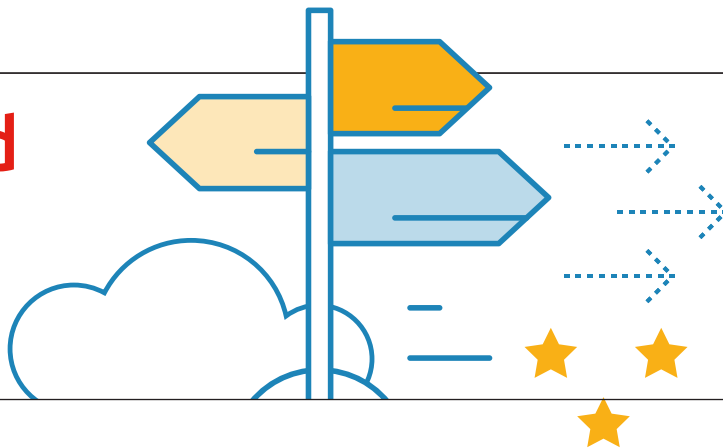
Opportunity for internal communicators in the future of work



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Executive foreword



Jennifer Sproul,
Chief Executive

The world faces unprecedented challenges. Geopolitical frictions, mainstream AI, cyber-security, mis- and disinformation, the climate crisis and persistent economic uncertainty all fuel stress, anxiety and burnout, impacting people of all ages.

The scale of challenge faced by organisations today has dire consequences for business continuity and performance.

There is no playbook for this level of complexity. Across the board, organisations must improve how they respond to market turbulence. Functional and cognitive agility are an imperative if organisations are to successfully adapt to new scenarios as they arise.

If one thing is clear, it's this. How we organise ourselves at work needs wholesale reinvention.

Research shows effective communication underpins all successful transformation. Internal communication is the only business function to help people at work feel informed, connected and purposeful. **And yet the profession now faces its greatest opportunity.**

Since 2019, I have commissioned research to help members understand the work trends most impacting their work.


While I could not have predicted the impact of COVID-19 on internal communication, today I am proud of our commitment to helping members prepare for the future.

“Research shows effective communication underpins all successful transformation.”

This white paper showcases the business case for internal communication in the future of work.

Empathic communication builds bridges, dismantles siloes and fosters connection and community. It underpins group cohesion and is a foundation block for organisational resilience, innovation and adaptation.

I believe history will show internal communication to be a vital function that underpins all workplace success. **And the IoIC is here to help members showcase its strategic value.**

 **“Internal communication enables people at work to feel informed, connected and purposeful in order to drive organisational performance.”**



In the pages that follow, you will find:

The forces
reshaping work in
the decade ahead

Why effective
communication is
now the ultimate
competitive advantage

How internal
communication
drives performance
and resilience

New roles and
opportunities
for internal
communicators

The skills needed
to stay relevant
and influential

Introduction

The global economy is in turmoil. COVID-19, war, AI, extreme weather events, cyber-attacks and more have destabilised supply chains, fuelled mental ill-health and left organisations fragile and unsure how to respond.

Trust – a crucial linchpin for societal and organisational cohesion – is at an all-time low. The rapid rise of mis- and disinformation has created division and many no longer know how to source legitimate, credible information.

Persistent labour market instability and a loss of financial security has fuelled a sharp rise in populism and a belief that already marginalised ‘others’ are singularly responsible for a lack of access to opportunity.

The world of work is at a precarious moment.

While some of these events were unanticipated, others have been long predicted. The future of work has been a field of study for several decades. It was always inevitable, for example, that digital technology would change human behaviour, with wide-reaching consequences for the way work is undertaken.

As we reach the end of ‘business as usual’, organisations must innovate, evolve and adapt. The level of transformation required is nothing short of wholesale. Values, vision, mission and purpose must all be redefined if organisations are to successfully, consistently and meaningfully engage with their many stakeholders.

AT A GLANCE

Since 2020, global shocks, eroding trust, and labour market instability have pushed organisations into constant crisis. Business as usual is over.

The organisations that will thrive are those that reinvent themselves — and internal communication is the engine of that transformation.



“Business as usual is dead. Communication is now the survival strategy.”

This, of course, requires robust and diligent internal communication.

It also requires a level of professionalism that transcends traditional communication activity. Internal communicators must dive deeper, examining the origins of language and the psychology of communication, to appreciate and advocate for the role it plays in human connection, community and resilience.

Internal communication is *the* linchpin of successful business transformation and long-term resilience.

Since 2019, the IoIC has invested in understanding what workplace disruption means for internal communicators. In 2021, it launched *The Future of Internal Communication* podcast¹, to explore communication in the future of work. It has published various whitepapers and reports on the trends transforming work and the business case for the profession.

This white paper sets out opportunity for internal communication in the future of work.

It starts by exploring the history of the profession. Next, it sets out the trends most impacting work. Then it presents the business case for internal communication. From there, it looks at new roles for internal communication, based on what organisations must do to futureproof in the years ahead.

Finally, it looks at the new skills required by internal communication. The IoIC remains committed to helping members develop their expertise and remain an essential business function. Advocating for authentic, humane communication in increasingly digitised work futures is now mission-critical.

Internal communication is changing. Continuous learning and adaptation will be key to its ongoing success and potential as a strategic powerhouse. It's the opportunity of a lifetime.



A short history of internal communication

Before looking to the future, it's always useful to reflect briefly on the past.

The origins of internal communication trace as far back as the late 19th century.

Research by Northumbria University business historian Dr. Michael Heller² reveals that, as labour markets evolved away from short-term, piecemeal, precarious work towards more stable and permanent employment, some organisations prioritised workplace wellbeing, connection and community in a bid to enhance staff retention.

Company newsletters, journals and magazines took off in the early 20th century. They helped drive corporate identity and boost the psychological contract between employee and employer.

Modern internal communication extends far beyond in-house publications, of course. Today, internal communication typically includes channel management, content creation, change communication, storytelling, town halls, leadership coaching, engagement, equity, diversity and inclusion (ED&I), wellbeing initiatives and more.

The IoIC started life in 1949 as the British Association of Industrial Editors. Its founding purpose was to raise standards in industrial publications and professionalise internal communication practices.

The evolution of internal communication



Internal communication today

In the past five years, the way we work has changed seismically.

Hybrid and remote working patterns, AI and other technologies, a new generation of hyper-digital young adults entering the workforce for the first time, a growing mental health crisis, ageing populations, a shrinking labour market, increased activism

“How people perform together in the workplace is under the microscope like never before.”

and geopolitical and economic turbulence – each and all place huge pressure on organisations to adapt.

How people perform together in the workplace is under the microscope like never before.

Like most business functions, internal communication is at a crossroads. Just as it has evolved in the past, it must now consider its future. It must keep moving, using all its creativity and commercial acumen to imagine what it might become and judiciously advocate for its ongoing impact and value.

In short, it must recognise its critical role in the future of work.

READ MORE

Read more about the history of IoIC and internal communication over the past 75 years.



The 'post-normal' business landscape

Like it or not, we are now ensconced in a host of global, complex crises.

Their interconnectedness creates feedback loops and amplifies their 'wicked' nature. This level of systemic entanglement means today's business problems are mostly non-linear. This means they are without confines and often impossible to resolve completely or in a way that can be successfully replicated in the future.

There are no easy answers, and the interwoven nature of modern business systems make it hard to sandbox potential solutions to limit their inevitable unforeseen consequences. We must rediscover curiosity – and get comfortable with the uncomfortable.

Yet too many business leaders remain in thrall to the notion of simplicity. Transfixed by the belief that efficiency is the answer, they are beguiled by the proposition that technology will somehow overcome whatever problems present.

For example, today, enterprise-grade generative AI (GenAI) promises untold efficiency at a fraction of the price of human capital. For business leaders pursuing profit over any other metric of value, this is, of course, enticing. It's entirely feasible GenAI is already being deployed in some organisations as a cheaper alternative to thoughtfully crafted, empathic communication.

“We must rediscover curiosity and get comfortable with the uncomfortable.”



As we approach 2030, we are witnessing continuous waves of new technology launches.

Rather than wait and see which flavour of AI yields the best productivity returns, instead AI investors aggressively promote a continuous slew of technological advancements. To date, there is little or no empirical evidence to back up the hype.

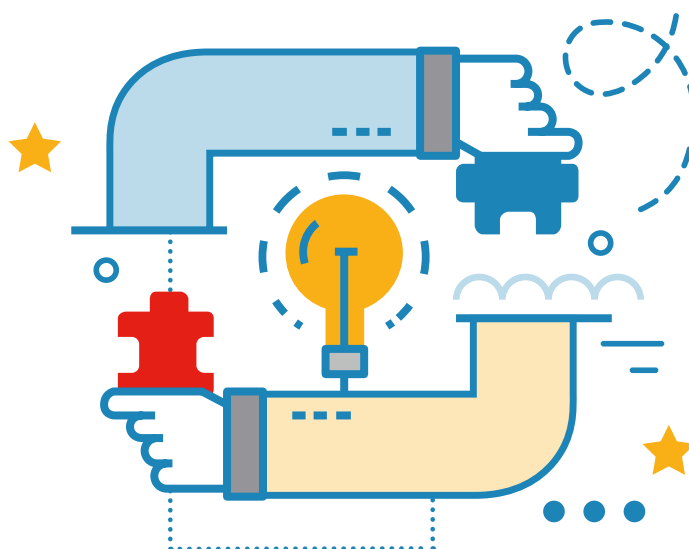
Agentic AI – the next wave of autonomous systems that will allegedly perform workplace tasks without human intervention – will, we are told, be available within the next few years. Yet alongside, MIT Media Lab has warned of GenAI's detrimental impact on critical thinking³.

A core proposition of AI is that it will do our thinking for us. As such, it invites us not to think. This is dangerous on two levels. The first is biological. The human brain regularly prunes those synapses not in regular use. Simply put, the less we have to think, the less we WILL think.

The second is societal. We are already living through endemic mis- and disinformation, fake news and the era of post-truth. If we outsource critical thinking to algorithms, what chance do we stand of being able to discern between fact and fiction? And what implications does this have for society over the long term?

Anthropological research into pre-modern societies has shown collapse happens when trust in public institutions disintegrates⁴.

For as long as we lionise late-stage capitalism and unquestioningly accept Silicon Valley hyperbole, little is likely to change. The ongoing prioritisation of profits over people and planet is irrevocably harming the environment and society at large.



And, more importantly, social and environmental injustices are a growing cause of disengagement at work.

In contrast, however, a rising tide of ethically minded leaders have recognised the critical role access to good work plays in a well-functioning society. They are building sustainable organisations that focus on the extensive value arising from social impact, meaningful work, human collaboration and shared endeavour. They recognise the boundless value of human creativity and innovation that stems from communication, collaboration and teamwork.

And herein lies the primary risk and opportunity for internal communication.

Its future will either be limitless or limited, dependent on the values and strategic objectives of the organisations that commission it.

But for an internal communicator to successfully advocate for the strategic value their skillset delivers, they must first build an understanding of the multiple factors influencing and shaping the future of work.

The future of work

The overarching goal of the IoIC's investment in future of work trend analysis has been to showcase the extent to which work is changing and identify areas of opportunity for members.

As the world has become increasingly hyperconnected and globalised, a multitude of meta-trends have converged to present huge challenges for organisations.

These challenges are complex and, by nature, lack clarity. This fuels unpredictability. And because trends are emergent, they are often only obvious after the fact, making them tricky to track and measure. They almost always lack the certainty and consistency the commercial world has shown itself to crave.

Each meta-trend is slowly but surely reshaping the way communication takes place within organisations.

A multitude of meta-trends

Some of the meta-trends disrupting how work is undertaken include:



INDUSTRY 5.0

The mass adoption of increasingly sophisticated digital technology



GEOPOLITICS

War, deteriorating international relations and imperilled global supply chains



THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY

The effects of a warming planet, extreme weather events, biodiversity loss and resource depletion



SHIFTING ATTITUDES TOWARDS WORK

The increasingly diverse wants, needs and expectations of modern workers



NEXT-GENERATION TALENT ECOSYSTEMS

An expanding array of employment types for flexible and agile working



A RESKILLING EMERGENCY

The extent to which new workplace skills are needed and the requirement for continuous learning to embed as the new cultural norm



NEW ORGANISING FRAMEWORKS

Operating models must flex if they are to meet modern stakeholder expectations



INCLUSIVE WORKPLACES

Recognising, embracing and celebrating multi-faceted demographic shifts at work

The future of internal communication

The IoIC's 2024 report *Creating Sustainable Futures for Internal Communicators*⁵ prioritised four overarching trends presenting opportunity for members.

An ongoing focus on technology, sustainability, people and employment provides ample opportunity for internal communicators to deliver strategic value and impact. Not only does each topic require extensive and continuous internal dialogue if organisations are to successfully adapt and transform, but the successful integration of these trends into 'business as usual' requires nothing short of a renaissance of human connection at work.

This is no mean feat when our digitised and hyper-competitive way of life in the 21st century all too often serves to divide and detach us from one another.

But, if organisations are to survive the coming decades, they must prioritise building emotional connection and psychological alignment with all stakeholders, be they internal or external.

This work falls into the natural domain of internal communication, where words and language are the catalyst for, and bedrock of, shared meaning and relationship.



“If organisations are to survive the coming decades, they must prioritise building emotional connection and psychological alignment with all stakeholders, be they internal or external.”

The business case for internal communication

Organisations must confront the reality that wholesale reinvention of how they respond and adapt to new scenarios is required. Until they do so, they will wither and stagnate.

The level of change required extends from the introduction of new workplace technology, tools and platforms, through new processes, practices, rituals and routines, and the attitudes and mindsets of colleagues as they prioritise delivering exceptional value to all stakeholders.

“Ongoing change and adaptation to new operating contexts requires continuous, thoughtful, empathic internal communication at every turn.”

The scale of this transformation requires fresh thinking about what it means to lead, manage, supervise and participate in teamwork. It demands a deep understanding of human behaviour and the psychology of successful habit change. It warrants an open mindset to organisational innovation, evolution and, more broadly, what ‘value’ looks like on a resource-depleted planet.

Continuous change is already the new normal.

Only by getting used to multiple, concurrent, ongoing change programmes will organisations become dexterous enough to adapt to new operating contexts as they arise.

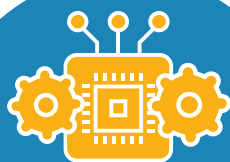
And of course, change on this scale requires continuous, thoughtful, empathic internal communication at every turn. Research shows business transformation fails when communication is inadequate. This alone renders the profession as mission-critical in the future of work. There are ample instances where internal communication is expertly positioned to deliver strategic value.

READ MORE

The IoIC's 2024 report, *Creating Sustainable Futures for Internal Communicators*, explores developments in technology, sustainability, employment and people's expectations of work.



Below, we explore a few instances in which its business case is clear.



Technology

- To successfully integrate workplace AI, wholesale cultural shifts are required. Leaders must role-model the behaviour change they want to see, promoting continuous learning, a growth mindset and enterprise-wide collaboration as the new normal.
- PwC research⁶ shows a lack of trust is inhibiting AI adoption at work. Organisations must **create transparent and compelling AI narratives** that allay anxieties about potential job losses and skills obsolescence. As the IoIC's 2024 and 2025 IC Index reports highlight, when colleagues aren't clear on their organisation's strategy, engagement is compromised.
- Lack of training also hinders AI adoption at work. While there might not be a huge array of credible training providers currently, organisations can still make substantial gains by **promoting a culture of continuous learning and knowledge sharing**. This requires open communication and the cultivation of environments where colleagues can come together to share techniques for how to use AI tools effectively.



Sustainability

- Companies with strong sustainability initiatives benefit from higher engagement⁷. Internal communication uses **storytelling to showcase activity and encourage all-hands participation**.
- Organisations with greater commitment to ED&I outperform those with lower scores. Progressive attitudes to ED&I naturally expand diversity of thinking. In today's complex and uncertain landscapes, this is a superpower. Diversity yields a wider and more creative range of ideas, feeding innovation.
- For any organisation to survive over the longer term, the focus and commitment of all internal stakeholders is required. Internal communication sustains connection and **alignment between colleagues and organisational strategic objectives**.





People

- As the *MacLeod Report*⁸ illustrated, internal communication underpins colleague engagement and performance. Research undertaken by Engage for Success and Nottingham Business School⁹ shows when colleague experience is prioritised, engagement scores tick up significantly.
- At a point where employment has never felt more transactional, understanding the specific hopes and expectations of each internal stakeholder is key to unlocking potential. Communication is a skill that helps team leaders, line managers and supervisors use enquiry and active listening to discern colleague needs and co-create rewarding workplace experiences that deliver against wider organisational objectives.
- Modern workers – particularly younger generations – expect **leaders and managers to be hyper-transparent, inclusive, authentic and accessible**. This is a sea change from traditional thinking about leadership and management, which has been grounded in hierarchy, status and exclusivity. Most mid- and senior-level executives need help adapting to these new expectations. Internal communication is well-positioned to coach and advise for these new realities.





Employment

- Generation Z is noted for its expectation of immediacy. It's also known for its stance on equality and willingness to call out attitudes and behaviours it doesn't align with. This makes it the most activist cohort yet. Younger colleagues are far more likely to speak out against perceived inconsistencies between a colleague experience that aspires or is claimed to be positive, and the lived reality. They will happily test the limits of conventional work structures, instead demanding flexibility, autonomy, wellbeing and work-life blend. In such instances, internal communicators can **champion cultural alignment**, to transcend 'say-do' gaps and create supportive, meaningful and authentic work experiences.
- Internal communication is the only business function equipped to build cross-functional community and cohesion across multiple employment types – defined by Deloitte as the 'alternative workforce'¹⁰. As the number of people of working age falls across the Global North and organisations are forced to become more agile, **creating a sense of community for all colleagues**, regardless of employment status and length of tenure, is a prerequisite for operational resilience.
- The pace of change at work is outstripping colleagues' ability to upskill. Alongside, employers can no longer rely on the open labour market to acquire the skills they need for business futureproofing. Instead, work environments that **promote continuous learning in the flow of work** must be cultivated. Internal communication is expertly placed to foster narratives that promote everyday learning at work.



Top takeaways

- 1 | Role-model behaviour change for successful AI adoption.
- 2 | Build trust with clear, transparent AI narratives.
- 3 | Promote knowledge sharing and continuous learning in the flow of work.
- 4 | Showcase sustainability to drive engagement and resilience.
- 5 | Amplify ED&I to unlock innovation.
- 6 | Connect colleagues with strategy to fuel transformation.
- 7 | Equip leaders to be transparent, authentic and accessible.
- 8 | Align Gen Z expectations with workplace reality.
- 9 | Create cohesion across diverse employment types.

The business case for continued investment in internal communication as a vital organisational function is clear. It's a critical profession that will determine the difference between organisational failure and success in the years ahead.

New opportunities for internal communication

Each organisation is unique.

While, of course, there are consistencies in the way most are structured, each operating culture is idiosyncratic. Alongside this, every workplace has its own ways of engaging with internal stakeholders.

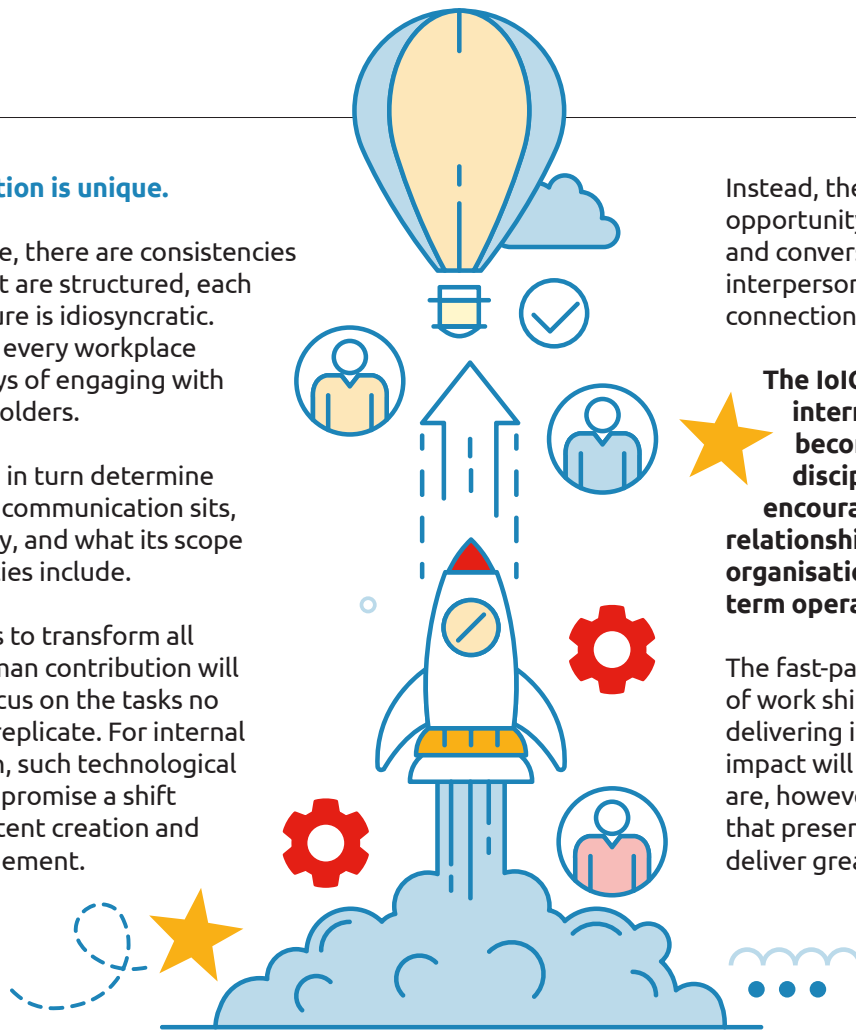
These specifics in turn determine where internal communication sits, organisationally, and what its scope of responsibilities include.

As AI continues to transform all disciplines, human contribution will increasingly focus on the tasks no algorithm can replicate. For internal communication, such technological advancements promise a shift away from content creation and channel management.

Instead, the game-changing opportunity is to use language and conversation to strengthen interpersonal relationships and build connection and community.

The IoIC believes, in the future, internal communication will become a far more 'embodied' discipline, focused on encouraging the human relationships that underpin organisational cohesion and long-term operating resilience.

The fast-paced and multifarious nature of work shifts means, of course, delivering internal communication impact will be a moving feast. There are, however, various starting points that present immediate opportunity to deliver greater strategic value.



01

Showcase communication as foundational to successful collaboration.

Strong relationships bind teams together, generating trust and goodwill. They underpin commitment to the organisational strategy and vision. The intricate web of human relationships is foundational to all organisations' ability to withstand and optimally respond to the complex challenges that lie ahead.

02

Create clarity and strategic alignment.

In a perennially distracted world, group coherence is vital. Shared understanding is an elemental component of high-performing teams, not least as work becomes increasingly distributed, asynchronous and on-demand. Creating and sustaining compelling ways to set out the organisation's strategic objectives reminds colleagues of their shared mission. Inviting open conversation about actions that deliver against the strategic objectives boosts forward momentum. Applied focus is a rarity and a superpower in the age of attention economics.

03

Curate human connection.

Since the pandemic, humankind's natural capacity for relationship and connection has eroded. Prolonged months of social distancing created new norms from which many have not yet recovered. Across the board, people need help re-establishing and strengthening social ties. With the onset of ever-more digitised ways of working, as well as remote, hybrid and asynchronous work patterns, organisations are particularly impacted. Facilitating spaces and opportunities for colleagues to organically convene – for no other reason than to share stories, ideas and points of view – is an invaluable way to help rebuild company-wide webs of interdependence.

04

Cultivate community.

Strong workplace relationships not only enhance organisational resilience, they also alleviate loneliness. A rising trend of social isolation is accelerating polarised thinking across the world. Strengthening community cohesion is a powerful antidote. Communities are essential to personal wellbeing and wider organisational health because humans need shared identity and to feel they belong. A strong sense of community boosts engagement and performance at work.

05

Harness colleague voice.

Nurturing a safe and inclusive work culture, where colleagues can share views and perspectives without fear of ridicule or retribution, is a requisite of trust-building. Active listening is crucial. When we listen actively, we seek to understand. Focused, undivided attention on the person speaking conveys psychological safety and empathic concern for the speaker's point of view. This amplifies human connection, mutual respect and trust. And when people feel their voice has been heard, engagement accelerates.

06

Break down departmental siloes.

Organisational resilience depends on the smooth flow and sharing of information, knowledge, know-how and insights. This requires bonds of trust between business units, functions, departments and teams. Internal communication is almost exclusive in its ability to transcend operating boundaries and create the cohesion needed for active information sharing and collaborative sensemaking.

07

Create thinking spaces.

Complex challenges require ample space to reflect, process, identify and agree viable pathways forward. Thinking spaces are psychologically safe places where people can share preoccupations and opinions for optimal transparency, openness and problem-solving potential.

08

Coach leader and managers to become better communicators.

Many leaders, managers and supervisors lack the confidence to communicate effectively. They under-communicate as a result. Modern workers increasingly seek leaders who are authentic, inclusive, accessible and transparent. Helping colleagues hone their communication skills immediately strengthens intra-company bonds and enhances organisational resilience.

09

Enhance colleague experience.

Most employees today want to work for organisations whose mission and values they believe in. They aspire for meaning and purpose at work. They want to access career paths and ways of working that are customised for their expertise, their interests and their goals. Creating bespoke, connective experiences throughout the end-to-end employment lifecycle boosts both organisational performance and employer brand.

10

Embed lasting behaviour change.

The role of social dynamics in behaviour, systems and organisational change is still widely underestimated in most conventional change initiatives. The way change is communicated – from outlining the reasons for change, through making sure each colleague recognises their specific role in change success, to consistent repetition to reinforce the new way of doing things – is key. Understanding the psychology of successful human behaviour change underpins successful business evolution.

11

Facilitate conversation.

In uncharted operating contexts, when so much is uncertain, conversation is key. Organisations need conversation champions skilled in creating, curating and honing psychologically safe and inclusive work cultures where curiosity is encouraged. Spaces for collective sensemaking are vital for critical thinking, collective problem-solving, innovation and long-term organisational survival.

12

Leverage activism.

There's no shortage of social and environmental issues to worry about and modern workers are increasingly frustrated and activist. Edelman's research on trust has identified business as the only remaining entity perceived to be capable of taking a proactive stance against climate change, resource depletion and social inequality. Harnessing activism is a potent way to foster inclusion and design appropriate organisational responses to these systemic issues.



When internal communication expands to encompass the art of conversation and connection, opportunity abounds. More than ever, organisations need help keeping colleagues connected, aligned, motivated and collaborative. How we relate to one another at work will determine long-term business resilience and organisational effectiveness.

New roles for internal communication

Uncertainty is the new normal and continuous change and adaptation are now centrepieces of most workplaces.

AI will transform most office-based jobs. The World Economic Forum's *2025 Future of Jobs Report* predicts 39% of existing skillsets will become outdated by 2030, with 59% of workers needing retraining¹¹.

The inexorable march of AI means routine work tasks will become increasingly automated in the coming years. GenAI already serves up well-structured, eloquent content to help time-pressed executives get their messages across. It is becoming more sophisticated by the day.

Transformation at this scale means it's inevitable the function of internal communication will evolve. As professionals with a vested interest in maintaining quality and standards in communication, it demands we future-gaze and imagine what the future of internal communication might consist of.

This starts by considering the role communication plays in organisational performance.

Since all successful teamwork starts with a well-defined statement of intent, at first glance this may appear somewhat self-evident. At a point where ROI tends to determine all budgetary spend, perhaps another angle to consider is one put forward by IoIC president Dominic Walters recently¹².

When coordinating with primary stakeholders, he suggests asking, "What do we need our colleagues to do and how will we know when they are doing it well?"

No organisation can afford mediocracy in such challenging operating conditions. High-calibre, relational internal communication boosts trust, motivation, goodwill and discretionary effort across the board.

As our profession transforms to meet the new business opportunities arising, we foresee specialist areas emerging. These will accompany, rather than replace, existing internal communication activities. On the following pages, we suggest nine such roles.





CHIEF TRUST OFFICER

Misinformation and disinformation are rife. Fake news is now a mainstay of rogue states, seeking to destabilise and foster ill-will. Trust in governments and institutions is at an all-time low and conspiracy theories abound. Societal polarisation now arguably poses as much of a risk to countries across the world as military conflict.

As high-profile hacks and digital security breaches undermine brand reputation like never before, most businesses are ill-equipped to fend off increasingly sophisticated cyber-attacks. This has inevitable consequences for organisations as people worry about the safety and security of their personal and confidential information.

Alongside the cyber-risks of operating in an increasingly online world, other issues are at play. Across the board, people at work are less trusting of one another. A trust officer both ensures the integrity, security and ethical management of organisational data, knowledge and information, and strives to maintain or restore stakeholder trust.



LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION COACH

Few leaders today feel equipped with the skills and confidence to communicate directly with internal stakeholders. By connotation, traditional leadership implies hierarchy, authority and superiority. Unfortunately, all too often with this comes an unwillingness to interact with people perceived to be of 'lesser' status. There's a widespread unease at the prospect of engaging in 'difficult conversations' without having all the answers to hand.

Yet in tumultuous times, colleagues look to their executive teams to provide certainty and hope. Modern workers want visibility, accessibility, transparency and honesty. They want to be able to trust in the quality and discernment of their leadership teams and know that people with honourable intentions are in charge.

Quality communication skills are rarely taught in executive education programmes. They are rarely taught anywhere for that matter. As such, most C-suite executives need advice, support and coaching in communicating well. With specialist expertise, internal communicators are ideally positioned to support them.



HEAD OF BUSINESS STRATEGY COMMUNICATION

All organisations are under pressure to remain relevant, but persistent market disruption is adversely impacting business strategy. It's no longer plausible to set a five-year plan; ambitious organisations instead regularly review, update and adapt their goals to situationally respond to new risks and opportunities, as they arise.

The IC Index has highlighted how few people at work understand their employer's strategic objectives or know how to directly contribute towards those goals. While this may in part be due to insufficient communication, alongside this, many people need help developing broader business acumen to better understand their industry sector and the challenges their employer faces. They need better understanding of the trends destabilising business continuity.

Enhanced business acumen fosters greater strategic alignment, making sure all people and processes are oriented to successfully pursue the organisation's objectives. Strategic alignment augments colleagues' ability to solve complex problems and successfully troubleshoot issues, where and as they arise.



DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND CHANGE COMMUNICATION MANAGER

Most change initiatives fail. Few organisations recognise the importance of, wherever possible, aligning business transformation with individual intrinsic values and drivers. Lasting behaviour change depends on plausible, aspirational and accessible stories of the future. A lack of shared vision and inconsistent communication undermine successful adaptation to new ways of working.

In business today, too little attention is paid to the psychology of change. Yet research in this field is rich with insight. For example, *Atomic Habits* by James Clear¹³ has become a global bestseller, translated into more than 60 languages. In it, he aptly writes, "All big things come from small beginnings. The seed of every habit is a single, tiny decision."

Regularly reminding internal stakeholders of why change is needed, the smallest constituent action that can be taken, and regular reporting on progress all seed forward momentum, cementing the likelihood of lasting change. This requires compelling, connective and compassionate communication.



DATA ANALYST

Today, big data is big business. IBM describes it as "massive, complex data sets that traditional data management systems cannot handle".¹⁴ As the internet and computing power have advanced and the cost of data storage and digital technology have fallen, more organisations than ever are able to collect, manage and analyse large sets of information.

With educated application, rich insights can be found in the measurement and interpretation of data. This advanced knowledge enhances business intelligence and fuels innovation. Gathered and interpreted intelligently, data-driven decision-making exponentially accelerates business performance. It is access to big data that has powered developments in large language models and GenAI.

For internal communicators, vast datasets can be analysed to better understand the day-to-day experience of colleagues. Turning data into insights for key stakeholders and decision-makers allows organisations to improve the operating conditions for internal stakeholders. Leveraging data to improve life at work boosts trust, engagement and performance.



HEAD OF COLLEAGUE, CANDIDATE AND TALENT ECOSYSTEM EXPERIENCE

Modern labour markets are increasingly dynamic. As populations in the developed world age, fewer people enter the workforce than leave it. Increased interest in and access to 'alternative' ways of working means employers must now integrate many different ways of employing talent on a non-permanent basis.

The experience economy has reshaped what people expect from work. Most people today aspire for an interactive experience where they are encouraged to thrive.

Ambitious organisations are developing full-spectrum talent ecosystems to enhance their agility and situational responsiveness. But 'on-demand' working requires internal communication to extend its reach beyond traditional 'employees' and engage with all colleagues, regardless of employment type and length of tenure.

High quality colleague experience is key. From the first contact with an employer brand, perception, reputation and lived experience matter. Candidate experience should segue into colleague experience and remain a priority throughout the entire employment lifecycle.



HEAD OF LISTENING

Listening is an increasingly vital skill. Paying full attention when someone speaks and reflecting back what they have said to cement understanding is foundational to successful trust- and relationship-building. In his book *It's Not Magic*¹⁵, organisational psychologist and professor of leadership John Amaechi refers to this as “sonic stewardship”. He stresses the importance of “treating communication as a reciprocal exchange that requires mutual investment and care”. At a point where more people than ever feel entitled to share controversial and divisive opinion, this is crucially important.

The ability to suspend judgement and listen well underpins successful collaboration, problem-solving and innovation. Research shows people want to feel included and know their contribution and opinions matter.

Active listening takes time, consistent practice, commitment and humility. Listening underpins high-performance environments because participants feel naturally more valued and inclined to go the extra mile in service of the wider group.



HEAD OF CULTURE AND COMMUNITY

High-performance cultures are underpinned by psychological safety. As Daniel Coyle compellingly argued in his bestseller, *The Culture Code*¹⁶, for people to do their best work, they need three things. They need a clearly laid out vision or purpose, they need to feel safe to experiment, and they need to know it's OK to make mistakes.

Above all they need to be able to trust – to believe their fellow colleagues can be relied upon. A strong sense of community at work is vital if organisations are to survive and thrive.

Community can be described both as a feeling and a set of relationships between people. As hybrid, remote, on-demand and asynchronous ways of working take root, organisations must prioritise how relationships between people at work are developed and sustained.

Nurturing community at work must become an intentional activity and internal communication is expertly placed to deliver in this area.



HEAD OF SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATION

Edelman's 2025 *Trust Barometer*¹⁷ revealed how few people feel business is doing enough to address the climate crisis. Most modern workers want to know their employer is proactively reducing emissions and adopting more sustainable business practices.

Rising activism places pressure on organisations to ‘do the right thing’ and produce outputs that are sustainable, equitable and inclusive. This year's rolling boycotts in the US show people will vote with their feet and wallets to get what they want. Employers must listen to stakeholder concerns, respond and adapt.

True organisational sustainability can be described as the quality of being able to continue over time. To successfully navigate continuous disruption, however, internal stakeholders must remain resilient. This requires a wholesale shift in how we think about the role of work in society. Focused sustainability communication makes sure the entire organisation is equipped to reduce negative environmental, societal and personal impact, prioritising people and planet alike.

Upskilling for the future of work

By now it's clear there is a wealth of opportunity for internal communication in the future of work. This is timely.

Not only will traditional internal communication activities be reshaped by AI and other next-generation technologies, but in increasingly digitised workplaces, organisations will need to remember the vital role human-to-human communication plays in relationship development and group cohesion.

“Communication is the glue that coheres teams and underpins all successful collaboration. It provides meaning and purpose, creating alignment around shared goals.”

In his 2025 white paper, Dr. Peter Mandeno explored the role of internal communication in building human connection at work. A leading expert in designing for human connectivity, Mandeno identified new opportunities for internal communication, including those of organisational cultivator, captivator, curator, facilitator, co-creator and stimulator.¹⁸

As more organisations embrace digital-enablement, help will be needed to sustain the delicate fabric of interpersonal colleague relationships. Across the board, people at work must learn to practise communication styles that diffuse tension, bridge misunderstanding and alleviate ambiguity.

Progressive organisations recognise the importance of psychological safety and trust at work. Internal communication is the only business function already primed to cultivate human ‘togetherness’ at work.

READ MORE

Download Peter Mandeno's white paper, *Human Connectivity Through Internal Communication*.



In readiness for the rapidly expanding influence of internal communication, certain skills must be prioritised. They include:



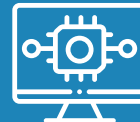
Business acumen

Human oversight and the application of **critical- and creative-thinking** are increasingly sought-after skills. Resilient organisations must continuously innovate and evolve in response to increasingly complex and challenging operating conditions.

Effective problem-solving and **new product and service design** requires business acumen. Robust strategising requires **in-depth knowledge of markets, industries and sectors** to identify competitive advantage as it arises.

It's no longer enough to possess niche professional expertise. Modern organisations also need colleagues with a **broader understanding of how their business works**. Blending both specialist and generalist knowledge delivers greater ability to resolve complex business challenges. As *Range* author David Epstein writes: "Everyone needs habits of mind that allow them to dance across disciplines."¹⁹

Getting clear on the organisation's strategic objectives, the challenges it and its industry faces, and the crucial role communication plays in building team cooperation, collaboration and cohesion positions internal communication as a mission-critical function.



Digital, data and AI literacy

As the working world becomes increasingly digital and data-driven, internal communicators must develop the ability to evaluate, select and oversee the integration and optimisation of an ever-expanding range of digital tools and platforms. This includes AI. Applying **human-centred design-thinking** to the adoption enhances colleague experience and wider business performance.

We must all become better at harnessing the value of data. **Data-driven decision-making** exponentially accelerates business performance, informing strategy and business futureproofing. Being able to show the **measurable impact of communication initiatives** is incredibly powerful when budgets and resources face increasing scrutiny and pressure.

A blended approach here is key. **Understanding how AI tools work**, appreciating their limitations and the ability to collaborate with them effectively means ethical implications can be addressed.

Positioning **AI as a performance enabler**, rather than a replacement of human input, allows distinctly human qualities such as creativity, empathic communication, critical thinking and complex problem-solving to remain key to organisational effectiveness. Success in the future of work will require **AI literacy, data fluency AND vital human skills**.



Influencing

Internal communication is the only business function at liberty to access any department or team, at any level, to initiate conversation. In this regard, its ability to influence is ubiquitous.

Internal communication acts as an interpretative bridge, **helping senior stakeholders turn feedback and insights into actions** to improve organisational performance. Credibility deepens when colleagues perceive the organisation's willingness to listen AND act.

In tandem, **understanding the myriad business issues** modern leaders are contending with builds empathy. It demonstrates **elevated thinking** and **situational awareness** and is far more likely to secure vital airtime to win confidence.

Deeper, more **strategic relationships** immediately position internal communication as an essential enabler of operational effectiveness and continuity.



Active listening

Communication expert Amy Gallo defines **active listening** as "when you not only hear what someone is saying, but also attune to their thoughts and feelings". She says, "It turns a conversation into an active, non-competitive, two-way interaction."²⁰

Active listening requires **commitment**. Most listening takes place while the brain is simultaneously figuring out a suitable response to what is being said. This reduces the capacity to process what the speaker is saying. Active listening goes deeper. Done well, it demands **full-body attentiveness** and the ability to **interpret non-verbal cues** and messages. When the listener has the full focus on the speaker, the speaker feels deeply seen and understood.

Higher quality listening helps internal communicators better attune to their colleagues' lived experiences. It surfaces richer insights that improve organisational performance.





Coaching

Communication is a universal human skill. Sadly, it is all too often taken for granted.

As social creatures, humans communicate all day long, but mostly without thinking about what we are doing and how we are doing it. But as human communication becomes increasingly reshaped by digital, its essence is changing.

The many pressures faced by organisations today easily inhibit empathic communication. Many interactions are hurried, instructional and authoritative, rather than thoughtful, dialogic and inclusive. Top-down command-and-control thinking overlooks the reality that resilient organisations rely on **decentralised problem-solving and decision-making**, for both situational responsiveness and operating agility.

Next-level internal communication must deliver key information, foster **psychological safety** and **promote inclusion** for diversity of thinking. Collective intelligence – defined by the UN Development Programme as “the enhanced capacity that is created when people work together”²¹ is essential when most issues confounding organisations today are unprecedented, with few known solutions.

Many leaders and managers need help **communicating with clarity** and in a way that fosters **trust, connection, goodwill and motivation** at work. Developing a communication style that enhances team dynamics is paramount for any individual charged with the responsibility for looking after others at work.

Internal communicators are naturally more attuned to the nuances of effective communication. As such, they are expertly positioned to coach colleagues with supervisory, management or leadership responsibility to develop communication skills for improved cohesion, engagement and motivation. **Investment in coaching techniques** will help the profession deliver strategic value to a wider range of stakeholders. As relational communication faces ever more threat from its automated counterparts, the value of this can’t be underestimated.



Psychology, behavioural science and cultural intelligence

For internal communication to be most effective, an elevated understanding of human behaviour is key.

Understanding human motivation, the science of social influence and the myriad factors that determine personality and character is vital if organisations are to become more agile.

Helping people change requires an interest in why people do the things they do. Behavioural science encompasses **psychology, neuroscience, linguistics and economics** to better understand human behaviour.

Communication is so much more than the relay of information. It’s the bedrock of relationship and understanding. A primal instinct of a new-born baby is to seek out eye contact with its primary caregiver. Humans are hard-wired to build bonds of connection and attachment, ensuring safety and kinship for the species.

In this sense, communication is the bedrock of relationship. It underpins human sociality – how we live together in organised society. As operating conditions become more fast-paced and fragmented, how communication takes place internally will increasingly determine the difference between business failure and success.

Cultural intelligence is the skill of understanding and navigating the complex interplay of cultural dynamics across organisational, national and professional contexts. Drawing on organisational culture theory, it recognises both visible and hidden cultural dynamics and how **leadership communication shapes culture**. Culturally intelligent communicators help organisational leaders **shape values, align subcultures and build effective communication infrastructures** to strengthen organisational performance.



Ethical communication

Ethical communication is **honest, transparent, fair and respectful**. In a world increasingly dominated by AI-generated, bot-augmented clickbait, it's a much-needed antidote to mis- and disinformation. Colleagues need to be able to trust the information they are provided with to do their work. More poignantly, they want to believe in their employer's vision.

Ethical communication underpins healthy, strong relationships – something all organisations need as they navigate increasingly challenging operating conditions. Knowing colleagues are aligned and **clear on their organisational goals** immediately removes friction points. **Dignified, inclusive communication** that demonstrates an **elevated understanding of specific audiences** requires **empathy**. Done well, it helps colleagues feel a deeper sense of belonging that smooths and improves internal relationships.

Ethical communication **values and prioritises colleague voice**. It recognises each internal stakeholder has valuable insights that have the potential to improve business processes and customer satisfaction.



Sensemaking

The collaborative process of sensemaking **creates shared awareness** and understanding from different perspectives. It is particularly useful when addressing unusual and unexpected events.

Sensemaking provides essential, qualitative context that so often is missed when organisations over-rely on quantitative analysis to interpret business performance. It's a vital technique that allows organisations to **process the deeply nuanced stories** that accompany key stakeholder data.

In his book *Sensemaking*, Christian Madsbjerg writes, "Big data makes us feel as though we can and should know everything there is to know on Earth. But this is a fool's quest, and it leaves everyone involved feeling depleted and lost."²²

Business reporting numbers by themselves lack context and nuance. They need **accompanying stories to make them meaningful**. People at work want to be able to make sense of what they are doing, why they are doing it and what purpose it serves in the wider picture. **Storytelling** helps people make sense of their working lives and is an imperative in an increasingly data-driven world.





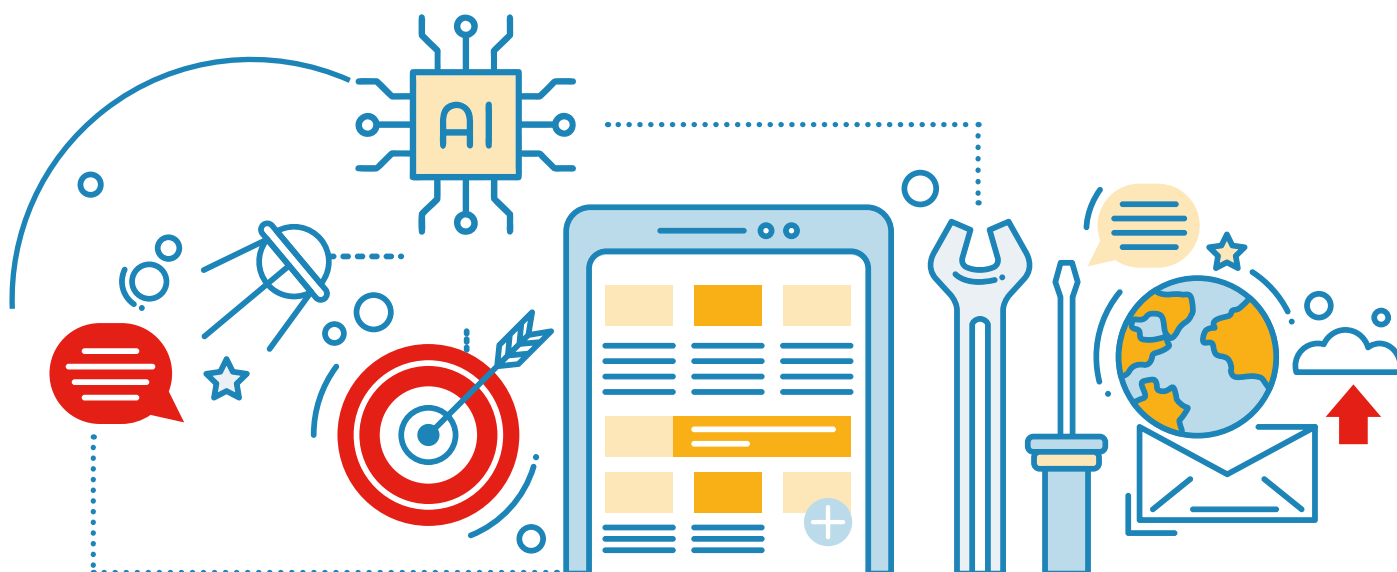
Scenario planning and systems thinking

Scenario planning allows organisations to explore possible futures, so as to better **mitigate risk and leverage opportunity**. By **evaluating current market forces**, they can make more flexible long-term plans and explore how they might need to adapt, should certain events arise.

Operating environments have long been described as volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA). The post-COVID world is, however, increasingly described as brittle, anxious, non-linear and incomprehensible (BANI). This reflects the pace at which unconnected events can quickly converge to create chaotic and baffling outcomes.

Scenario planning uses systems thinking and storytelling to explore plausible futures. Systems thinking is “a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns rather than static snapshots”²³. It helps organisations contend with the complexity of the modern world.

As a strategic exercise, scenario planning helps all stakeholders become more comfortable with uncertainty and more adaptive in the face of unforeseen events. Shifting out of ‘business as usual’ mode to contemplate ‘what if?’ possibilities improves organisational preparedness and encourages more innovative and agile thinking.





Advocacy

The investment pouring into technology is eye-watering. AI and adjacent technologies are set to transform most aspects of human life.


While technology is positioned as the panacea to all our societal problems, it is an indisputable truth that sociality is a core characteristic of our species. We crave authentic social connection, belonging and meaning. The gradual rise in transactional attitudes towards work has resulted in a crisis of disengagement and a rising tide of generalised apathy. Too many people today feel locked out of economic opportunity.

As organisations face growing pressure to adopt AI, what impact will this have on colleague relationships and, more broadly, job security? How will this, in turn, impact our ability to live in peaceful community with one another?

Communication needs advocacy like never before. Internal communication is the glue that coheres teams and underpins all successful collaboration. It provides meaning and purpose, creating alignment around shared goals.

Demonstrating measurable impact is a vital first step of advocacy. Educating decision-makers on the vital role of communication in group cohesion is a second. Wherever humans work together, there is a need to champion robust, clear, inclusive and empathic communication.

Without internal communication, what will happen to collective sensemaking and the serendipitous collisions that fuel innovation and transformation? Organisations may face financial pressure, but now isn't the time to deprioritise communication at work. The business case for ongoing investment in internal communication is clear.



£1.6 trillion
The European Parliament estimates the global AI market will grow to a value of £1.6 trillion by 2030.²⁴

READ MORE

In March 2025, IoIC surveyed more than 300 internal communicators to learn how they felt about the current state and future direction of their profession. It highlighted their evolving roles and skill requirements, with more than half of respondents noting an increase in change communication and digital transformation responsibilities and around a third saying they are advising senior leadership more frequently.



Conclusions and next steps

The world of work has never felt more bewildering, pressurised and uncertain. And yet, at the same time, it's unlikely to ever feel as 'slow-paced' as it does today. This is a paradox we must all come to terms with.

Current market forces are converging to create completely novel operating contexts for all organisations. There is no playbook for what lies ahead. The coming years will require great courage, curiosity, imagination, empathy and perseverance from us all.

The future of internal communication is unlikely to be designed by organisations ahead of schedule. Unless the trends shaping its trajectory are thoughtfully considered alongside a detailed understanding of the role communication plays in a well-functioning society, it's likely to emerge in a reactive, *ad hoc*, scattergun and disorganised fashion.

Yet for internal communication to deliver most impact, professional standards must always be maintained.

In this report, we've outlined some of the forces causing most disruption at work today.

We have prioritised four key meta-trends reshaping what modern workers want and expect from work, and we have highlighted the business case for internal communication.

After extensive analysis, we have identified new opportunities for internal communication and explored new roles that might well exist in the near future.

Finally, we've looked at areas for upskilling, to set out the expertise that will be required of internal communicators in the near future.

The IoC is committed to helping members deliver their best work through the delivery of training, qualifications, professional standards and support that recognises the emergent operating context, while conserving the foundation blocks of robust, high-integrity internal communication.

As the future of internal communication emerges, the IoC will continue to provide resources to empower all internal communicators to leverage the full spectrum of opportunity that presents.



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About Working the future

Foresight specialists helping organisations harness opportunity in the future of work.

Established in 2016, Working the Future is a boutique consulting and advisory firm helping businesses adapt to the future of work.

It provides executive education to help business leaders, managers and decisionmakers develop their understanding of the rapidly changing world of work, allowing them to prepare and mitigate risk accordingly.

It co-designs progressive strategies to optimise team-performance and organisational agility. Its people-centred approach enhances collective intelligence for improved resilience and long-term organisational sustainability.

About the founders

Cathryn Barnard has a long background in building and nurturing high-performing teams. Her interest in human dynamics has transferred across into her expert analysis of the future of work, and her insights help business leaders future-proof their commercial activities.

Patrick Lodge is a futurist and emerging trends expert, with 20 years' experience in horizon-scanning. He has a particular interest in generating and demystifying business intelligence applicable to all forms of upstream future-planning activity.





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