

# TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

Internal communicators are at the forefront of supporting organisations through an unprecedented crisis. But for many, the workload is pushing them to the brink.

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## **A period of high pressure**

The recent IolC Covid-19 survey highlights the increased profile of internal communication professionals. Two thirds of respondents say that organisational leaders are seeking their advice more, and 90% consider that the current situation will have a positive impact on the profession – including almost a third (32%) anticipating a “very positive” effect.

But there’s a professional downside. That’s the toll on practitioners themselves, and potentially on families, especially where increased pressure involves super-long hours – possibly combined with the challenges of home schooling.

## BATTLING BURNOUT

IoIC's Covid-19 survey shows that health and personal wellbeing for employees has been high on the communication agenda. Public health information (selected by 64%) ranked second only to remote working and business continuity (89%) as key internal messages at the time the survey was conducted.

Over half of comments made by respondents about topics focus on health and wellbeing messages.

This is in sharp contrast to the picture painted for internal communication professionals themselves.

"Significant increase to workload and capacity" is the top impact identified by respondents. Around half of respondents' comments about personal concerns focus on unsustainable workload: *"Burnout while working more than full-time at the strategic level and looking after a young family"; "Maintaining this intensity for too much longer – we are on our knees!"*

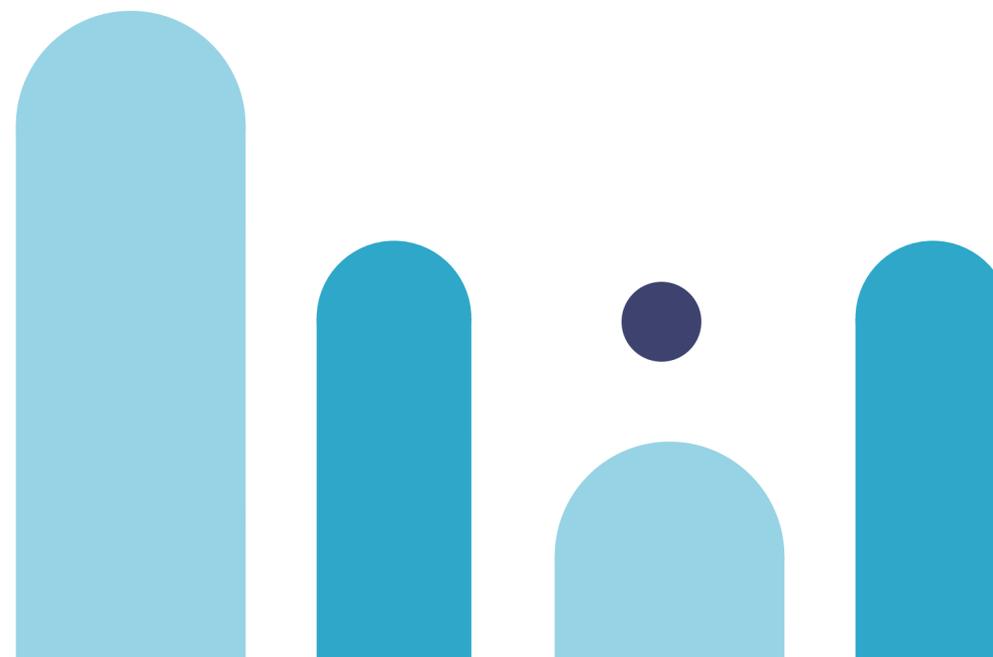
# 64%

Percentage of survey respondents who said that public health information was a key internal message.



**Managing workload [is a personal concern]. I don't want lack of resource to impact our service to colleagues while it's absolutely critical.**

Survey respondent



## THE NEXT PHASE

Meeting increasing internal communication challenges in the next phase of Covid is going to be critical. But it's going to be hard to deliver – and maintain over a long period – if people are feeling washed out. As one respondent says: *"I'm working all hours, because that's what's needed – I'm just worried that I... won't be able to sustain this in the medium and long term."*

To keep punching your weight, you need to look after yourself, as well as the organisation. To borrow from the airline industry, in an emergency situation, put your own oxygen mask on, before helping others with theirs.

That's not easy. Internal communicators tend to be "people" people, and want to support and help others. But doing what you can to lay down ground rules will mean you can sustain giving high quality support in the long term.

What does that mean in practice?

Try and lay down some boundaries in terms of expectations. If you are working

all hours, devise a timetable that carves out some "protected" time each day for you and your loved ones. Use your communication skills to explain why this means you will continue to make the best contribution. Then stick to it. Mega-long hours typically have a strong correlation with decreased effectiveness. You may even be able to join the 20% of survey respondents whose organisations have increased investment in internal communication during the crisis.



**If you are working all hours, devise a timetable that carves out some 'protected' time each day for you and your loved ones – and stick to it.**



### Top five impacts of the crisis on respondents' role as an internal communicator (as of April 2020)



Percentages represent survey respondents who said Covid-19 had that impact on their role as an internal communicator

# WHO DO YOU WANT TO BE?

Peter Block's book, *Flawless Consulting*, gives some great hints and tips for "contracting" with clients, including for individuals acting as an internal consultant (or business partner). He observes that internal consultants can be so orientated to meeting client needs that they have a hard time identifying what they want and need in return, and warns that caution about stating needs, though understandable, is a big risk.

Block cites Ed Schein's excellent model of consultancy types:

- the "pair of hands", delivering what the client specifies
- the "expert", diagnosing what's needed, then prescribing the solution, like a

doctor/patient relationship

- the "process" consultant, using expertise to work in partnership.

Block warns that not stating what you want and need to deliver a project brings the risk of slipping into the "pair of hands" role.

Current organisational anxiety will probably insulate you from this.

Organisational theorists are clear that in times of uncertainty, people seen as having relevant knowledge and expertise increase their power and influence. But you won't be as impactful as you could be.

Block suggests an exercise that can help. Create two lists side by side – one with essential wants to get the job/project done, and one with desirable wants. Then write your lists, in as uncensored a way as possible – don't worry about whether you'll ever actually have to ask for these things. Just get your thoughts down.



**Not stating what you want and need to deliver a project brings the risk of slipping into the 'pair of hands' role – delivering what the client specifies.**

Then write down what you can offer – being realistic (Block cautions it is better to underestimate what we can deliver on our own). Ask your boss/client to make their own list. Then have a conversation, making sure you express your needs in a clear, unambiguous and objective way – keeping it simple and authentic to avoid fogginess.

It's harder to do this mid-flow rather than at the start of a project. But there is the potential to uncover a range of blocks to effectiveness through taking this objective, helicopter view approach. Issues with clearance processes for starters – survey responses show this is a headache for some.

# CONSERVING ENERGY FOR THE FUTURE

It's always tough to renegotiate how things are. But carving out a bit of time to review and learn from the experience of Covid-19 so far, and look at how this can be applied for the next phase, is good practice. On the question of key impacts of the crisis to date, 44% of respondents in the survey cite "learning to help me in my role in the future".

Make sure that your learning isn't just about internal communication practice, but also about the process of how you operate in the role.



**For the first time, the organisation is seeing just what internal comms can do. To support this, we've seen our comms team reshape and we've brought in five more people to support what we do.**

Survey respondent

This extraordinary time gives us the opportunity to raise our profile and add value more than ever before. Consolidating on that can only happen if you don't get exhausted and slide back down the added value chain. Plus – you'll never get the time back, for yourself or your loved ones, again.

