

# THE 2019 IPR FUTURE OF WORK REPORT

By **Melissa D. Dodd, Ph.D., APR**, and the  
**IPR Organizational Communication Research Center**



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This report is produced by the Institute for Public Relations (IPR) Organizational Communication Research Center, the most comprehensive source and thought leadership on internal communications.

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# INTRODUCTION

This Institute for Public Relations (IPR) report investigates the future of work and the impact of several factors on the changing nature of work, including a rapidly and continuously shifting technological landscape, the growth of globalization, and the juxtaposition of new and tenured members of the workforce. While some technological innovations have already made a significant impact on organizations, the future of work is more than just artificial intelligence (AI) and automation. The intent of this project was to investigate the three interlinked dimensions of an organization: the work (the what), the workforce (the who), and the workplace (the where). Each offers unique challenges and opportunities for organizational (internal) communication.

Technological innovation is accelerating the ways that business must think and operate, affecting the skills and mindset of the workforce. A 2018 McKinsey Global Institute report places work skills into five different categories: physical and manual, basic cognitive, higher cognitive, social and emotional, and technological. Of those, the report estimates that by 2030 physical-manual skills and basic cognitive skills will show a steep decline in the percent of hours worked; whereas, higher cognitive skills, social-emotional skills, and technological skills will dramatically increase.

A 2019 report by the Pew Research Center found a deep divide in how segments of today's workforce view technology. Adults 50 and over are more likely to believe that automation negatively impacts workers; whereas, young adults and part-time workers are more likely to view technology as enhancing the work experience. In looking at innovations like AI and automation, assembly-line workers, drivers, cashiers, customer service staff – those people who primarily perform physical-manual labor or basic literacy/numeracy tasks – will be adversely impacted.

Likewise, innovations in information and communication technology are advancing global competition by breaking the boundaries of time and space. Widespread adoption of the internet and other technologies gives workers the freedom to operate outside of traditional geographically-bound office spaces and nine to five work hours. Researchers term this growing population of independent workers “e-lancers” or “free agents.”

Meanwhile, an aging Baby Boomer workforce means that by 2020, one out of four workers is projected to be over the age of 55. As Baby Boomers retire, they will be followed by a substantially smaller generation, Generation X, leaving a potential talent shortage. A 2018 study by McKinsey Global Institute reports that executives increasingly see investment in retraining workers as an urgent business priority. Some 62% of executives said they will need to retrain or replace more than a quarter of their workforce by 2023 in order to meet evolving needs.

The *IPR Future of Work Report* arose from a need to understand current and continuous forces of change impacting organizational operations and communication. The report focuses on the disruptions in the workforce, how organizations are dealing with those changes, and how organizations are communicating to a diverse and evolving workforce.

For this report, the IPR interviewed 25 executives responsible for organizational communication to determine how they are strategizing around this new reality. To protect confidentiality, interviewees' identities are white-labeled. Interviews were transcribed, and thematic analysis was conducted using a process of open and axial coding.

### Three meta-themes framed the report's findings:

- The future of work in a global, technology-driven reality;
- Reaching a diversifying workforce;
- Investing in employees for the future of work.

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# PART ONE:

Forces Shaping The Future Of Work

The future of work and the workforce itself are facing incredible transformation driven largely by technology and globalization, both conspiring to create new behaviors, expectations and skills.

In a 2018 report for the National Bureau of Economics Research, researchers Daren Acemoglu from MIT and Pascual Restrepo from Boston University argue that “we are far from a satisfactory understanding of how automation in general, and AI and robotics in particular, impact the labor market and productivity.” They contend that much of the debate in the popular press and academia is around a false dichotomy: “On the one side are the alarmist arguments that the oncoming advances in AI and robotics will spell the end of work by humans, while many economists on the other side claim that because technological breakthroughs in the past have eventually increased the demand for labor and wages, there is no reason to be concerned that this time will be any different.”

Speaking to the technological forces shaping the future of work, internal communicators in this report were largely concerned about the pace of change, organizational technology, resources for internal communication and the emergence of a contract economy.

### **The Pace of Change is More Significant than the Change Itself**

Organizational communication executives largely attributed technological advances (i.e., automation, AI) as the major driver of workforce disruption. However, it was not the actual technologies that concerned them. Rather, communicators referenced the pace and the resulting expectations – driven in part by these technologies – as the greater challenge.

Organizational communication executives emphasized that speed and agility present challenges to communicating and maintaining organizational culture and values. Employees may become overwhelmed and lose a sense of connection to the organizational mission, vision and go-forward strategy. Communicators indicated the pace distracts frontline employees from their primary responsibilities, as well as from maintaining connections between those responsibilities and the overall goals of the organization.

A director of employee communication and engagement at a U.S. health services company said:

*“There's a lot of change happening and a lot of uncertainty, and I think that can make it difficult for a workforce to really understand what it is we're trying to do here as an organization and where we are going. So, you start to see this climate of ‘I'm feeling left behind, I feel like I'm in the dark, I don't know what's going on around here.’”*

A vice president of internal communications at a multinational consumer goods company said:

*“I think we're in for an interesting wild ride for the next three to five years as so much changes around us and so much disruption continues to take place. For us, it's really important to keep our eyes and ears open and understand the trends we're seeing already happen now, knowing that the pace of change is accelerated, and it just keeps getting faster and faster.”*

Moving the workforce ahead in a manner that allows for the assimilation of new technology requires leadership commitment and direction demonstrating investment in development and new performance criteria.

### Internal Resources Are Lagging

Compounding issues of managing this technologically-driven reality is the fact that many internal communication tools and technologies are behind, especially by way of comparison to external tools and technologies. Communication executives largely indicated that internal communication technologies and tools are far behind where they should be to effectively manage change. A few organizations were in the process of introducing new technologies, but admittedly were “early in the journey” for internal communication. A senior director of communication at a research firm said:

*“The future of work needs to catch up because, especially on the internal side, we have antiquated systems with our intranet. [With] any internal communicator, their intranet is like a big eye roll sometimes.”*

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Acemoglu, D. & Restrepo P. (2018, Jan.). Artificial intelligence, automation, and work. National Bureau of Economic Research. Retrieved from

<https://millstein.law.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/content/docs/Greenwald%20-%20Acemoglu%20&%20Restrepo.%20AI-automation-work%202018.pdf>

The issues with this appear to be two-fold. First, communicators indicated a desire to upgrade tools and technologies, but this requires training and often skills-building for an aging Baby Boomer generation. Second, organizational technology resources have traditionally been invested in external, consumer-facing communication efforts, rather than internal efforts.

Communicators did indicate an organizational culture shift toward understanding the importance of technology as not only an external tool, but also to be used internally to communicate with employees. This will become increasingly important as the workforce becomes more global and mobile.

Identifying and retaining talented workers will require ongoing investment in communication technologies to connect them. Workers of the future will expect organizations to be technologically-savvy in their communication. They will expect a quality of experience that mirrors that of their user experiences on external-facing websites and social media.

The director of internal communication at a healthcare organization said, “This inequity has to be addressed so that we can offer our staff that seamless communications experience.”

### **The Contract Economy Will Continue to Grow, Altering Communications Functions**

Although the use of contractors is not new, research demonstrates that the evolution of communication technologies paired with falling transaction costs for forming temporary organizational teams means a contract economy or “gig economy” will continue to grow. A 2017 study by the Freelancers Union, “the fastest growing labor organization representing the independent workforce,” and Upwork, “the world’s largest freelancing website,” found that the majority of the U.S. workforce will be freelance by 2027.

New communication technologies make it easier to find and participate in e-lancing. CEO of Upwork and Co-Chair of the World Economic Forum’s Council on the Future of Gender, Education, and Work, Stephane Kariel said, “We are in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, a period of work driven by increasing automation, but we have a unique opportunity to guide the future of work and freelancers will play more of a key role than people realize.”



In this IPR report, communication executives similarly indicated the emergence of a contract economy is another technologically-driven workforce disruptor. Communicators are concerned about how contract employees may disrupt organizational culture, as well as how to effectively communicate and form relationships with a mobile workforce.

The chief communications officer for a travel and tourism organization said, “The gig economy is here. And spoken in other ways, what are the implications of people not having pensions, not having long-term relationships, maybe not having community in a work setting?”

More so, communicators indicated the communication profession may similarly become more contract-based and mobile.

The vice president of employee communication at a global shipping company said:

*“We're not experiencing this right now, but I can see this as a trend in the next couple of years, and that is gig workers or contract workers within communications departments. I can see it on the horizon with the things that our organization is asking us to think about and to look at. In a lot of countries that we operate in, we have a full suite of services, but we don't have a single hourly employee. We have some management people, but we don't have a single hourly employee. They're all service contractors.”*

The workforce of the future – the communication profession included – will be more independent and mobile than ever before. The implications for internal communication are great with regard to both effectively communicating with contract employees, as well as the implications for relationships, trust, loyalty, and talent acquisition/retention. Communicators will need to rethink traditional models of effective internal communication. However, it’s probable that technological advancements, while drivers of this workforce disruption, will also help facilitate connections in this regard.

# PART TWO:

Who Are You? Communicating  
To A New Workforce

When we talk about the future of employee communications, we think of concepts like identity, empowerment, engagement, culture and a sustainable workforce. Communicators addressed concerns about communicating with a changing workforce across generations that have differing expectations of companies. A changing workforce requires methods of personalization and relevance in communication efforts while at the same time, presents the additional challenge of maintaining a consistent organizational culture.

It begins with a thorough analysis of the current workforce. Analytical models can discern archetypes with the organization describing behaviors, interests, methods of information flow and use, etc.

### **The Tried and True Basic Principles of Effective Communication are Still Critical**

Communicators frequently noted how the technologies will change, but the basic principles of effective communication remain the same. The director of communication and public affairs at a national health services company said:

*“You need to keep people motivated, keep them inspired, and make it challenging, and, I mean, this has been since the beginning of time. But even with new platforms and new technology, it's still the basics. You have to interact with your team. You have to give them feedback. You want to listen to their ideas, and you have to make it fun and inspiring.”*

Similarly, the chief communications officer at a large insurance company said:

*“Almost ironically in the face of all this technology and automation and so forth, actually going back to basics and opening up communication with open, two-way, candid, face-to-face communications is often ideal. And if that's not an option because people are working remotely, being able to do that virtually through teleconferences and video conferences and conference calls and Zoom technologies, and anything that gets people to be more engaged and feeling like they're part of the organization versus feeling like they're not part of it.”*

Strategic communication may best be categorized as higher cognitive skills and emotional-social skills, which are anticipated to grow (as opposed to physical-manual labor, for instance). Recognizing this, communicators specified how hiring practices are evolving in two ways: more generalist roles and an increased emphasis on critical thinking and problem solving.

One of the byproducts of a digital world is that the lines between internal and external communication have disappeared. The result is a 24/7 seamless ecosystem of information exchange.

The director of communications at a worldwide pharmaceuticals company said:

*“Because of the influence that internal can have on the outside of the organization and what we say outside the organization can affect what's happening inside the organization, we're trying to recruit people that are more generalists than are specialized. You have to have a keen appreciation for both.”*

A move toward generalist roles runs parallel with basic communication skills as foundational to effectiveness.

Communicators emphasized the importance of hiring for strategic and critical thinking with an expectation of having strong core skills and abilities, such as writing.

According to the director of public affairs at a nationwide insurance company:

*“One of our focuses is more on strategic thinking, critical thinking versus being able to string some sentences together. We need that critical thinking to think through some of the communications challenges that we have as an organization and how we can tackle them. We need to make sure our people can think through and help solve business challenges from a communications standpoint.”*

Executive communicators indicated more behavioral-based hiring practices. When candidates' skills and experiences are equal, there is an eye toward cultural fit with the company. For instance, an internal communication executive explained how interview questions should focus less on “tell me about your past experience” and more on assessing attitude, leadership potential and problem-solving skills.

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## The Growing Generational Divide in the Workforce Offers Challenges and Opportunities

Often referred to as the “silver tsunami,” 78 million Baby Boomers represent the largest group of workers in their 50s and 60s, signaling a striking demographic shift for the future of work. The Society of Human Resources Management conducted a survey of 2,500 human resources managers that identified common advantages of older workers: more work experience, knowledge and skills; greater maturity and professionalism; stronger work ethic; greater reliability and loyalty; and less turnover compared to younger workers.

Communication executives in this IPR report recognized these advantages of older workers, despite technological advances that may require “upskilling” or “reskilling.” Some organizations in this report offered multigenerational training programs for both leadership and workers.

Yet, communicators agreed that the generational divide offers internal communication challenges – both for how the generations consume media and the organizational culture. For instance, generational differences led one interviewed organization to retain the print publication of the company’s magazine, despite the implementation of a new company-specific app. The VP of internal communications for a multinational consumer goods company said her department conducted an employee survey of media preference and determined there was about a 50-50 split in preference between print and digital. She said, “One solution is not going to work for all.”

More than media preferences, communicators expressed how evolving demographics would lead to shifts in expectations, and therefore, organizational communication and culture. Communicators expressed an emphasis on the importance of diversity and inclusion across demographic groups, with no “easy button” answer.

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Upskilling and reskilling refer to training processes and continual learning or professional development opportunities for employees. Upskilling is generally understood as learning new skills that enhance an employee’s potential for success within their existing occupation, whereas, reskilling is generally understood as learning new skills that allow for employee success in a new occupational role.

The director of corporate communication at an energy organization where 50% of employees would be eligible for retirement in the next five years said:

*“Generational change will bring with it new expectations from employees, and we will respond to that. But really, we try to look at it more holistically, as a push for inclusiveness as a core cultural element here. Of course, we need to make everyone feel welcome, and we work better when we have diverse experiences and diverse thinking in our projects. The focus of our approach to a changing workforce is to have everyone thinking about it from the standpoint of diversity and inclusion.”*

Similarly, the vice president of corporate communications at a research firm said:

*“I think there are certain generations that have expectations that are different of their employers and the people they work for, that maybe are in alignment with some of their personal beliefs. And it is a challenge for corporate communicators to think about how the corporation communicates at large, as an entity, but still feels diverse, and inclusive, and welcoming of its employees ... to find that balance of what the entity is actually going to say about perhaps, a societal issue.”*

The chief human resources officer at a health services company with low turnover explained a lifecycle approach to the organization’s workforce. The organization partners with universities for pre-employment opportunities, but also contracts retired workers to consult on projects where their expertise is valued. The organization emphasizes career development and provides opportunities accordingly, without an expectation that the employee will remain with them for the entirety of their career. They said:

*“The hope is that by keeping current with your former alumni that shared your values, that shared your thinking, that they will continue to be great promoters of you. We are early in our journey. But it’s something, I think, is going to be an untapped area for our organization let alone, other organizations that might aspire for that.”*

Internal communicators should be prepared to address a generational divide where one in four workers will be over the age of 55 by 2020. This means identifying ways to retain organizational knowledge and competencies, while preparing for a generation of younger workers who have different expectations for organizational communication and culture. Listening to workers, planning for the lifecycle, and striking a multigenerational balance will be key.

## Developing a Consistent Organizational Culture and Personalizing Experiences Are Key

Communicators overwhelmingly noted that the current landscape creates more opportunities for internal communication with a changing workforce, but also more hurdles. With a diverse workforce and more communication channels than ever before, communicators emphasized the importance of developing a consistent organizational culture, as well as adding “personalization.” The vice president of internal communications from a multinational consumer goods company said it is important to “meet workers where they are” and have the “right information at the right time and place.”

Consistency and personalization present the challenge of being seemingly at odds with one another. The executive said:

*“A lot of employee communications is focused on growing, building, and enhancing the culture of an organization, whatever that culture may be. It is becoming more difficult to have that consistent culture that you're growing and building, fostering because more and more people are having a different experience, a different employee experience, if you will, because of where they're working. I think we as employee communications experts have to continue to evaluate what is culture and what are the most important aspects we need to try and keep employees connected with to achieve the outcomes we need for our organization.”*

Fostering a shared organizational culture is challenging in and of itself, while organizations must simultaneously meet diverse employee communication preferences. The chief communications officer at a large insurance company said:

*“It's almost like building a model that meets people where they are and is able to have the right information at the right time at the right place based on how people want to engage with it ... Do they want to have a face-to-face interaction? Yes. Provide that. Do they want to have just an online experience? Okay. You can do that too. Can you do it in a kind of both personal and personalized way and then give people the option to engage on their own? Yes. So, I think a lot of the challenge now is can you do enough of that right and do it well so that you can differentiate yourself against your competitors, let alone as an organization that's trying to be an employer of choice in the markets in which we compete?”*

Communicators indicated that preparing to address this challenge involves strong leadership and hiring practices that emphasize flexibility and agility. The chief human resources officer at a health services company explained a new initiative:

*“We're implementing something that's called agile and flexible staffing. And we've put some pilots on it where we have identified some people that have a real interest in intellectual curiosity that love this, kind of, more project work or just are on that, 'I'm constantly wanting to learn' view. And there's a subset of people that are like that. And we are putting them in this pool, which we're calling the agile staffing pool. And then we're identifying high priority projects that are multi-disciplinarian.”*

In other words, the future of communicating to a diverse workforce may be the integration of flexibility and agility as core to the organizational culture (e.g., in the case of agile staffing pools). Effectively communicating to the future workforce means cutting through the clutter, meeting employees where they are, and emphasizing the organization's business strategy, external industry context and trends, core mission, vision, and values – all while remaining open to change management opportunities that emphasize the achievement of organizational goals. A major foreseeable hurdle for companies with high levels of bureaucracy will result in less independence and ability for internal communicators to pivot as needed to effectively operate in this complex landscape. Companies would do well for preparing for the future by beginning now to break down more rigid organizational structures that will prevent the flexibility and agility necessary to succeed in communicating to a changing workforce. The director of communications at a worldwide pharmaceuticals company said:

*“An employee culture is not something that's driven from the top down. An employee culture is a shared currency between you and I and how we like to do business ... At the end of the day, it's the behaviors and actions of your people that drive the culture, and if you're a global business or a global organization, being able to replicate that at every site can become extremely challenging. So that's where I think it's creating a unified culture and an engaged workforce that organizations are going to be challenged.”*



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# PART THREE:

Planning For The Future Of Work

We are living through a fundamental transformation in the way automation and machines are assisting with and even replacing human tasks and jobs and changing the skills that organizations are looking for in their people. Research finds high levels of anxiety toward technological innovations. According to a 2017 study by the Pew Research Center, not only were Americans twice as likely to express worry (72%) than enthusiasm (33%) about the future of automation and machines, but 85% of Americans are in favor of public policies that limit machines to performing primarily those tasks that are dangerous or unhealthy to humans.

In this report, communication executives addressed how they are planning for the future, mainly by investing in their employees through educational partnerships and career development opportunities that include upskilling and reskilling. Despite widespread anxiety about the transformation of traditional human tasks to automation and machine tasks, one idea particularly stood out among communicators: the importance of the human element. In planning for the future of work, communicators acknowledged that changes are inevitable; however, the prevailing idea was the importance of investing in people, in human capital. It was not the replacement and displacement of workers by automation and machines.

### **Investing in People and Communicating the Future Must Begin Now**

Communicators can increase awareness and reduce anxiety among workers by communicating about changes and opportunities to come. The communications manager at a financial services firm said:

*“We need to make sure folks are trained up and know what's happening in all of those areas. And I think with all of the advances and the different technology options that we have, I think we also need to make sure that we're keeping our employees in the loop on the fact that they are an integral part of our success and they're not being replaced by robots....And how can we help them [employees] learn, maybe not a completely different job, but how to do their job in a different way that's more efficient? Because if you're making use of this complementary technology, I think there is some fear from people that, 'I'm not going have a job anymore.'”*

Nearly all communicators in this report identified opportunities offered by their organization such as educational partnerships, upskilling, or reskilling programs.

The vice president of internal communication at a large insurance company said:

*“We've had several key partnerships with universities in several parts of the country in the U.S. And while I think we have traditionally looked at those partnerships as being able to cultivate talent that we'd like to bring into our organization, that provides us an opportunity to maybe use those partnerships to help onboard workforces in the future.”*

At some universities, curriculum was augmented in partnership with the organizations to best serve the needs of those organizations' future employee needs. Other organizations partnered with scholars to develop internal curriculum and training. There was an emphasis on multidisciplinary and project-based opportunities for career development and training that reflects predictions about the desires of employees in the future.

Communication executives emphasized their role as being transparent internal communicators about the future. However, communicators also emphasized the personal responsibility of employees for taking advantage of these opportunities. The vice president of corporate communications at a research firm said:

*“All of us have to take a personal responsibility to invest in our own careers, in our own viability, in our own value. That's something everybody really should be doing, thinking about their own development and trying to invest. I would say our organization is very supportive and has some pretty robust initiatives around the growth and development of our employees to encourage that.”*

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Smith, A. & Anderson, M. (2017, Oct. 4). Automation in everyday life. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <https://www.pewinternet.org/2017/10/04/automation-in-everyday-life/>



A communication executive from the healthcare industry explained:

*“I think treating people like adults and saying, ‘Hey. Here's what's going on and here are the options. And yes, it looks like that may impact some positions, but here's maybe some things that may enable you to either up-skill and/or redeploy and/or at least be employable, even though it may not be with this organization, it might be with another one....Historically what's happened is that organizations don't do enough of that, and then when you do have the conversation, you haven't really fertilized that relationship for a period of time and now, it becomes an even more difficult conversation. And that's where people start losing trust and faith, and ‘you're not telling me the truth, or why didn't you tell me this before, if I would've known earlier, then I could've made appropriate plans and so forth.’ If you create an open, two-way, more engaging environment that's really focused on people and enabling people, I think there's a greater appreciation for when something maybe has to be done that isn't quite employee-focused, where people at least understand it better and appreciate it better versus it becoming some kind of an existential crisis.”*

Internal communicators are drivers in ensuring employees are not only aware of and understand upcoming technological advances and changes taking place in their organizations, but also incorporate into their own development realities. Transparent communication paired with opportunities for development will allow current employees to appropriately prepare themselves for the future. They will also engender alignment around how employee roles in the organization ladder up to larger business objectives. Cultivating ongoing opportunities to communicate with employees about the future will be key to successfully reducing anxiety and retaining talent.

### **The Most Important Element is the Human Element**

People recognize that it's all different, and that business and roles will need to adapt, too. Senior internal communicators in this report referred to the “human element” in planning for the future of work. The human element refers first, to a genuine investment in employees through educational and professional development opportunities. Also, the human element refers to the inability to effectively perform many tasks – even as they are increasingly performed by machines and robots – without a human touch. Machines and robots require humans to operate them, but also, executive communicators emphasized that many workforce positions are effective because of a human interpersonal-relationship quality, such as empathy in customer service.

Perhaps, the way forward is in the evolution of critical thinking and problem solving for humans alongside this technological revolution.

Senior internal communication leaders described this as a process of integration, not replacement.

The vice president of internal communication at a large insurance company said:

*“The question we continue to wrestle with around [technological advancement] is the human element. We will still need to be able to express empathy and help people through very personal things. That impacts the workforce because now it's a matter of combining some of those so-called soft skills or customer service skills with technology. I don't know that there is a replacement for that.”*

Another communication executive at a multinational chemical company noted:

*“The empathy and care and service that employees bring is going to be irreplaceable from technology going forward. There may be tools to help them be quicker to serve more members but the human element of that is going to be consistent.”*

Senior leaders also described how work-life balance will shift for many employees in an environment of constant communication. For many industries, the lines between where work ends and an employee's personal life begins are increasingly blurred. One example of this is the increase of employees joining digital communities of shared identity and values (“employee resource groups”) that operate within the boundaries of their workspace (e.g., LGBTQ groups, Hispanic and Latino groups). Aligning and providing personal purpose and identity-driven opportunities for employees at work as these environments continue to blend is prevalent in future planning.

As the vice president of internal communications from a multinational consumer goods company explained:

*“As your manager, I can never promise you a job here or anyplace else. You can't make that promise because you don't have enough control over that, but what I can control is that while you're here, you're going to learn, develop, grow, get a chance to try new things, succeed, fail, and have a hell of a good time, and you're going to really enjoy the experience. That I can promise you because that I can help control.”*

# Neural Network Modelling of Interviewees' Word Usage

1 2

Applying Fundamentals to  
Multi-Channel/Multi-  
Generational Needs

**\*281**

1 3

Meeting the Needs of a  
Digitally-Adept Workforce

**\*821**

1 2

Changes Caused by  
Digital Channels

**\*469**

2

Purpose-led Mission,  
Vision and Culture

**\*643**

1 3

Hiring & Building  
Communications Teams

**\*251**

2

Expectations of High-Touch  
Communications and  
Management Guidance

**\*288**



## Macro Themes Appearing in Analysis

- 1 Forces Shaping the Future of Work
- 2 Communicating to a Unique Workforce
- 3 Planning for the Future of Work

\*how many paragraphs this theme appeared in

Analysis Conducted By W2O Group



### Analysis Methodology:

The W2O Group employed a machine learning approach to dissect interviewees' responses. Specifically, neural network modelling of word usage in addition to unsupervised theme clustering and hand labelling was used to quantitatively surface patterns in language and context.

The size of the outer-most lighter bubbles represents the frequency with which this theme was resident in interview transcripts. Each of the smaller, darker sub bubbles represent related, sub themes and their size is related to the proportion of the interview transcripts mentioning these topical themes.

# CONCLUSION:

## THE FUTURE OF WORK WILL BE SHAPED BY SPEED, AGILITY, AND CONNECTEDNESS

Internal communicators are preparing for the future of work; however, the specifics for how to do so remain challenging with a diverse and distributed workforce. While communicators feel internal communications technologies are lacking (but, slowly getting better), organizations are in the meantime largely identifying areas of employee interest to retain talent, such as educational and career development opportunities – most with programs already in-place.

A major challenge identified by communication executives is an emphasis on maintaining unified organizational culture, vision, mission and values while simultaneously delivering personalized employee experiences across the workforce with ranging needs and expectations. Technology both helps and hinders this. In preparing for the future of work, flexibility and agility will be key. The internal communication function is more critical to the achievement of organizational goals than ever before, and there is widespread recognition of this among C-Suite executives.

Despite technological advancements, communication executives stressed that the core foundational communications remain important, and that includes a focus on the human, personal element of internal communication. The senior leaders emphasized the importance of communicating transparently about the future and ongoing change as essential in reducing anxiety and increasing understanding among employees about where they fit in what's next for the organization. Additionally, they noted the growing importance of providing platforms for employees to organize around diversity, inclusion and personal purpose for effectively inspiring loyalty and trust in a changing and multigenerational workforce.

In short, it seems that internal communication as part of this technological revolution may be more human than robot, more about people than machines, and more about evolving as a society, rather than creating inequities.

## KEY INSIGHTS

In digesting this report, there are four main insights to guide your efforts:

- **Organizational (internal) communications can drive the organization to the future** – The workforce needs to imagine the future in a constructive manner and communications can inspire such thinking.
- **The Future of Work begins with Leadership and Communicators** – Investment, performance, metrics, recognition are all levers that must be employed before the workforce engages.
- **Characteristics inherent in a new work model include Agility, Assimilation, Development, Connectedness** – Whatever the ultimate work protocol of the future becomes there will be basic elements shaping behavior. From a communications standpoint, programming must be aligned and supportive.
- **The Future of Work is about Creation** – Allowing more employees to ideate, develop, share, exchange, and collaborate is what the future will be all about. Expanding “voice” across the enterprise to better innovate and learn resulting a successful business.

# METHODOLOGY

The Institute for Public Relations (IPR) conducted in-depth telephone interviews with 25 internal communications leaders at various-sized enterprises in 2018 and 2019. The intent of this research was to uncover how communicators are anticipating changes in the workforce—the future of work.

Research participants were drawn from a diverse set of both consumer and business-to-business industries, including automotive, financial services, healthcare, insurance, pharmaceuticals, technology and transportation.

All interview participants were assured confidentiality in order to elicit the most candid responses. Secondary sources also informed our insights and analysis; they are cited directly when relevant.

Because of the small sample size, this study cannot be generalized to the mass population of public relations and communications professionals.



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