



**INSTITUTE FOR  
PUBLIC RELATIONS**

The science beneath the art of public relations™

# THE **TOP 17** PUBLIC RELATIONS INSIGHTS OF **2021**

Compiled by Olivia Kresic, Institute for Public Relations



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# INTRO

The Institute for Public Relations annually compiles the top research studies that we think public relations professionals should know about from the previous year. The past couple of years have seen many changes in our industry and 2021 was no exception. With increasing vaccine availability, supply chain challenges, a new U.S. president, and the impact of climate change, there were no shortage of issues communicators focused on around the world. Some of these challenges and topics are spotlighted in this guide's research.

At the end of this report is a list of IPR resources and IPR signature studies published in 2021. Thanks to our Board of Trustees, comprising senior-level executives and academic leaders in public relations, for driving the mission and work we do.



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**Behavioral  
Science**



# 1

## The Anti-Vaccination Infodemic on Social Media: A Behavioral Analysis By Gederico Germani, Ph.D., and Nikola Biller-Andorno, Ph.D.

PLOS ONE

### Why This Research is Important:

Misinformation about vaccine safety is spreading and causing reduced vaccine uptake worldwide. Researchers analyzed the behavior of anti-vaccination supporters on Twitter and proposed solutions to improve vaccine safety communication.

### Method:

A behavioral analysis was conducted using 50 Twitter profiles belonging to pro-vaccination, anti-vaccination, or control group individuals. Pro-vaccination individuals were identified through their use of the #vaccineswork hashtag, whereas anti-vaccination individuals were identified through their use of either the #vaccineskill or #vaccinesharm hashtag. Posts between September – December 2020 were studied.

### Key Findings:

- Compared to pro-vaccination supporters, anti-vaccination supporters shared conspiracy theories and were more likely to use emotional language.
- Anti-vaccination supporters were more engaged in discussions on Twitter and often shared content from prominent anti-vaccination influencers.
- The success of the anti-vaccination movement relies on a strong sense of community.
- Researchers suggest that policies to halt the circulation of vaccine misinformation should be created.

[View full study here](#)



[View full study here](#)

# Making Behavioral Science Integral to Climate Science and Action

*By Baruch Fischhoff, Ph.D.*

## *Behavioural Public Policy*

### **Why This Research is Important:**

Behavioral science can play an essential role in setting and implementing climate-related policies. This study detailed the ways in which behavioral science can benefit climate science.

### **Method:**

Secondary research was analyzed to evaluate behavioral science in climate science.

### **Key Findings:**

- Theories from behavioral science may provide a more effective messaging approach to influence climate behavior change in certain audiences.
  - Historically, climate change communicators have trusted that the simple enormity of the problem would motivate action. Behavioral models suggest that a more complex, deliberative process may be better suited for behavior change.
- Behavioral science can use the following strategies to retain its seat at the climate science table:
  - Integrate behavioral science in climate models
    - Behavioral scientists may show how behavioral variables fit into climate models, refining existing relationships or adding missing ones.
  - Make climate science more relevant to climate decisions
    - Two-way communication is critical here; people need to know what scientists have learned, and scientists need to know what decisions people face.
  - Treat climate science as a behavioral endeavor
    - Decision-makers should be aware of random and systematic error in the science reported to them.



# Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion



3

Open-access of this article made possible courtesy of the editor Bey-Ling Sha, Ph.D., and the publisher Taylor & Francis.

## A Theory of Corporate Responsibility to Race (CRR): Communication and Racial Justice in Public Relations

By Nneka Logan, Ph.D.

*Journal of Public Relations Research*

### Why This Research is Important:

Guided by critical race theory (CRT), Dr. Nneka Logan explored how the business community can take responsibility for its role in the discussion of race by offering a new research-based theory—*Corporate Responsibility to Race* or CRR. The theory is based on the intersection and roles of the corporation, race, and corporate social responsibility. CRR will allow professionals to better identify, understand, contextualize, and analyze corporate communications that address race relations.

### Method:

Empirical observations and research studies on public relations activities informed this theory.

### Key Findings:

- Corporations have a responsibility to race because they have historically perpetuated and profited from racial oppression.
- CRR holds that corporations should communicate in ways that:
  - Advocate for racial justice
  - Attempt to improve race relations
  - Support achieving a more equitable and harmonious society
- CRR highlights five main principles that communications must do:
  - Draw attention to racism
  - Highlight the implications of racism and illuminate its complexities
  - Advocate for racial justice and racial equity
  - Express a desire to improve race relations to achieve a more equitable and harmonious society
  - Prioritize the needs of society over the economic needs of the corporation

[View full study here](#)





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publisher Elsevier.

## Coping with Workplace Racial Discrimination: The Role of Internal Communication

By Jo-Yun Li, Ph.D., Yeunjae Lee, Ph.D., Shiyun Tian, and Wanhsiu Tsai, Ph.D.

*Public Relations Review*

### Why This Research is Important:

The COVID-19 pandemic brought a renewed focus on internal communication and employee well-being. The shifting nature of work has also shed light on challenges for employees in minority groups. This study examined how employees cope with workplace racial discrimination, and how internal communication can play a role.

### Method:

An online survey of 453 participants was conducted in December 2019.

### Key Findings:

- Discrimination experiences in the workplace lead to employees' adoption of *emotion-focused* coping strategies (which diminish employee-organization relationships) instead of *problem-focused* coping strategies (which benefit employee-organization relationships).
- Organizations should employ transparent communication to encourage employees to adopt a *problem-focused* strategy and avoid an emotion-focused strategy.
- Organizations should hold meetings for racial minority employees to identify their information needs if they feel they are being treated unfairly at work.

[View full study here](#)

# Women in the Workplace 2021

McKinsey & Company and LeanIn

# 5

## Why This Research is Important:

Despite added stress and exhaustion due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, women are making gains in representation. However, work by women, especially by women of color, goes unrecognized by some companies. This report assessed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on diversity, equity, and inclusion of women in the workplace.

## Method:

A survey of more than 65,000 employees was conducted as well as interviews with women, including those with diverse identities such as women of color, LGBTQ+ women, and women with disabilities.

## Key Findings:

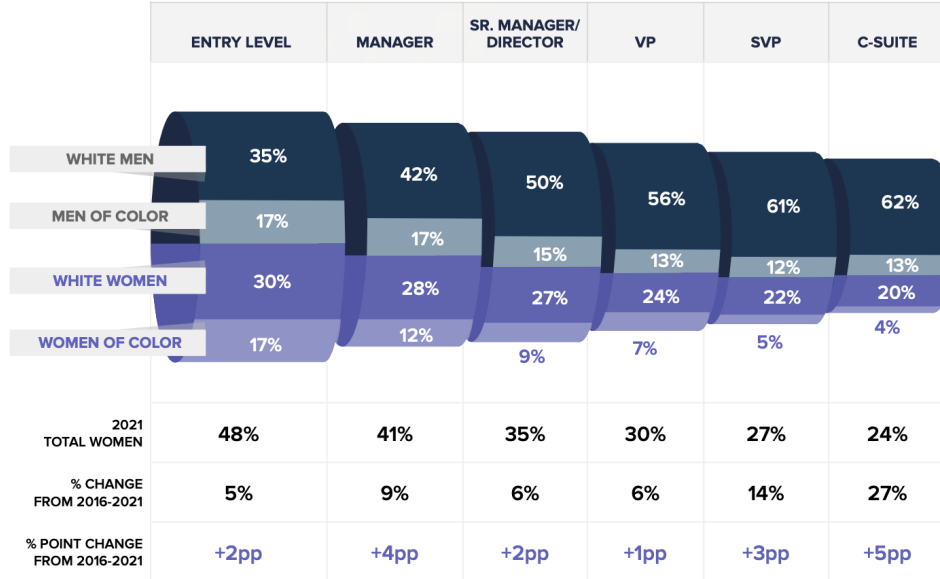
- Women were more burned out in 2021 than in 2020; burnout is escalating much faster among women than men.
  - 42% of women said they have been “often” or “almost always” burned out in 2021, compared to 32% in 2020.
  - 1-in-3 women said they have considered downshifting their careers or leaving the workforce in 2021, compared to 1-in-4 who said this a few months into the pandemic.
  - More than 50% of women who are responsible for managing teams were “often” or “almost always” burned out, and almost 40% have considered leaving the workforce or downshifting their careers.
- 32% of Black women who have spoken out against bias and discrimination at work reported experiencing retaliation, compared to just 6% of white men.
  - It is critical that white allies actively confront bias and discrimination against women of color.
- 77% of employees said they are allies to women of color, but there was a disconnect between words and actions. In regard to specific actions, only 21% advocated for new opportunities for women of color, and only 10% have mentored or sponsored one or more women of color.
- 38% of senior-level women said they mentor or sponsor at least one woman of color, compared to 26% of senior-level men.

View full  
study here

## REPRESENTATION IN THE CORPORATE PIPELINE BY GENDER AND RACE<sup>7</sup>

■ MEN ■ WOMEN

% of employees by level at the start of 2021





## Race in the Workplace: The Black Experience in the U.S. Private Sector

*McKinsey & Company*

### Why This Research is Important:

This study explored Black workers' participation in the entire U.S. private sector economy, including their representation, advancement, and experiences. Findings reveal major barriers for Black employees, including a lack of advancement opportunities and a trust deficit between employees and their companies.

### Method:

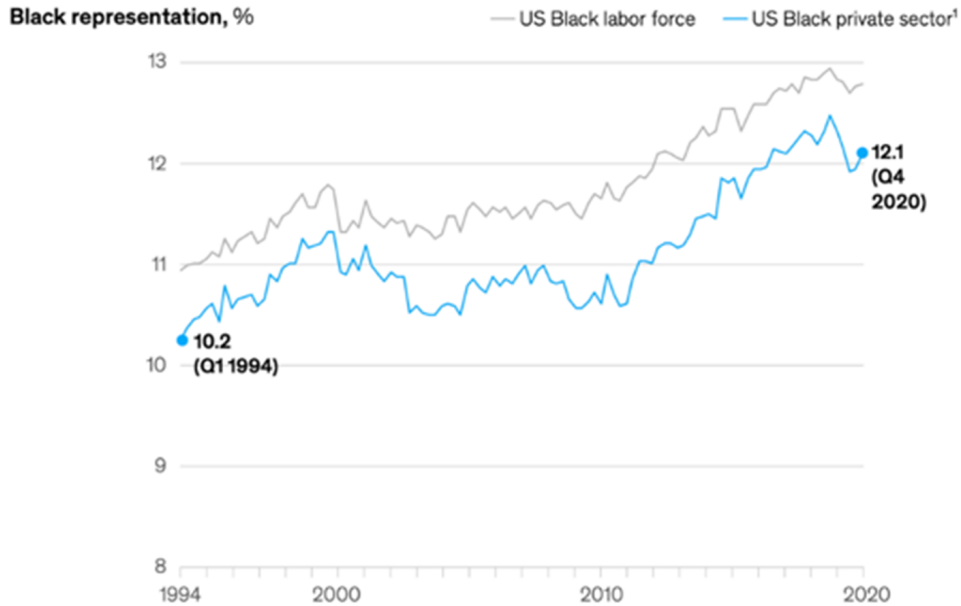
Researchers analyzed employment data from 24 companies and conducted qualitative and quantitative research with nearly 25,000 participants from September 2020 – January 2021.

### Key Findings:

- Frontline jobs largely do not connect Black employees with sufficient opportunities to advance.
  - Due to this, 43% of Black workers earn less than \$30,000 annually, compared to 29% of the rest of private sector employees.
- Entry-level jobs are a revolving door for Black employees.
  - The “revolving door phenomenon” strongly correlates with the culture of inclusion and belonging, as well as the opportunity for advancement.
- Black employees may encounter a broken rung, or the obstacles on the promotion ladder that keep people from advancing, from entry-level jobs to managerial jobs.
- Many Black employees lack sponsors and/or allies who support their advancement.
  - 67% of Black employees reported that they do not have a sponsor.
  - 23% of Black employees believed they receive “a lot” or a “quite a bit” of support to advance.

[View full study here](#)

Black representation in the full US private sector has increased by about two percentage points over the past quarter century, tracking with Black working-age population growth.



Source: McKinsey & Company



7

## Asia-Pacific PR Industry: White Executives Dominate Higher-Paid Roles

*PRovoke Media*

### Why This Research is Important:

PRovoke Media examined the extent of the pay and promotion gap at Asia-Pacific public relations agencies.

### Method:

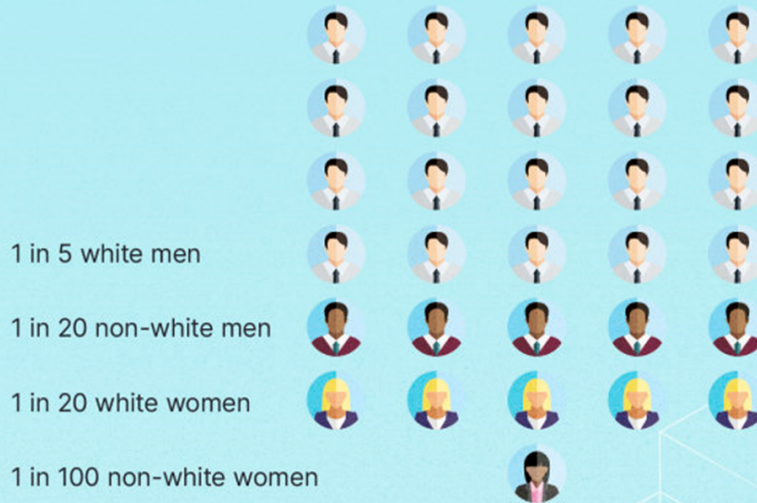
A survey of 1,100 employees at 24 PR agencies across Asia-Pacific was conducted.

### Key Findings:

- 68% of industry professionals were female, but all positions above director comprise proportionately fewer females than the industry at large.
- 42% of white men and 25% of white women reported earning over \$125k per year — far higher proportions than other groups.
  - 13% of East Asian men and 6% of East Asian women earned over \$125k per year.
  - 10% of Southeast Asian men and 8% of Southeast Asian women earned over \$125k per year.
  - 4% of South Asian men and 6% of South Asian women earned over \$125k per year.
- Although only 1-in-5 (17%) industry members identified as white, white employees comprised more than a third of executive vice president and partner-level positions.

[View full study here](#)

## Income Distribution for Salaries Over \$200k



Best Agencies to Work For Asia-Pacific 2021

PRovoke



# Environmental, Social, and Corporate Governance (ESG)



# 8

## The Rise of the Chief Sustainability Officer

*Korn Ferry*

### Why This Research is Important:

Sustainability leadership is becoming imperative. This report outlines Korn Ferry's "Executive Success Profile," a collection of attributes organizations should seek when hiring a Chief Sustainability Officer (CSO).

### Method:

Interviews of current CSOs were conducted in mid-2021 to provide insights on the traits and competencies CSOs need, as well as how to effect change and measure impact.

### Key Findings:

- CSOs need grit and persistence to drive meaningful change. Related traits include:
  - Resilience through a long "arc of change"
  - A focus on the customer
  - A broad global perspective
- Employees should be the primary focus in driving culture change — CSOs should address influencers in the top, middle, and lower levels of the organization.
- By shifting the focus from "doing less bad" to "doing more good," sustainability is perceived as an enabler or creator of business, rather than a cost or reporting function.
- Success metrics for sustainability include executive buy-in, organization-wide buy-in, and tangible values like top-line revenue.

[View full study here](#)

# 9

## The Post-Pandemic Board Agenda: Redefining Corporate Resilience

*McKinsey & Company*

### Why This Research is Important:

Widespread disruption from COVID-19 led to a renewed focus on corporate resilience. Through identifying the changes boards made to their structures, processes, and interpersonal dynamics during the pandemic, this study reveals what makes up the “most adaptable” boards.

### Method:

A global survey of 846 board directors and C-level executives in a range of industries was conducted.

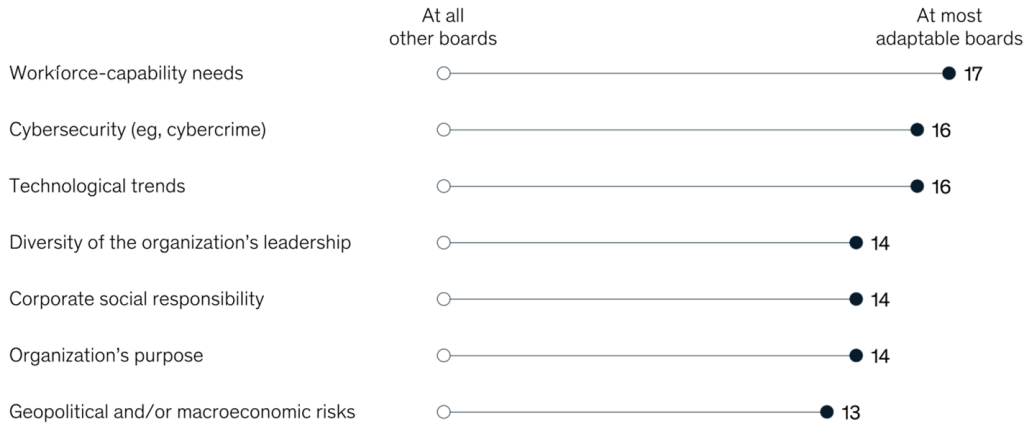
### Key Findings:

- Boards that were quickest to adapt to the COVID-19 crisis are now focusing more on specific external risks, such as climate change or technological trends, than on corporate resilience overall.
- Respondents expect to maintain many of the operational changes they made during COVID-19 but also expect to focus more on:
  - Geopolitical and macroeconomic risks (up 19 percentage points from 2020)
  - Political risks (up 15 percentage points from 2020)
  - Climate-related risks (up 10 percentage points from 2020)
- More than 75% of respondents said that “innovation and growth” was a key focus.

[View full study here](#)

## Nearly every topic the survey tested is more likely to be on the agendas of the most adaptable boards, compared with their peers.

Reported topics on the board agenda,<sup>1</sup> percentage-point difference, directors on most adaptable boards<sup>2</sup> vs others



<sup>1</sup>Out of 15 topics that were offered as answer choices.

<sup>2</sup>Respondents who reported at least one structural change, one process change, and one change to collaboration on their boards since the COVID-19 crisis began *and* that their boards have been effective at helping the organization respond to COVID-19; n = 143. For all other respondents, n = 268.



# Internal Communication and Culture



# The Next Great Disruption is Hybrid Work — Are We Ready?

Microsoft

[View full study here](#)



## Hybrid work is inevitable

Business leaders are on the brink of major updates to accommodate what employees want: the best of both worlds.



66%

of leaders say their company is considering redesigning office space for hybrid work



73%

of employees want flexible remote work options to stay



67%

of employees want more in-person work or collaboration post-pandemic

## Why This Research is Important:

Organizations must navigate the hybrid workplace and the challenges it presents, including decreased communication across the organization and digital exhaustion. This research revealed seven trends that are projected to shape the hybrid work world.

## Method:

A survey of more than 30,000 people in 31 countries was conducted from January 12-25, 2021.

## Key Findings:

- 73% of employees wanted flexible remote work options to stay.
  - 67% of employees want more in-person work or collaboration post-pandemic.
- 61% of leaders said they are “thriving” right now, compared to 38% of respondents with no decision-making authority.
- 60% of Gen Z said they are “struggling” or merely “surviving” right now.
  - Gen Z specifically reported difficulties “feeling engaged or excited about work,” “getting a word in during meetings,” and “bringing new ideas to the table.”
- 39% of respondents said they’re more likely to be their full, authentic selves at work compared to early 2020.
  - 31% said they are “less likely to feel embarrassed or ashamed when their home life shows up at work.”

# 11



## Integral Employee Activation Index

*Integral and The Harris Poll*

### Why This Research is Important:

Employee and internal communication played a vital role as organizations adapted quickly to new ways of working in 2020 and 2021. With many corporate employees working from home, the division between work and home life narrowed and blurred. This study sought to understand the impact of societal issues and workplace experience on employee activation, or behavior and engagement.

### Method:

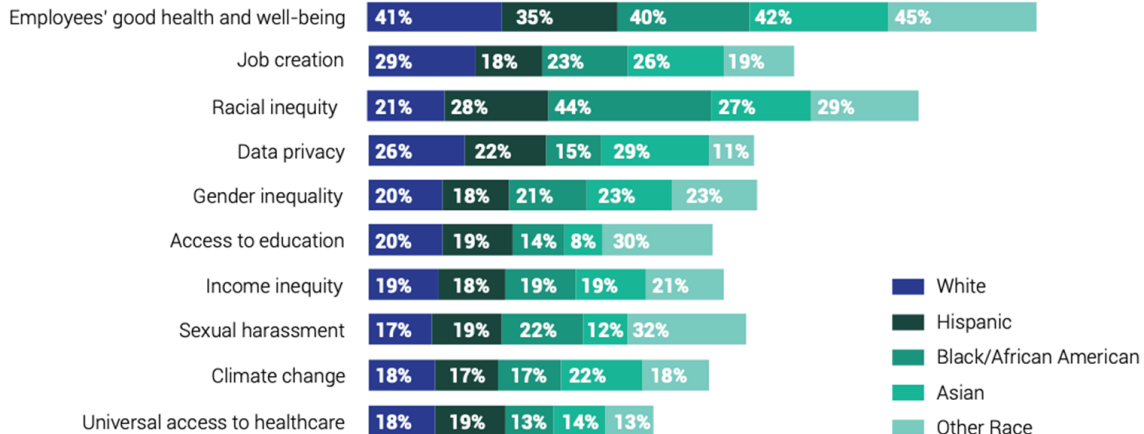
A survey of more than 2,000 employed individuals across the United States was conducted from June – July 2021.

### Key Findings:

- 64% of employees felt their organization reflected their values, while 36% felt it did not.
- Employees were activated to support business goals when they felt that their organization made a positive difference on their top values.
  - Of employees who said their organization reflected their values, 63% said they were likely to remain with their employer over the next 6-12 months.
- 48% of employees felt people should have the ability to express their political views in the workplace.
- 30% of participants with children in the household say they're excited to come to the workplace compared to 14% of employees without children in the household.
- Over two-thirds of participants were likely to give their organization a positive review on sites such as LinkedIn, Indeed, and Glassdoor.
  - Employees who felt their company reflects their values were also more likely to write a positive review.

[View full study here](#)

## Societal Issues that matter to employees



## 2021 Employee Hopes and Fears Report

*PwC Global*

### Why This Research is Important:

As the way we work changes, so do employee preferences and concerns. Workers now want more digital skills, inclusivity, and flexibility. This report assessed the factors that are top-of-mind for employees, including career advancement and corporate purpose.

### Method:

A survey of 32,517 working adults across the globe was conducted in February 2021.

### Key Findings:

- 50% of workers said they have faced discrimination at work, which led them to miss out on career advancement or training.
- 22% of participants reported being passed over for opportunities because of their age.
  - Younger workers were just as likely as older workers to report being passed over for opportunities due to age.
- 75% of respondents said they want to work for an organization that will make a positive contribution to society.
- 46% of respondents said they'd choose a job that "makes a difference" over a higher salary.

[View full study here](#)





# Mental Health





# 13

## 2021 Employee Stress Check

*Talkspace*

### **Why This Research is Important:**

As COVID-19 led to a renewed focus on employee mental health, Talkspace commissioned a survey with The Harris Poll to explore employee attitudes toward mental well-being and work.

### **Method:**

A survey of 1,015 full-time employees in the United States was conducted July 29 – August 2, 2021.

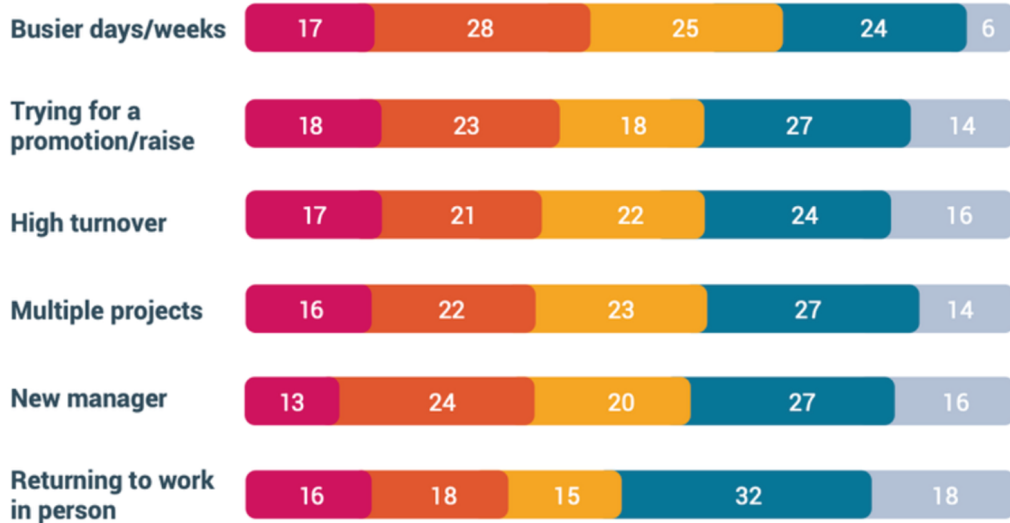
### **Key Findings:**

- 41% of employees were likely to consider a job change to resolve stress.
  - Employees were bypassing company policies, such as changing teams or short-term leaves, in favor of resignation.
- Nearly 60% of employees believed that supportive management can improve retention.
  - When it came to retention and engagement, “a manager that prioritizes mental health” is ranked higher by employees than both a strong culture and mentorship.
- 2-in-3 employees who considered leaving their job said their employer has not followed through on early pandemic promises to focus on employee mental health.

[View full study here](#)

## Employee Stress Levels According to Events at Work

Great deal of stress    Some stress    A little bit of stress    No stress    NA/DK



Q: How much stress does each of the following events at work cause you?

Source: Talkspace

## The Polarization Index

*USC Annenberg, Signal Labs, Golin*

### Why This Research is Important:

The USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations, Signal Labs, and Golin examined polarization in the United States regarding major topics like the presidential election and social issues.

### Method:

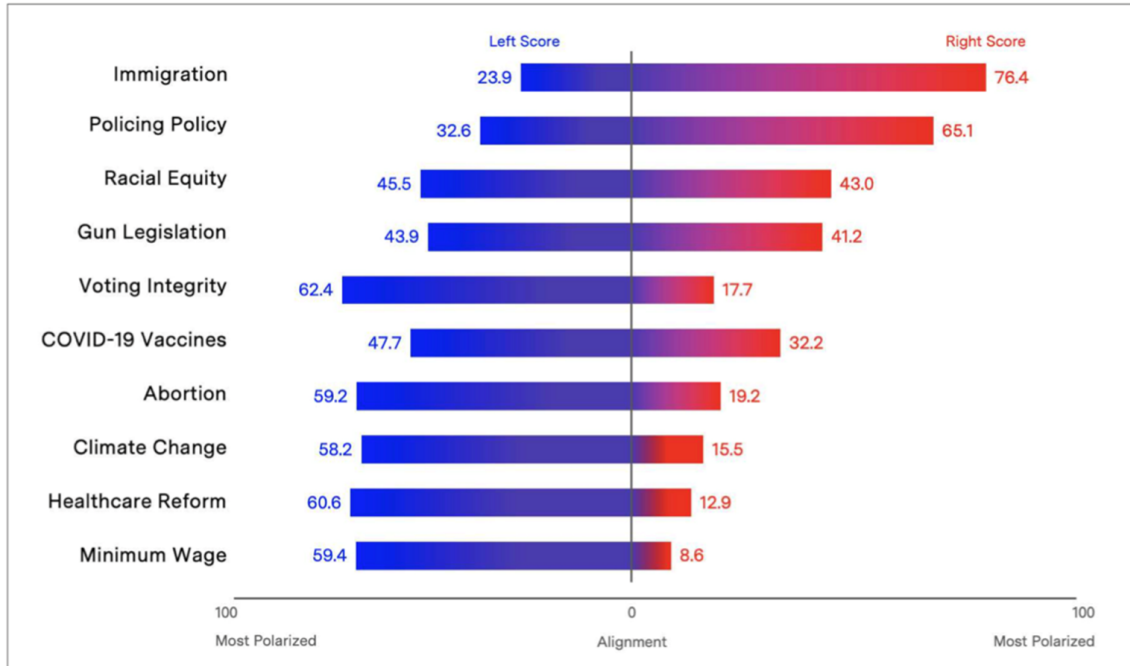
The Polarization Index measures engagement with polarized content on Twitter, with polarization calculated by combining the volume of shares with the bias and reliability ratings of the media sources publishing the content.

### Key Findings:

- Polarization levels remained steady over the past year, despite the end of the Trump administration, the events of January 6th, and the start of the Biden administration.
  - One year after the 2020 presidential election, the overall PI score dropped from 85.1 to 82.5, indicating a slight drop in polarization.
- Since Q1 2021, immigration has continued to become more polarized quarter over quarter and remains the most polarized issue.
  - In Q3 2021, immigration was given a 100.3 polarization score from the PI.
- Policing policy is the second most polarized issue, which became more polarized due to Twitter users' increasing engagement with less reliable, right-leaning sources, which comprised more than half (53%) of the shares.
- Almost a year since the launch of COVID-19 vaccines, conversation is still increasingly polarized.
- Although historically a controversial topic, abortion has become less polarized as more reliable sources on the left drove most shares in 2021.

[View full study here](#)

## Polarization by Issue



Source: USC Annenberg, Signal Labs, Golin



# State of the Industry





# 15

## Latin American Communication Monitor 2020-2021

*EUPRERA*

### **Why This Research is Important:**

EUPRERA examined a wide range of topics in the strategic communication industry in Latin America, including ethical challenges, cybersecurity, and crisis communication.

### **Method:**

A survey of more than 20,000 communication and public relations professionals in 20 countries was conducted May – July 2020.

### **Key Findings:**

- When it comes to managing ethical challenges, 89% of respondents placed their personal values above the ethical guidelines from their organization or professional associations.
- 38% of those who work in the public sector said their organization does not have a crisis plan.
- Respondents said the most relevant strategic topics moving forward are:
  - The digital evolution and the social web (39%)
  - Big data and/or algorithms for communication (38%)
  - Creation and distribution new forms of content (35%)

[View full study here](#)

# State of the Industry Report 2021

PublicAffairsAsia

# 16

## Why This Research is Important:

PublicAffairsAsia explored compensation levels, job satisfaction, perceived value, and remote work in the communication industry across Asia.

## Method:

A survey of 257 communication, public relations, and public affairs professionals in the Asia-Pacific region was conducted.

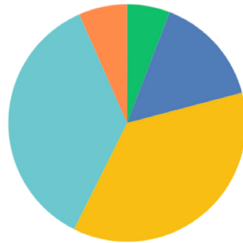
## Key Findings:

- 71% of agency respondents noticed a greater appreciation of the value and importance of the communications function within organizations since the emergence of COVID-19.
  - Over 40% of respondents said budgets for internal communications increased.
  - Over 40% of respondents said budgets for digital/social media increased.
- 50% of respondents from both agency and in-house organizations reported receiving pay raises in 2020.
- In July 2020, agencies rated work-from-home productivity an average of 8.1 out of 10 (on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being “highly productive”).
  - In November 2020, the rating dropped to 7.7 which may be due to the effectiveness of working from home long-term, or a sign that people are exhausted by their situation and their personal circumstances.

[View full study here](#)

## Satisfaction Levels

On a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 being extremely unsatisfied and 5 being very satisfied) how do you feel about your current salary, bonus and benefits?



1 2 3 4 5

Source: PublicAffairsAsia



## Asia-Pacific Communication Monitor 2020/2021

*Asia-Pacific Association of Communication Directors, EUPRERA, Truescope, Nanyang Technological University, and PRovoke*

### Why This Research is Important:

The Asia-Pacific Association of Communication Directors (APACD) and industry partners explored current strategic issues, competency development, ethical challenges, and gender equality in the Asia-Pacific communication industry.

### Method:

An online survey of 1,236 communication practitioners in Asia-Pacific was conducted September – November 2020.

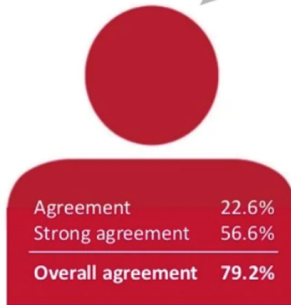
### Key Findings:

- 38% of respondents said “coping with the digital evolution and the social web” was the most important strategic issue for communication management through 2022. Other issues included:
  - 37% of respondents said “using big data and/or algorithms for communication.”
  - 34% said “building and maintaining trust.”
- Leaders were confident about their business, management, and communication competencies, but ranked themselves equally to their subordinates in technology and data competence.
- Ethical challenges were more common in governmental organizations (with 52% of respondents reporting “several ethical challenges”) compared to other types of organizations.
- Female communicators were predominant in all organizations, but female leadership was most prominent in nonprofits where 70% of leaders are female.

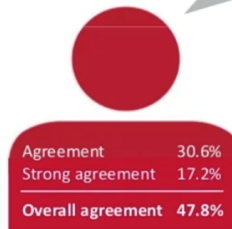
[View full study here](#)

Competency development in the communication profession:  
Almost four out of five practitioners in Asia-Pacific see a need for improvement

*"There is a great need for communication practitioners to develop their competencies."*



*"Competencies are heavily discussed in the communication profession in my country."*



# IPR Research from 2021

## **The Top 15 Public Relations Insights of 2020**

Published annually, the report highlights the top research studies published the previous year that all PR practitioners and academics should know about. Topics include behavioral science and COVID-19, diversity and inclusion, future of work, and measurement.

<https://instituteforpr.org/top-pr-insights-2020/>

## **The Communicator's Guide to Research, Analysis, and Evaluation**

This guide was presented by the IPR Measurement Commission to help public relations leaders understand how they can apply data, research, and analytics to uncover insights that inform strategic decision making, improve communication performance, and deliver meaningful business contributions.

<https://instituteforpr.org/communicators-guide-research-2021/>

## **The Evolving Communication Function**

The Institute for Public Relations and PRNEWS conducted a study of 318 public relations professionals to find out how companies organize and evolve their communication function, including headcounts, reporting lines, strategic choices around structure and function, and areas of improvement.

<https://instituteforpr.org/the-evolving-communication-function/>

## **The 2021 IPR Future of Communications in Asia Report**

The Institute for Public Relations conducted interviews and focus groups with 20 — 30 senior communications executives based in Asia to investigate key changes that would impact the future of the communications function.

<https://instituteforpr.org/2021-foc-asia-report/>

## **The Language of Diversity**

The Institute for Public Relations Center for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and The Wakeman Agency conducted a survey of 393 communications and public relations leaders to study diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) perceptions and definitions from March 17 – April 12, 2021.

<https://instituteforpr.org/defining-diversity-equity-inclusion-report/>

## **Measuring Stakeholder Perception of the “Social Impact” in ESG**

Cision and the Institute for Public Relations examined the conversation around environmental, social, and corporate governance (ESG) topics. This first report focused on the ‘S’ in ESG: social impact.

<https://instituteforpr.org/cision-social-impact-esg/>



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The science beneath the art of public relations™

## About the Institute for Public Relations

Founded in 1956, the Institute for Public Relations is an independent, nonprofit foundation dedicated to *the science beneath the art of public relations*™. IPR creates, curates, and promotes research and initiatives that empower professionals with actionable insights and intelligence they can put to immediate use. IPR predicts and analyzes global factors transforming the profession and amplifies and engages the professional globally through thought leadership and programming. All research is available free at [www.instituteforpr.org](http://www.instituteforpr.org) and provides the basis for IPR's professional conferences and events.

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