



# COVID-19: How Businesses are Handling the Crisis

The 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has caused the greatest global disruption many of us have seen in our lifetimes, with more than 120,000 people infected and more than 4,600 deaths (as of March 11, 2020). It has led to travel bans and restrictions, shaken up the financial markets, and caused event and conference cancellations around the world. It has significantly impacted businesses across all sectors and tested crisis preparedness plans.

The Institute for Public Relations (IPR) worked with communications firm Peppercomm to conduct a study of 300 communications executives and senior leaders from March 5-10 to gain a better understanding of how prepared businesses were for COVID-19 and how they are handling the impacts.

More than half of respondents (53%) said COVID-19 has had a “moderate” or “major” impact on their business operations and 83% are “moderately” or “extremely” concerned about the potential impact of the virus on their companies, suggesting the virus and its effects are not going away any time soon.

Business leaders are leaning into their communication function as an essential resource to help them deal with COVID-19. More than three-quarters (81%) of respondents said the communication function is “important” or “very important” to their company’s COVID-19 response. Communicating to employees was an “essential” or “high” priority for 81% of respondents, especially around operational changes and sanitation practices. Noted internal communication channels included internal platforms, mobile apps and hotlines.

While most businesses have been trying their best to prepare for crisis scenarios, something like COVID-19 is unprecedented. Some 30% said their organization was “very” prepared for COVID-19, while 55% said they were “somewhat” prepared. However, almost half (44%) said their crisis communications plan did not specifically address an infectious disease outbreak. Meanwhile, 10% of respondents did not have a crisis communications plan at all.

The most trusted sources for information about COVID-19 were federal agencies (e.g., Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) and international health agencies (e.g., World Health Organization), with nearly three-quarters of respondents (71%) noting they trusted these organizations “a lot.” On the flip side, most respondents had “not much” or no trust in country leaders (56%) and social media (81%).

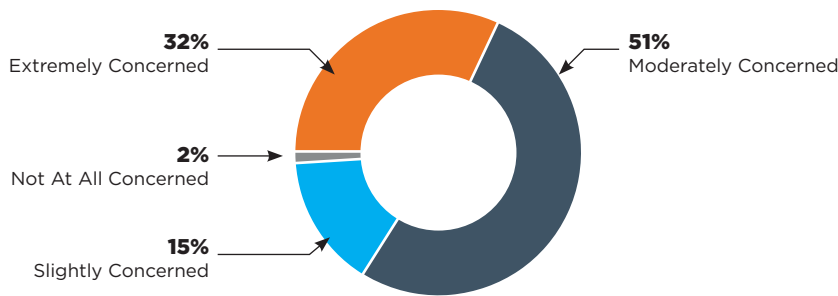
Below is the full data report.

### To what extent has COVID-19 had an impact on your company's business operations?



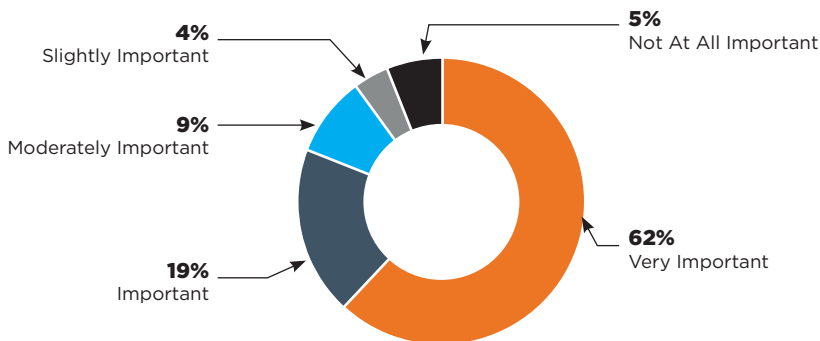
More than half (**53%**) of the respondents said COVID-19 has had a “moderate” or “major” impact on their business operations.

### How concerned are you about potential impact of COVID-19 on your company?



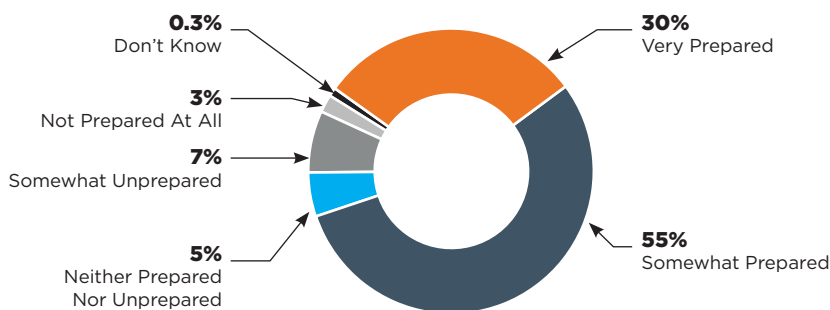
**8 out of 10** respondents are “moderately” or “extremely” concerned about the potential impact of COVID-19 on their company.

### How important has the communication function been to the company's COVID-19 response?



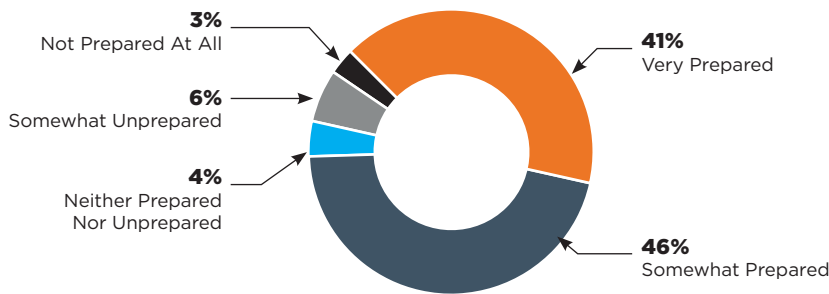
More than three-quarters of respondents (**81%**) said the communication function has been “important” or “very important” to the company's COVID-19 response.

### How prepared is your organization to handle COVID-19?



In terms of preparedness for COVID-19, **30%** of respondents said their organizations were “very” prepared while **55%** said they were “somewhat” prepared.

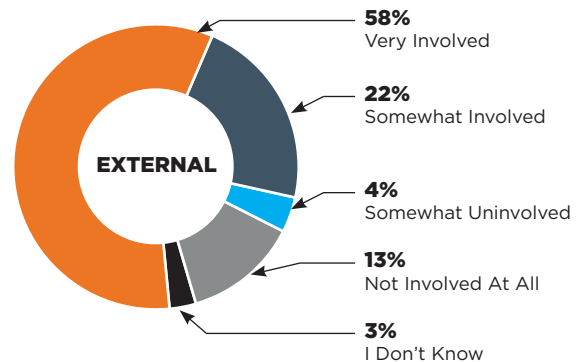
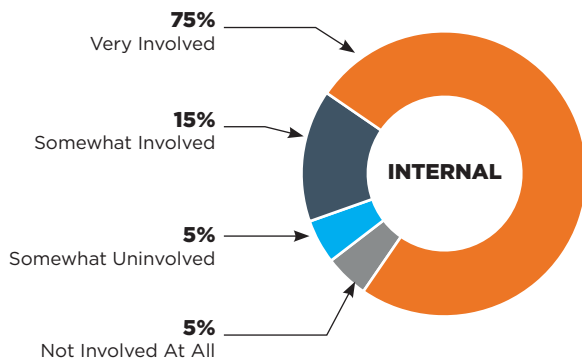
## How prepared is your communication function to handle COVID-19?



In terms of preparedness for COVID-19, **41%** of respondents said their communication function was “very” prepared while **46%** said they were “somewhat” prepared.

## How involved is the communication function in communicating internally and externally?

The communication function was more likely to communicate internally rather than externally.

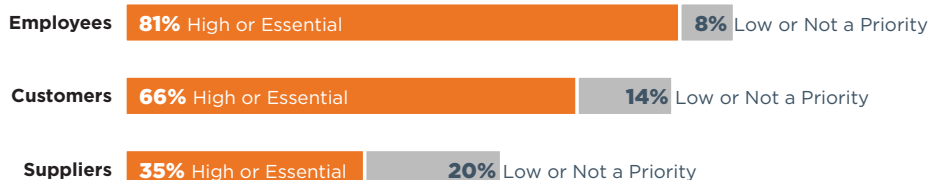


## Who should be the primary communicator about COVID-19 within the organization?

Nearly half (**49%**) of communication executives said the CEO should be the primary communicator, even though a few noted this may be contextual. After the CEO, significantly fewer respondents noted other C-suite executives should be primarily responsible for communicating: CCO (**12%**), CHRO (**10%**), and COO (**8%**).

CEO	49%
CCO	12%
Other	11%
CHRO	10%
COO	8%
Another C-suite Executive	4%
Lower-level Staff	3%
Outside Consultant	1%
CMO	0.8%

## How much of a priority is the communication function placing on communication to specific stakeholders?



Communicating to employees on COVID-19 was a “high” or “essential” priority to the communication function for **81%** of respondents, versus **66%** for customers and **35%** for suppliers. Some **20%** said communicating to suppliers was a “low priority” or “not a priority.”

**Who is working with the communication function on a cross-functional team to oversee the COVID-19 pandemic?**

If the communication team is part of the cross-functional team, three functions were identified by more than half of the participants to be on that same team: Human Resources (77%); Operations (67%); and Legal (52%). Only 3% of respondents said the communication function was not part of a cross-functional team, and 6% said their company did not have one.

Human Resources.....	<b>77%</b>
Operations.....	<b>67%</b>
Legal.....	<b>52%</b>
Technology.....	<b>39%</b>
Public Affairs.....	<b>38%</b>
Marketing.....	<b>38%</b>
Finance.....	<b>37%</b>
Sales.....	<b>25%</b>

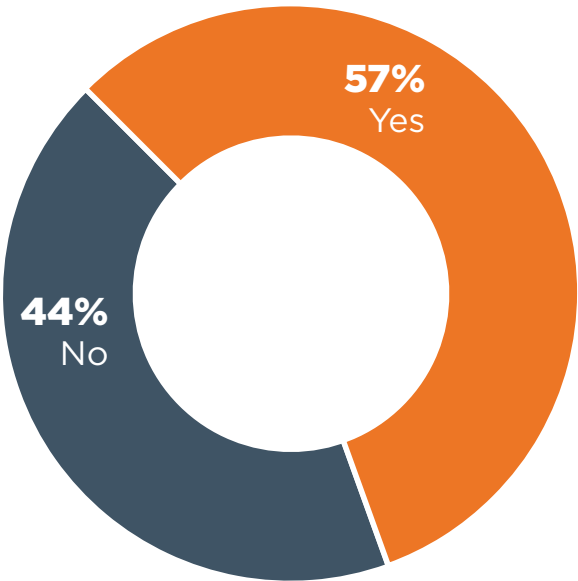
**What is the state of the company’s crisis communication plan?**

We have made good progress on updates.....	<b>32%</b>
Plans have been fully updated.....	<b>23%</b>
We have not updated our plans, but we will be updating them.....	<b>11%</b>
We do not have a crisis communication plan.....	<b>10%</b>
We have not updated our plans nor do we have plans to do so.....	<b>8%</b>
I don't know.....	<b>6%</b>
We have made little progress on the update.....	<b>5%</b>
Others.....	<b>4%</b>

Communication executives differed on the status of updating their crisis plans with nearly one-third (32%) reporting making good progress on the updates. 23% said their plans had been fully updated. 10% did not have a crisis communication plan, and 13% had either not updated and would not, or had made little progress.

**Does your company’s crisis communication plan specifically address an infectious disease outbreak?**

More than half of respondents (57%) said their crisis communication plan specifically covers an infectious disease outbreak, while 44% said it did not.



## How much do you trust the following sources to provide accurate news and information about COVID-19?

Health-related agencies were reported to be the most trust sources of information during the COVID-19 crisis. Nearly three-quarters of respondents (71%) have “a lot” of trust in federal agencies (e.g., Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) or the National Health Service) and international health organizations (e.g., the World Health Organization).

Social media, online health websites such as WebMD, and country leaders such as presidents and prime ministers were the least trusted sources of information. Concerning trust, **82%** of respondents said they had “not much” or “not at all” in social media (e.g., Facebook and Twitter), and **56%** reported having “not much” or “not at all” in country leaders.

Trust of Sources	A lot	Some	Not Much	Not At All	Don't know/ No opinion
International Health Organizations (e.g., World Health Organization)	71%	22%	6%	0.8%	0%
Federal agencies within your country (e.g., CDC, National Health Service)	71%	22%	5%	1%	0.8%
Local county agencies and local public health departments	53%	39%	6%	2%	0.8%
Hospitals and Academic Medical Centers	46%	45%	7%	2%	0.8%
Mainstream media outlets (e.g., <i>The Wall Street Journal</i> , <i>The Financial Times</i> )	19%	51%	20%	9%	0%
A medical practice connected to my organization	19%	28%	13%	9%	31%
Country leaders (e.g., Presidents, Prime Ministers)	9%	32%	29%	27%	2%
Online health websites (e.g., WebMD, Medline Plus)	8%	39%	35%	15%	4%
An unaffiliated medical practice	5%	19%	24%	18%	34%
Social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter)	1%	13%	33%	49%	4%

## Which sources are communication executives referring stakeholders to for more information?

Sources for more information	% of Respondents
Federal agencies within your country (e.g., CDC, National Health Service)	77%
International Health Organizations (e.g., World Health Organization)	56%
Local county agencies and local public health departments	47%
Internal media platform or source	45%
Internal executives, supervisors, or managers	36%
Hospitals and Academic Medical Centers	14%
Mainstream media outlets (e.g., The Wall Street Journal, The Financial Times)	9%
A medical practice connected to my organization	8%
Other	6%
Country leaders (e.g., Presidents, Prime Ministers)	5%
Online health websites (e.g., WebMD, Medline Plus)	3%
Social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter)	2%
An unaffiliated medical practice	2%

Most often, health agencies and organizations were sources communication executives were referring their stakeholders to for more information. More than three-quarters (**77%**) referred stakeholders to federal agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Internal platforms and sources were also frequent go-to sources, with **45%** reporting they were sending stakeholders to internal media platforms and **36%** to internal executives, supervisors or managers. Mainstream media outlets (**9%**), country leaders (**5%**), online health websites (**3%**) and social media (**2%**) were referred to stakeholders by less than **10%** of respondents in each category.

## How are companies helping those affected?

Sources for more information	% of Respondents
Yes, we are already implementing a program related to COVID-19 to help those affected	32%
Yes, we are currently planning an effort to help those that are affected by COVID-19	20%
No, we are not currently planning an effort to help those affected but may do so	28%
No, we are not currently planning an effort to help those affected and are unlikely to do so	11%
I don't know	6%

Nearly **1 out of 3** respondents said their company is already implementing a program related to COVID-19 to help those affected. Several respondents commented that if an employee was affected by the virus, that they would support that individual.

## OPEN-ENDED RESPONSES

### What word(s) or phrases(s) best describes the media's coverage of COVID-19?

One survey question asked respondents to give the word(s) or phrase(s) that best describes the media's coverage of COVID-19. Each response was categorized as positive toward media, neutral/mixed toward media, and negative toward media.

Descriptions of media coverage
<b>60%</b> of respondents criticized the media as "sensationalizing" the COVID-19 crisis. Popular words to describe the media coverage were variations of "sensational," "hysteria," "panic," "alarmist," "overblown," and "overheated."
<b>28%</b> used mixed or neutral words or phrases to describe media coverage of the COVID-19 crisis. These include words and phrases such as "pandemic and epidemic of unequal proportion," "extensive," and "ongoing."
Only <b>12%</b> of the words/phrases given by respondents praised the media's coverage using terms such as "thorough," "accurate," and "balanced."

### What are communication executives doing above and beyond the standard procedures that may be helpful for others?

Overall, internal communication was the focus for most responses as companies take additional measures outside of the standard practices that most companies are adopting. Open-ended responses to this question were grouped into key themes.

#### THEME 1: Increase in Internal Communication Resources

In addition to intranets, microsites, and other internal sites, companies opened hotlines, offered FAQs on their sites, and opted for mobile apps. One respondent noted their company offered live feeds of updates from health authorities and medical experts.

Another respondent said their company summarizes actions taken at their "Pandemic Preparedness Committee" and relays the impact to the employee base.

#### THEME 2: Increase in Communication and Steps Around Sanitation Procedures

Companies are adding more sanitation stations and supplies, as well as increasing communication about sanitation procedures, including standard suggestions such as, "wash your hands," "don't touch your face," etc. One respondent noted that this requires real behavior change, which is challenging. Another respondent said they were minimizing touch access to doors and disinfecting tables before meetings.

Some companies are offering free supplies to their employees in the form of hand sanitizers and disinfectant wipes; one company said they worked with their sourcing partners to provide an overstock of business-critical supplies. Executives noted the importance of communication throughout the workplace, including posters (the CDC was often referenced), and reminders at contact points.

One respondent said their company moved desks facing away from each other, banned open water containers, and encouraged food to be covered. Another respondent said they closed operational areas where transmission could be high, such as buffets.

#### THEME 3: Option to Work Remotely and Move Operations Online

Some companies had mandated "work-from-home" policy for their employees. With the increased work-from-home procedures, some companies are training their employees to use virtual technologies, such as Zoom. One company developed a "work-from-home" toolkit.

One respondent said their company launched a branded workout app to encourage their customers to stay active.

Another respondent said they divided their teams in two to implement mandatory 14-day distance work without contact between the groups. For frontline workers, they closed the front office, keeping back-office tasks only.

One respondent said they were taking a leadership role within the local community, by requesting and even insisting that meetings with vendors, partner organizations, nonprofit boards, etc, be handled via phone or web rather than face-to-face.

#### THEME 4: Travel and Meeting Restrictions

Companies offered variations of travel restrictions, ranging from grounding of all travel to stopping travel to affected areas. A couple respondents noted their companies were restricting meetings of a certain number of people, ranging from 15 to 50. Some have even cancelled in-person meetings altogether. Several noted that they gave employees permission to avoid doing anything that would make them uncomfortable.

#### THEME 5: Temperature Screenings

A few companies noted they were doing temperature screenings and hosting isolation areas within factories. One respondent said they were using thermal cameras/scanners to detect sickness, such as fevers, to ensure those sick are quarantined immediately.

### DEMOGRAPHICS

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*“We have a generally centralized communications organization in which the CCO has all the responsibility but not necessarily all the direct authority, but we have declared ‘martial law’ to centralize all oversight for internal and external communications across the board.”*

*– Communication Executive in COVID-19 Survey*

## Methodology

The Institute for Public Relations and Peppercomm conducted a global online survey of 300 communication executives and senior leaders from March 5 - 10, 2020 to determine how their company and their communication function are responding to the COVID-19. The margin of error based on the sample size is +/- 6%, but please note this was not a random sample.

To give context to the survey, as of March 11, more than 120,000 people have been infected with COVID-19 around the world with more than 4,600 deaths. On March 11, the World Health Organization updated the classification of COVID-19 from an epidemic to a pandemic.

To see the full report, visit the webpage:

<https://instituteforpr.org/coronavirus-covid-19-comms-report/>

## Learn More About the Epidemics Readiness Accelerator's Communications Working Group

**Toni Brasting**, Wellcome Trust

The Epidemics Readiness Accelerator's Communications Working Group, composed of members from the World Economic Forum (WEF), World Health Organisation (WHO), the Wellcome Trust and Edelman, is developing a concept to aid employers in their communication with employees on epidemic information. This platform will aim to alleviate the resource and information burden facing employers so that they can focus on how best to communicate with their employees during an epidemic outbreak.

We are funded to develop this early design phase and now need input from employers in what a platform will require in order to be responsive and effective to their employee needs in times of an epidemic, such as the current coronavirus (COVID-19). Employers interested in learning more and want to be a part of this endeavor can contact: Toni Brasting from Wellcome Trust (t.brasting@wellcome.ac.uk).