# Break free
# Be the change

**ab** 2022/23

Communications Leaders Survey

# Foreword

> **The world is run by the people who show up.**

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This quote is attributed to a number of authors. In my view, it's true of the impact those who lead in the communication professions have on the work we do, and on the way we are seen by the business leaders we work for.

Indeed, the main purpose of the #WeLeadComms Communication Leaders Survey is to give a voice to those who show up, who take initiative, and who have something to say about the world(s) in which all communication professionals operate.

The secondary purpose is to ask questions that help to share and probe the diversity of views, opinions and visions that communication leaders hold, and identify not only the obvious trends but the ones simmering below the surface.

The 156 responses to the Communication Leaders Survey cover a broad diversity of the communication professions – representing 30 countries, a wide swath of industries and all levels of organisational and freelance experience.

At the same time, its skew towards internal communication, with half of the participants being internal communication-focused and ⌐⌐

more than 20% in mixed internal-external roles, reflects the increasing importance of IC as the 'engine room' for employee and external communication alike.

For me, the overarching trend is the extent to which communication leaders can grow as leaders – to help define agendas and shape trends as opposed to being defined and shaped by them.  Nowhere is this more apparent than in our attitude towards the climate battle – a battle that will be won or lost by the extent to which people are aware, awake and empowered to take constructive action – yet one that seems removed from our immediate priorities.

There are some inspiring and ambitious words shared by our colleagues who participated and there's a need for us to recognise that we ourselves actually have much of the power we require to generate the perceptions of value and influence that we desire.

At the core of that power is the recognition that we're not alone and that we bring unique capabilities to catalyse change in our enterprises and communities.

Together, we can be the ones we've been waiting for and the change we seek.

Thank you for participating, for what you've done so far, and for what you are about to do.

And thank you to AB and Sparrow Connected for your support in giving communication leaders our own collective voice.

**Mike Klein**
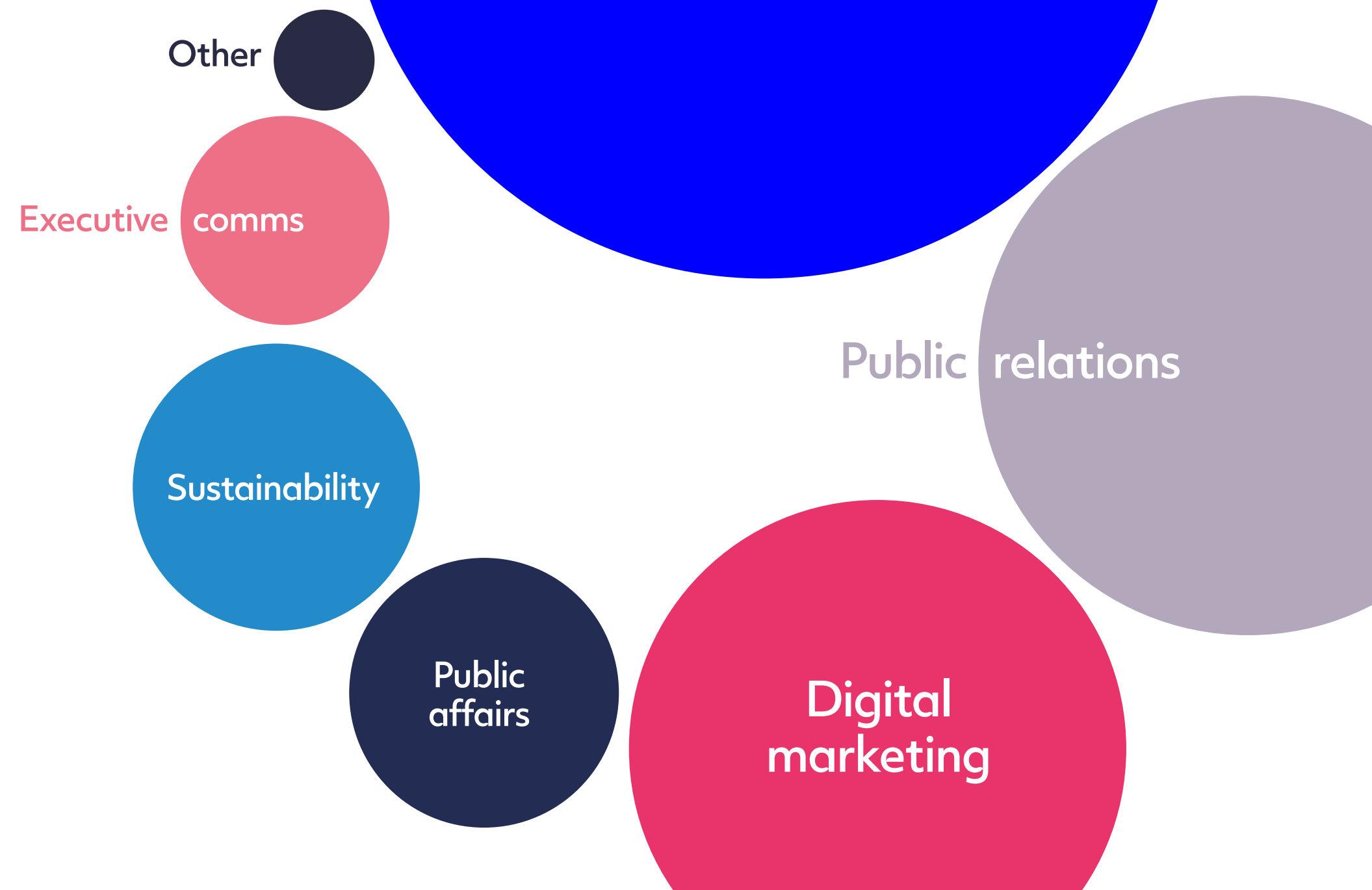**Founder, #WeLeadComms**

# Contents

# About the survey

The Communication Leaders Survey is designed to explore the opportunities and challenges facing communication professionals around the world.

This open-access online survey was conducted between September and October 2022. It was sponsored by #WeLeadComms, Sparrow Connected and AB, and supported by the IABC.

One-hundred and fifty six communication professionals responded to largely open-ended questions. This resulted in more than 3,000 data points.

Who responded?

Other

Executive comms

Sustainability

Internal communications

Public relations

Public affairs

Digital marketing

# Key categories and definitions

The benefit of open-ended questions is better-quality insight. The participants in our survey were not restricted to closed responses but were free to express themselves fully.

To analyse their feedback, we categorised all 3,000 comments into 17 categories:

- **Alignment:** extent to which messages and actions are consistent.

- **Capabilities:** Improving skills – for selves or other stakeholders

- **Certification:** recognised credential(s) for skills and competencies

- **Climate and sustainability:** targeting changes or improvements in environmental behaviours

- **Collaboration:** improving the ability of individuals and groups to work together

- **Crisis comms:** communication as a lever of resilience in turbulent situations

- **DEI:** promoting diversity, equity and inclusion

- **Integrated and external communication:** activities that improve external perceptions

- **Influence and value:** perception of comms as important and a source of differentiation

- **Measurement and data:** ability to collect data to influence decision-making

- **Priorities, content, noise:** organisation-specific intent, messaging and calibration

- **Social impact:** actions or messaging targeting social or societal issues

- **Stakeholder engagement:** the ability to connect with and mobilise key actors

- **Technology:** automation of channels, platforms and networks

- **Trust and reputation:** perceived honesty, credibility and transparency

- **Workforce and workplace:** internal dynamics

# Executive summary – the changing world of work

- Four categories dominate the responses: 'Technology', 'Influence and value', 'Workforce and workplace' and 'Priorities, content, noise'.

- The three biggest opportunities facing communication professionals? 'Technology' (19%), 'Influence and value' (18%), 'Workforce and workplace' (16%).

- The biggest personal opportunity for comms leaders to make a difference? A quarter of respondents said 'Workforce and workplace'. The next highest is 'Influence and value', with 16%.

- Half of all comms leaders see 'Workforce and workplace' and 'Priorities, content, noise' as the hottest topics of conversation, with 27% and 23% of responses. The next highest is 'Integrated internal and external comms', with just 8%.

- Given a magic wand, leaders would immediately cut the noise (25%) or be more influential and valued internally (21%).

- 'Certification' and 'Alignment' account for few responses throughout.

- 'Social impact', 'DEI' and 'Climate and sustainability' are seen as important, but not considered communication opportunities.

# Opportunities abound

**What do comms leaders see as the biggest opportunities facing the comms world today?**
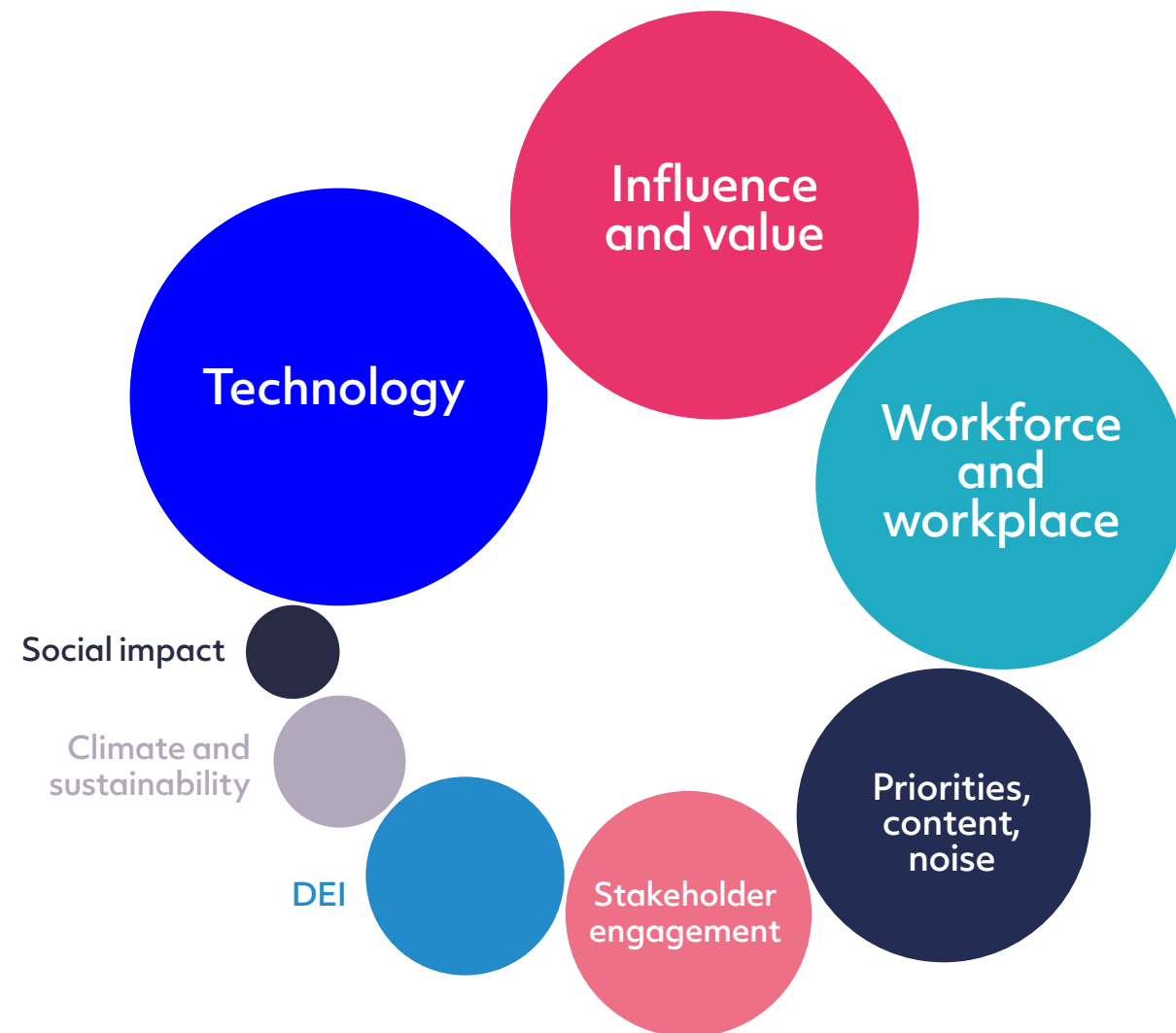


- 'Technology', including the automation of channels, platforms and networks to drive or target communication activity, is seen as the biggest opportunity for comms leaders (19%). This mirrors the multi-sector pursuit of digital transformation and the desire to give clients, customers and colleagues the seamless and quality digital experience they experience in their personal lives.

- Second is 'Influence and value' (18%). How can comms be seen as important, as a source of leverage and differentiation, and as integral to business-wide success?

- 'Workforce and workplace', including communicating to a hybrid workforce and fostering a sense of belonging, is next, with16% of responses.

- Fourth is 'Priorities, content, noise' (10%), with responses referencing 'too much content' and 'fighting disinformation'.

- Last of the top five is 'Stakeholder engagement' (7%) – mobilising and influencing key actors .

- 'DEI' and 'Climate and sustainability' – important topics that affect everyone at work and at home – score low, with just 2% and 4% respectively.

- 'Social impact' (actions or messaging targeting social or societal issues) is also low, with just 1% of responses. Odd, perhaps, at a time when consumers want their favourite brands to speak up and take a stand.

# Where to make a difference

**Where are the biggest opportunities for communication leaders to make a difference in their organisations and communities over the next 12 months?**

- The biggest opportunity is 'Workforce and workplace' (25%) – specifically, how to influence internal dynamics and organisational footprint. Responses emphasise hybrid and remote work, both in fostering a sense of community and upskilling leaders to manage the new world of work.

- 'Influence and value' comes second (16%). Leaders want to position comms as integral to business success, to move into the boardroom and influence decision-making. A common theme is the importance of persuading leaders of the value of comms ("Drive home importance of comms among C-suite",

"Help leaders understand need to communicate strategically vs. a tactics-first mindset").

- 'Priorities, content, noise' comes next (13%). Opportunities to be planful, intentional, to set the tone, for 'ruthless consistency' and less is more.

- A similar number of respondents listed the big opportunity for 'Technology' (7%) to drive comms activity and 'Measurement and data' (6%) to better inform that activity.

- Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) dominates responses around climate and sustainability (3%).

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# The hottest topics

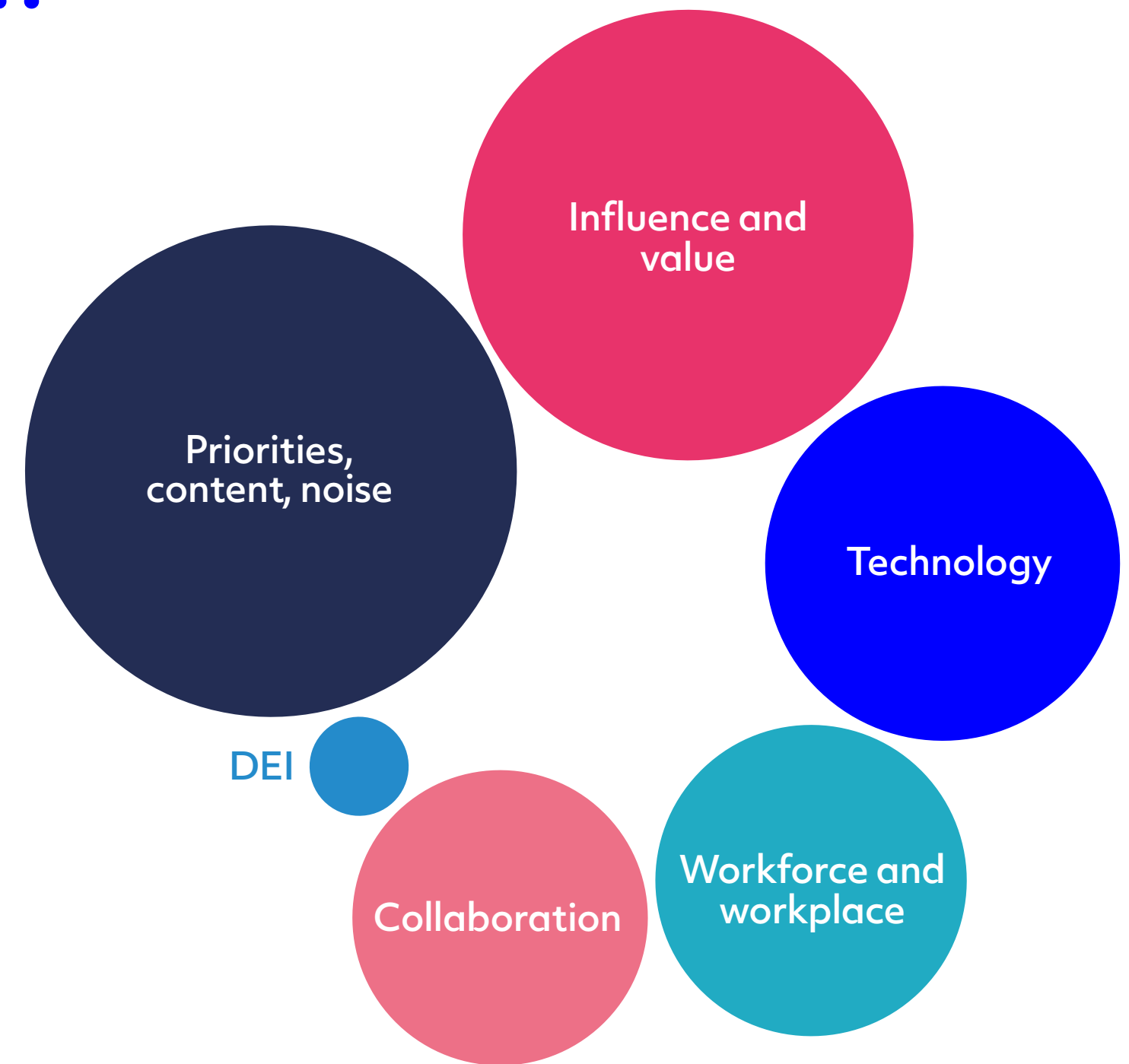### What are the biggest topics comms leaders are focusing on?



- Two categories dominate: 'Workforce and workplace' (27%) and 'Priorities, content, noise' (23%).

  » Workforce responses cover the old with the new: benefits, burnout and engagement, but also hybrid working, winning 'the war for talent' and multi-generational workplaces.

  » Communications leaders' role in defining strategy dominates responses under 'Priorities, content, noise'.

- 'Integrated external and internal communication' (particularly brand positioning and turning employees into advocates) and 'Climate and sustainability' are next, both with 8%. There is a focus on ESG, as well as defining and aligning on environmental sustainability.

- Some responses (5%) refer to 'Social impact'. Responses demonstrate a mix of opinions and priorities, with references to philanthropy, abortion rights, corporate social responsibility and 'wokeness'.

- Only eight responses can be categorised as 'Crisis comms'. This is particularly interesting given the uncertain world we live in – extreme weather events, the war in Ukraine, the cost of living crisis and public sector strikes, to name a few causing widespread concern.

# 'With a magic wand we would…'

## Which of their day-to-day challenges would comms leaders make go away if they could?

- A quarter of all leaders would cut the noise, find more time, tackle 'email overload' and focus on priorities.

- The many responses showing leaders struggling from a lack of strategic focus and time is perhaps as a result of the second issue they would remove in a heartbeat – the challenge of boosting the perception of comms as important. Indeed, 25% of responses are categorised as 'Influence and value'.

- A further 13% are categorised as 'Technology'. Leaders would leverage new tech and fix their current systems and channel strategy.

- Ten per cent would tackle challenges relating to the 'Workforce and workplace' (employee attrition, cynicism, demotivated team and the blurring of the 9–5 workday) and 'Collaboration', from tackling silos to eliminating red tape and office politics.

- Just five responses are categorised as 'DEI', with responders wanting to eliminate a 'lack of understanding of diversity' and 'lack of representation in HR and comms'.

- No responses are categorised under 'Alignment' or 'Certification'.

Influence and value

Priorities, content, noise

Technology

DEI

Collaboration

Workforce and workplace

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# Leaders are firefighting, time-poor and frustrated...

Fight disinformation. Use communication responsibly.

Counter pandemic-related exhaustion with reminder of purpose.

Not enough time!

Focus. Less is more.

Clients that don't understand it takes people and time to create quality work.

The anxiety so many are feeling due to uncertainty, changing times, etc.

Slow down time or create more time.

While there are times for societal concerns, not every moment is one for activism.

# Some are focused on the next big challenge...

Helping organisations engage stakeholders in transition to net zero.

Communicate climate change solutions.

Connecting your mission to relevant social issues.

Motivate behaviour change (to help planet, boost diversity, etc).

# Many sense an opportunity for progress...

Embedding change in an organisation – creating a culture of innovation.

We are empathetic and have the capability to create meaningful connection.

Move to receiver-centric comms model.

Pandemic has shown value of comms – time to capitalise on having seat at table.

Understand technology and the new realities it creates to use it effectively and ethically in the profession.

Take time to really listen to employees.

Build a proactive communication plan that is flexible and can react to changes and opportunities.

Help with hybrid office comms policies and practices.

# What do the responses tell us?

**Comms leaders feel their discipline is undervalued. They want to be respected at C-suite level and they want stakeholders and senior leaders to be advocates.**

Leaders have many priorities (tech enablement, strategic messaging, engaging a hybrid workforce) but there's too much noise, too many 'ad-hoc' jobs and too little time to focus on these priorities.

Some think they are doing too much. They need time to focus, but given this noise, it's not clear when they will finally get the time.

The post-pandemic world of work isn't working  and we've got a long way to go to understand how we can boost (or simply sustain) employee engagement and enhance flexibility in this hybrid world. For many, it is here to stay.

Confusion over channels is  a challenge many leaders need to overcome. Meanwhile, legacy IT systems are a barrier to the opportunities big data and new technology can offer.

Hot topics and opportunities don't directly align, but should they? Climate, DEI and social impact are not high on people's priority list, yet these are huge opportunities to spark positive organisational and wider societal change.

# Where do we go from here?

**The pandemic brought many challenges. Many now lie in its wake.**

While comms leaders want more time to focus, this is made difficult by a state of permanent crisis, the challenges posed by the Great Resignation and the impact of hybrid working.

With the start of a new year, comms leaders now have an opportunity to reset. They have demonstrated the significant role they play in steadying the ship during a crisis and that vitality and vision can now be transformed into an influential, strategy-defining role in the boardroom.

Leaders have an opportunity to lead, to demonstrate their deep connection with their audience (internal or external) and lead the conversation through insight. And they must learn to value the voice they have.

Customers, consumers, colleagues – they all want their brands to lead with a social conscience. Comms can bridge that gap between boardroom and shop floor, top floor and bottom.

Leaders told us they weren't valued – but at the same time they have demonstrated why they must be. One crisis has gone, but another far greater must now be tackled: climate change. Comms can "motivate behaviour change to save the planet", "communicate climate solutions" and "pull together to improve the odds of successfully combating climate change".

Break free. Take the lead. Be the change you want to see.

# How to break free, one step at a time

- **Establish and communicate the role and value of your team or function.** Consider crafting a charter or mission statement for your team. This should explain why you exist – how you add value to your organisation and the community it serves.

- **Take a moment to separate the urgent from the important.** With so many demands on our time, prioritisation is essential. What activity will have the most significant impact on your organisation and society as a whole? Your inbox may be calling you. But, remember, that is someone else's to do list.

- **A goal without a plan is just a wish.** As we head towards the start of another year, it's time to step back and reflect. What value did you deliver in 2022? How will you maintain or exceed that value over the next 12 months? You need a clear, realistic action plan that begins with measurable objectives. ⌐

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Your bespoke internal comms
planning workshop

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- **Be data and insight-driven.**
  Covid-19 ripped up the comms rule book. The new world of work already looks very different from the old. Technology and changing customer preferences and values disrupt even the most established markets. Now is the time to listen. Pose intelligent questions of your internal and external audiences. Make them feel known, heard and understood. Make their concerns yours.

- **Advances in behaviour science and neuroscience will help us in our quest, particularly when marshalling forces to address climate change.** More than a decade ago, Daniel Kahneman explained how humans think. We pay close attention to immediate threats but underestimate the more complex and long-term because they require data and reasoning to comprehend. As comms professionals, we can make the most public issue feel personal. Knowing more about how the brain is wired will help hone our ability to tell emotive, compelling stories. It will help us to get people to act – now.
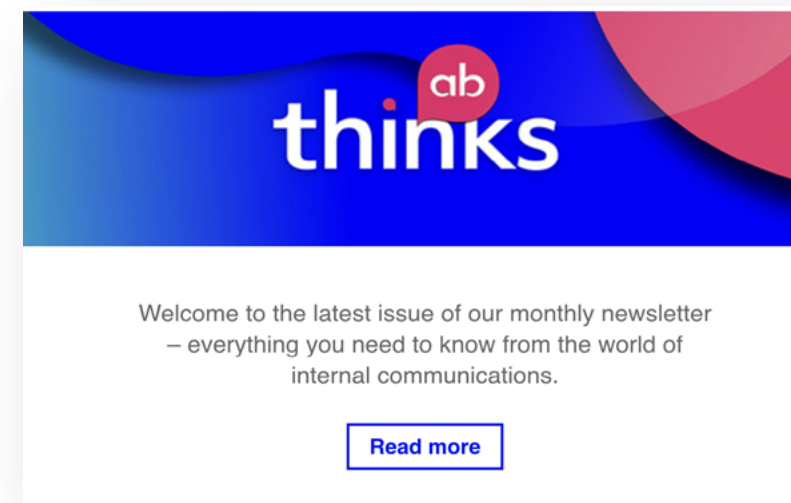
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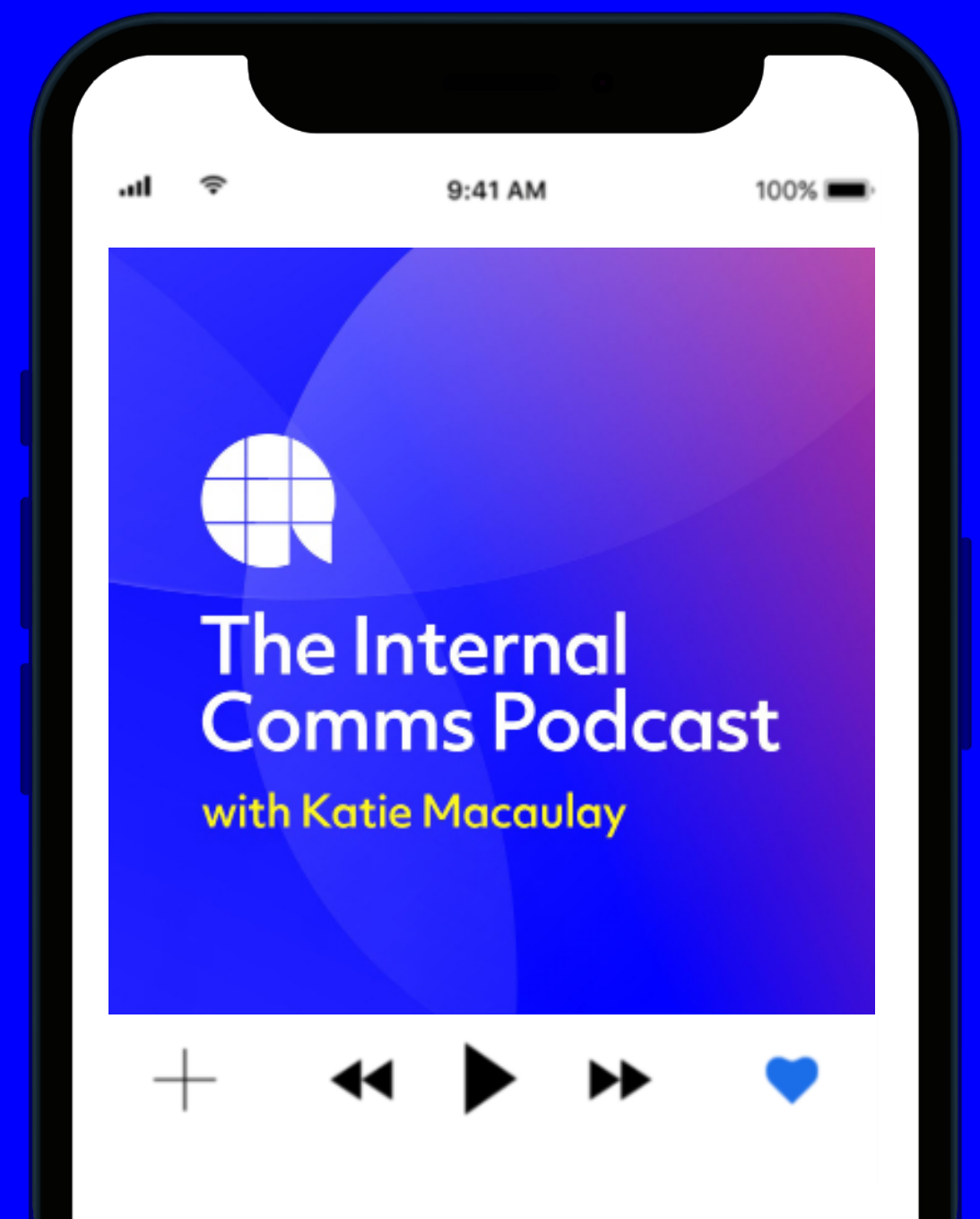
# Just before you go...

AB supports organisations across the globe with their internal communications. If you would like to find out more about our services, or simply discuss the latest trends, email Abi Terry, our Client Services Director, at

abi.terry@abcomm.co.uk

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