



THE COMMUNICATIONS
NETWORK

The Communications Network **Research Report**

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Spring 2017



About the Survey & Report

Design

Before compiling a list of survey questions, CRC interviewed several communications experts to get their views on what it takes to be successful in the communications field today. Working together, we used themes from these interviews to develop a first draft of the survey. After several conversations with Network staff and a few revisions, CRC developed and implemented the final survey in the fall of 2016.

Distribution

After the survey was finalized, it was uploaded to [Survey Monkey](#)¹, an online survey tool. The survey link was then shared with Network members; the survey was kept open for 10 weeks to give members enough time to respond and share their thoughts and ideas.

Thoughts & Takeaways

The results of the survey were first shared with experts in the communications field. We've included some of their thoughts on the findings throughout this report.

Survey Findings

293 members completed the survey

Many of the respondents were in upper-level management positions at their organizations as shown in Table 1. Additionally, most of the respondents work in foundations, nonprofits, and consulting firms as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 1: What is your current job role?

Job Role	Number	Percent
Communications Director	117	39.9%
Vice President	28	9.6%
Executive Director	27	9.2%
Director	23	7.8%
Communications Manager	17	5.8%
Communications Officer	15	5.1%
Communications Consultant	9	3.1%
Communications Coordinator	6	2.0%
Principal	5	1.7%
Program Officer	4	1.4%
Other ¹	42	14.3%

¹A complete list is available in [Appendix A](#).

Table 2: Which one of the following groups do you represent primarily?

Group	Number	Percent
Foundation	118	40.3%
Nonprofit	92	31.4%
Consulting Firm	65	22.2%
Academia	2	0.7%
Communications Firm	2	0.7%
Government Agency	2	0.7%
Media and Communications	2	0.7%
No Response	2	0.7%
County-Level Government Commission	1	0.3%
Global Network of Nonprofits and Individual	1	0.3%
Government Contractor	1	0.3%
Government Funder	1	0.3%
Publishing Company	1	0.3%
Regional Association of Grantmakers	1	0.3%
Research Institution	1	0.3%
Research Network	1	0.3%
Total	293	100%

Many respondents have more than a decade of communications experience.

As shown in Figure 1, over half of respondents work in organizations that have been engaged in communications work for more than a decade. In addition, close to 70 percent of respondents have been engaged in communications work in their personal careers for more than 10 years as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 1: How long has your organization been engaged in communications work?

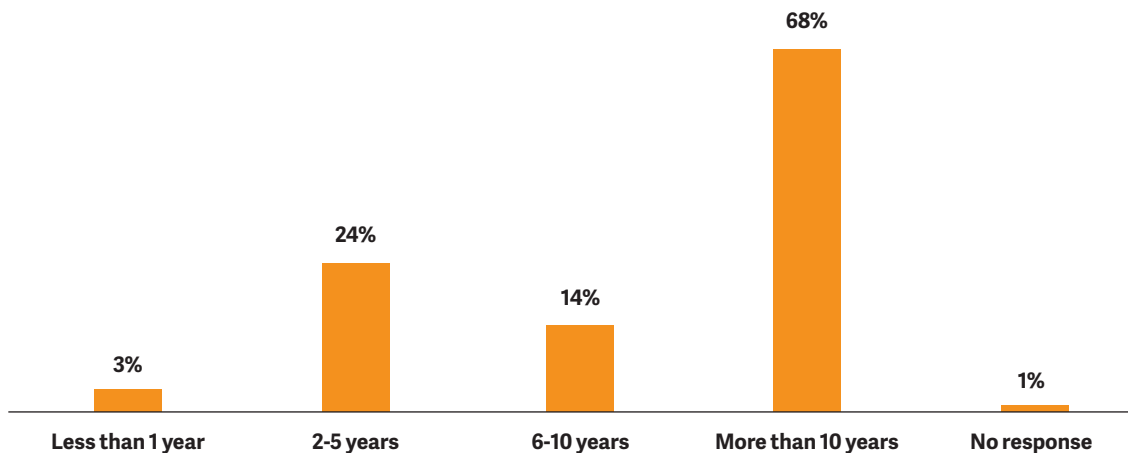
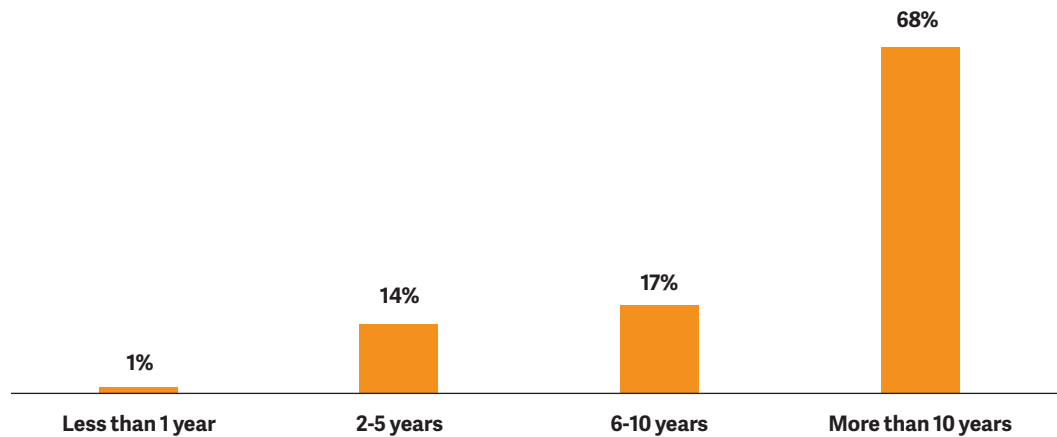


Figure 2: How long have you been engaged in communications work?



Core Competencies

Strategic Thinking

Strategic thinking refers to a person's ability to think beyond his or her organization and seek change at a systems level. Strategic thinkers have knowledge about the systems they are trying to influence and their audience. They have clear goals in mind and ways in which to achieve them. They also have the ability to raise awareness, change attitudes, and motivate people to take action.

Most respondents agreed with the definition of strategic thinking above, but they also thought effective strategic thinkers need the following:

i. Knowledge about their institutional/organizational goals

Strategic thinkers should know what their organization is trying to achieve, both short and long term, who can make it happen, and what they need to do to get there.

ii. Knowledge about their target audience

Strategic thinkers should understand the psychology of how their audience receives information so they can effectively influence and mobilize people around particular issues. They should be able to convey information and data in ways that are accessible to various groups and communities. And they should be able to help their audience see beyond what is currently in front of them.

iii. Knowledge about how to create and maintain partnerships

Strategic thinkers should be able to develop and maintain partnerships that advance their organization's goals, and they should explore and learn from people in other areas or disciplines to bring about change.

iv. Knowledge about how to use data and research to make decisions

Strategic thinkers should always be researching and exploring new avenues of getting their message heard by the target audience, and they should be able to make data-driven decisions to keep their organizations moving forward.

Overall, strategic thinking was rated highly as a competency. Respondents gave strategic thinking an average rating of 9.5 (on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being very important and 1 being not important), as shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3: How important do you think strategic thinking is in communications work?

Rating	Number	Percent
1 (not important)	1	0.3%
2-6	-	-
7	7	2.4%
8	40	13.7%
9	49	16.7%
10 (very important)	194	66.2%
No response	2	0.7%
Total	293	100%

Despite strategic thinking being rated highly, 63% of respondents thought it was difficult or very difficult to find someone with strategic thinking skills for their organization (see Figure 3). Nonetheless, 59% of respondents thought strategic thinking skills will be more important for communicators in the next 10 years (see Figure 4).

Figure 3: How difficult is it to find someone with strategic thinking skills for your organization?

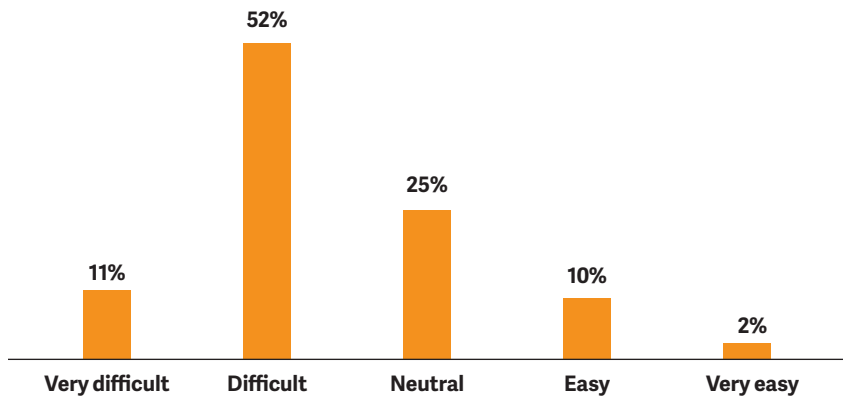
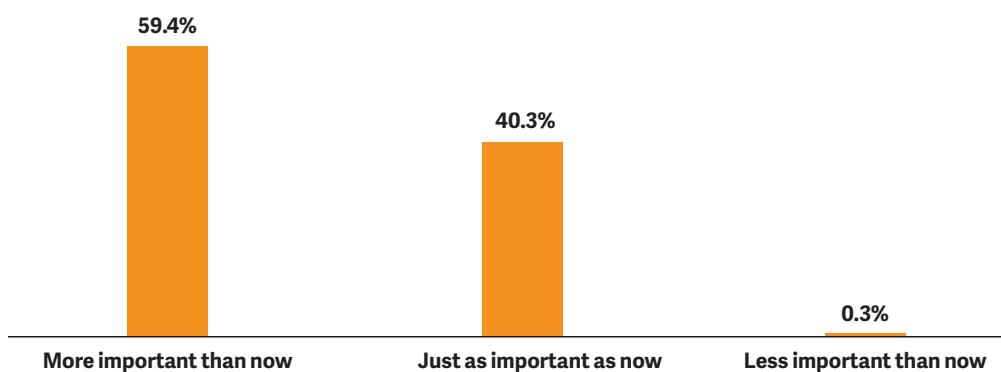


Figure 4: How important do you think strategic thinking skills will be for a communicator focused on social change in 2025 compared to now?



Expert Thoughts on Strategic Thinking



If you think about social change happening within the different avenues that we have available to us to drive social change -- policy, media, communities of influence, activism, and social marketing, the go to one is policy. For many of the issues that Network members are working on or the sort of progressive social change the world is working on, for at least the near future, policy change at the national level is going to be very difficult to achieve. We are going to have to be super strategic about how to make change happen in those sectors. So, I think some of our go-to approaches for driving systems-level change are foreclosed in many people's minds at least for the immediate future as shown in the results.



— **Ann Christiano**, The Frank Karel Chair in Public Interest Communications, Professor, Department of Public Relations, University of Florida

Data and Research

Effective communicators have the ability to source and use relevant data on the best way to communicate with their target audience. They can develop a realistic theory of change using the best available information. They understand how behavior change and motivational psychology works and can adopt social research as part of any strategic effort.

Overall, survey respondents gave data and research an average rating of 8.7 (on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being very important and 1 being not important), as shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4: On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being very important and 1 being not important, how important do you think the use of data and research are in communications work?

Rating	Number	Percent
1-2	-	-
3	1	0.3%
4	-	-
5	2	0.7%
6	9	3.1%
7	34	11.6%
8	74	25.3%
9	64	21.8%
10 (very important)	109	37.2%
Total	293	100%

Over three-quarters (77%) of respondents thought that it was either difficult or very difficult to find someone with an understanding of how to use data and research to effect change or drive action in the communications field (see Figure 5). Sixty-four percent responded that having the ability to understand data and research and apply it effectively will be more important in the future compared to now (see Figure 6).

Figure 5: In the communications field, how difficult is it to find someone with an understanding of how to use data and research to effect change or drive action?

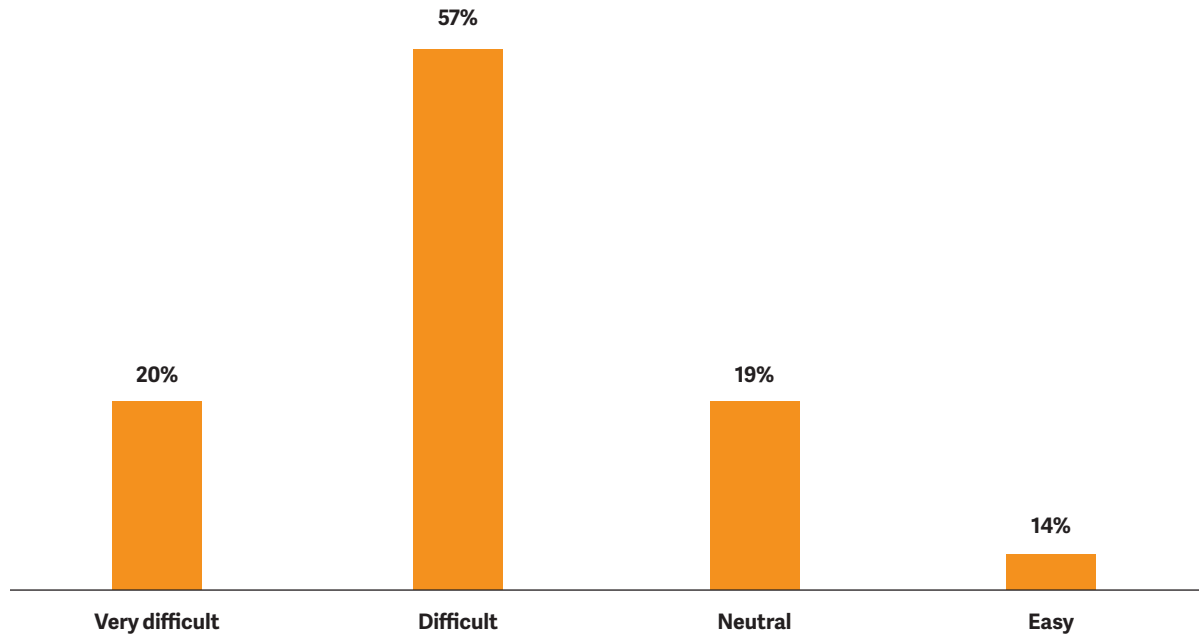
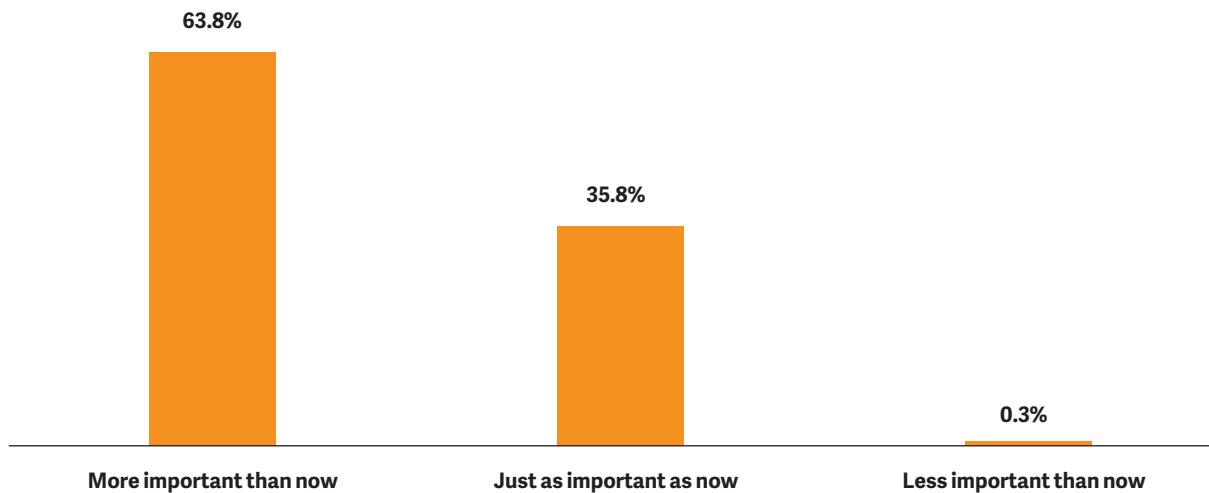


Figure 6: How important do you think having the ability to understand data and research and apply it effectively will be important in 2025 compared to now?



Creative Thinking

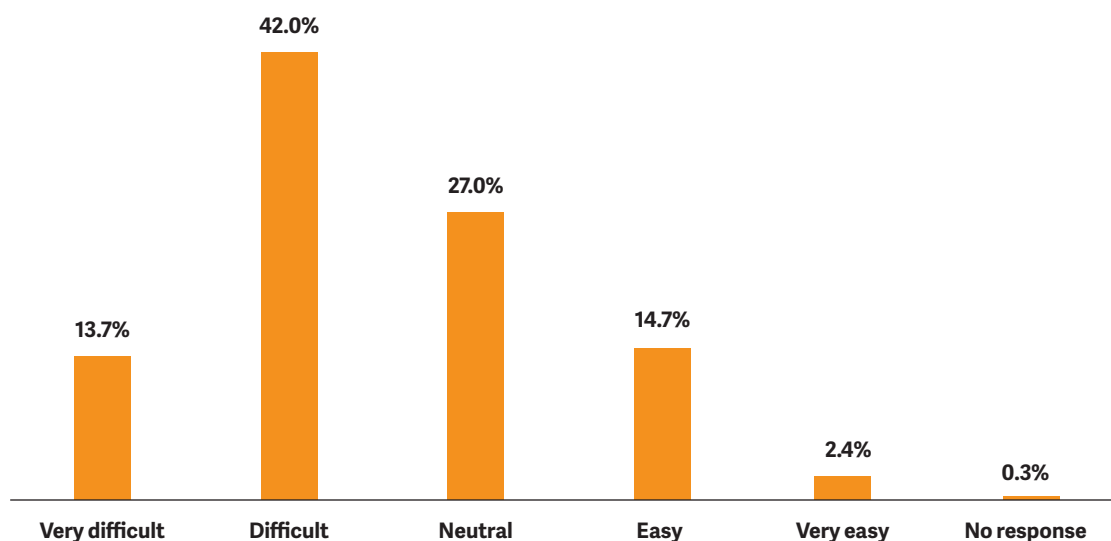
Creative thinkers have a way of looking at problems or situations from a fresh perspective. They have new and innovative ways to present content, tell stories, and reach target audiences.

Survey respondents gave creative thinking an average rating of 9.2 (on a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being very important and 1 being not important), as shown in Table 5. Fifty-five percent of respondents thought that it was either difficult or very difficult to find someone with creative thinking skills in the communications field (see Figure 7).

Table 5: On a scale of 1 to 10 with 10, being very important and 1 being not important, how important do you think creative thinking is in communications work?

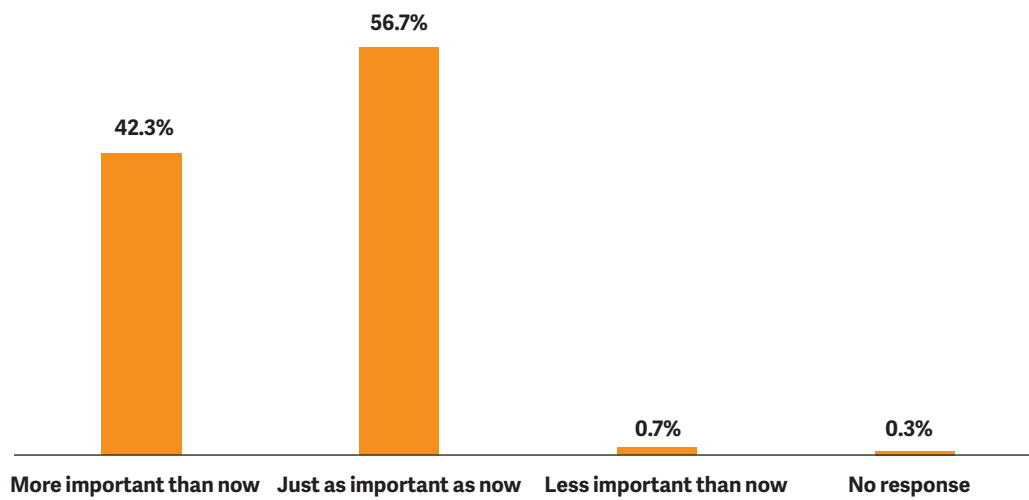
Rating	Number	Percent
1-4	-	-
5	1	0.3%
6	4	1.4%
7	24	8.2%
8	41	14.0%
9	53	18.1%
10 (very important)	169	57.7%
No response	1	0.3%
Total	293	100%

Figure 7: How difficult is it to find someone with creative thinking skills for your organization?



Overall, most of the respondents thought that creative thinking as a competency would be just as important in the future as it is currently, as shown in Figure 8.

Figure 8: How important do you think creative thinking skills will be in 2025 compared to now?



Expert Thoughts on Strategic Thinking



Historically, creativity has been a more valued skill or quality among communicators than strategy. It's still the case that in many organizations, the strategic minds and the creative minds are given entirely different tasks, and there's very little focus on the functional creativity that works within this strategic space.



— **Ann Christiano**, The Frank Karel Chair in Public Interest Communications, Professor, Department of Public Relations, University of Florida



Another way to think about creative thinking, especially for social impact organizations [that] are always facing money constraints, is being creative about how to do communications work. And working within the framework they have.



— **John Trybus**, APR, Deputy Director, Center for Social Impact Communication (CSIC) at Georgetown University

Organizational Leadership

Organizational leaders have the ability to manage a team. They know what their organization's priorities are. They can develop strategic plans, make the best use of resources available, and manage projects effectively and efficiently.

On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being very important and 1 being not important, survey respondents gave organizational leadership an average rating of 8.9.

Table 6: On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being very important and 1 being not important, how important do you think organizational leadership is in communications work?

Rating	Number	Percent
1 (not important)	1	0.3%
2-3	-	-
4	1	0.3%
5	4	1.4%
6	13	4.4%
7	30	10.2%
8	42	14.3%
9	57	19.5%
10	141	48.1%
No response (very important)	4	1.4%
Total	293	100%

More than half (53%) of respondents thought that it was either difficult or very difficult to find someone with organizational leadership skills in the communications field, as shown in Figure 9. The majority of respondents (69%) thought organizational leadership would be just as important in the future as it is today.

Figure 9: How difficult is it to find someone with organizational leadership skills for your organization?

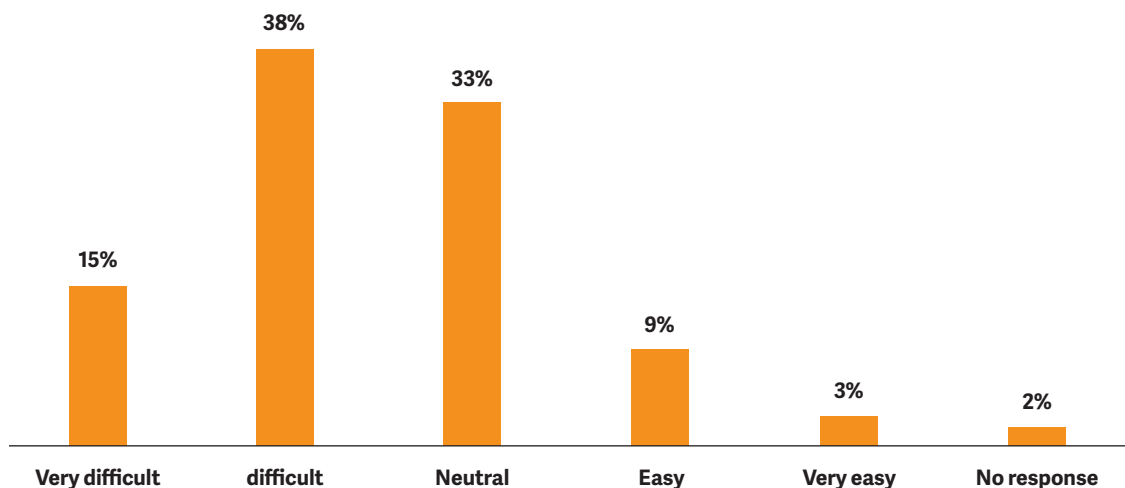
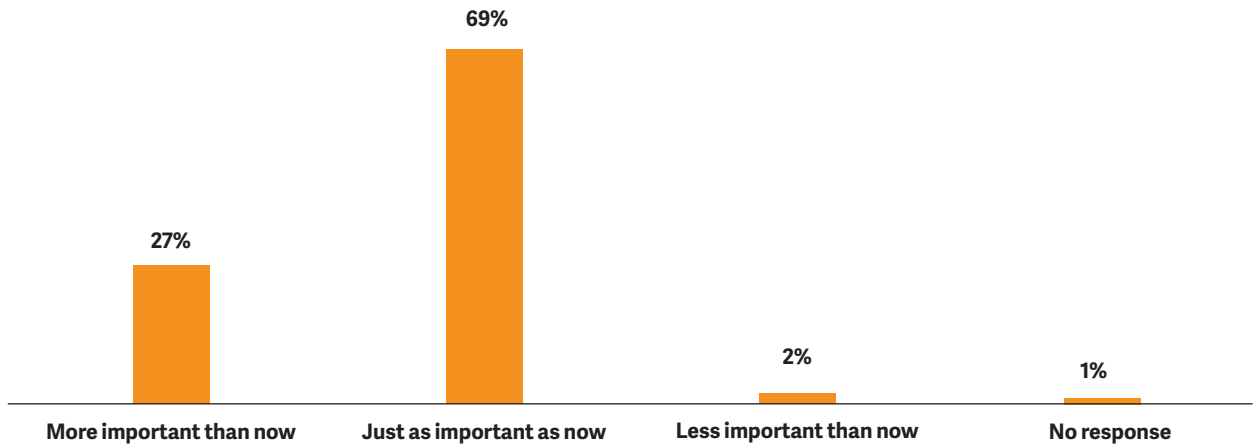


Figure 10: How important do you think organizational leadership skills will be in 2025 compared to now?



Expert Thoughts on Organizational Leadership

“ The survey results make sense because in many organizations, even large and influential ones, there are a small number of communications people. So, it’s unusual that a communications team would be big enough that anybody would have somebody to manage. Therefore, developing leadership skills would be challenging; there’s been very little opportunity for people in communications to cultivate those skills. I think almost anybody I have ever talked to who did go into a management position with communications felt that while they had extensive experience as a communicator, but they had absolutely no preparation or opportunity to develop management skills. ”

— **Ann Christiano**, The Frank Karel Chair in Public Interest Communications, Professor, Department of Public Relations, University of Florida

Collaboration

Collaborators are great at communications and can connect with individuals on a personal level. These individuals have the ability to communicate within (with colleagues, across departments) and outside of their organizations (with stakeholders, clients). They have the ability to connect with the community and the target audience they are trying to influence.

Survey respondents gave collaboration an average rating of 9.1 (on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being very important and 1 being not important), as shown in Table 7. Only 30% percent of respondents thought it was either difficult or very difficult to find someone with collaboration skills in the communications field (see Figure 11). Sixty-one percent thought that creative thinking as a competency would be just as important in the future as it is today.

Table 7: On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being very important and 1 being not important, how important do you think collaboration skills are in communications work?

Rating	Number	Percent
1-4	-	-
5	1	0.3%
6	11	3.8%
7	16	5.5%
8	45	15.4%
9	71	24.2%
10 (very important)	137	46.8%
No response	12	4.1%
Total	293	100%

Figure 11: How difficult is it to find someone with collaboration skills for your organization?

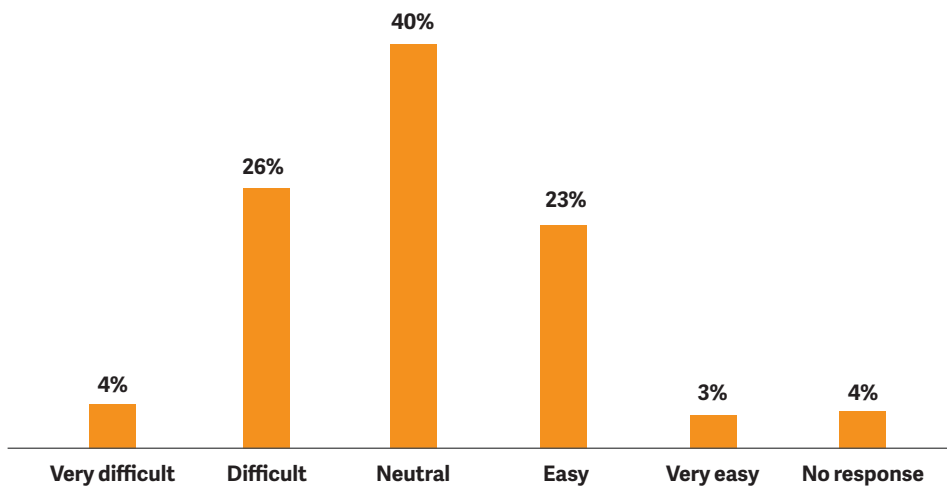
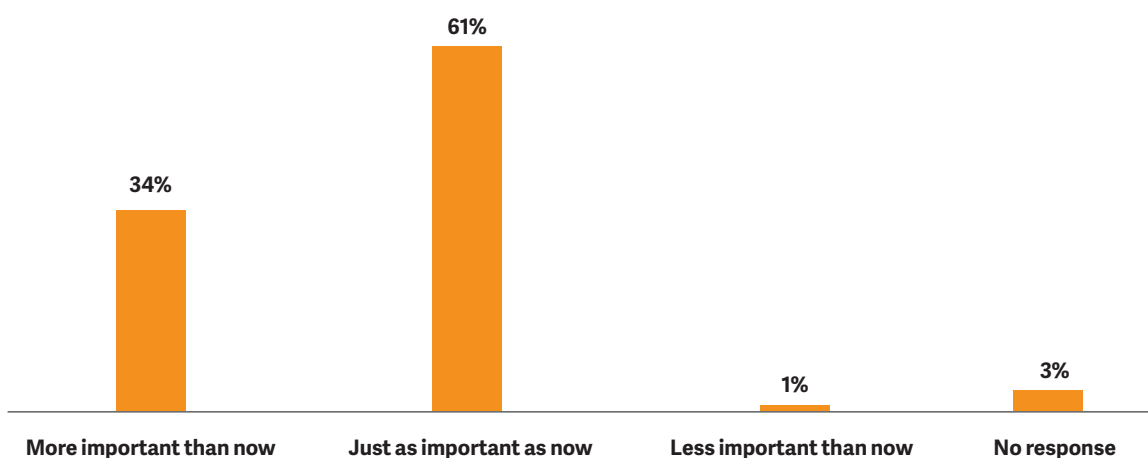


Figure 12: How important do you think collaboration skills will be in 2025 compared to now?



Expert Thoughts on Collaboration

“ I think that we define public interest communications as communication efforts that take on an issue that transcend the interest of any single organization or individual, and so, if you are going to make meaningful social changes, you cannot communicate solely at the organizational level, you have to communicate across a sector. And so, you cannot do that well without skills of collaboration outside of your organization, it’s going to be impossible to have an impact on the issues that matter the most if you are simply working in your silo within your organization. **”**

— **Ann Christiano**, The Frank Karel Chair in Public Interest Communications, Professor, Department of Public Relations, University of Florida

“ There is a cost to collaboration which is linked to strategy and creative thinking. Communicators must decide, when looking at their long-term strategy, when to stay within the silo and when to be that silo buster within their organization. **”**

— **John Trybus**, APR, Deputy Director, Center for Social Impact Communication (CSIC) at Georgetown University

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence is the capacity of individuals to recognize their own, and other people’s emotions, to discriminate between different feelings and label them appropriately, and to use emotional information to guide thinking and behavior. Communicators who use emotional intelligence are empathetic, can build trust, and have the ability to connect with individuals on a personal level.

Respondents gave emotional intelligence an average rating of 8.9 (on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being very important and 1 being not important), as shown in Table 8. Half of respondents thought that it was either difficult or very difficult to find someone with emotional intelligence skills in the communications field (see Figure 13). Sixty-five percent thought that, in the communications field, emotional intelligence would be just as important in the future as it is today.

Table 8: On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being very important and 1 being not important, how important do you think emotional intelligence is in communications work?

Rating	Number	Percent
1-3	-	-
4	1	0.3%
5	5	1.7%
6	8	2.7%
7	24	8.2%
8	53	18.1%
9	59	20.1%
10 (very important)	130	44.4%
No response	13	4.4%
Total	293	100%

Figure 13: How difficult is it to find someone with emotional intelligence skills for your organization?

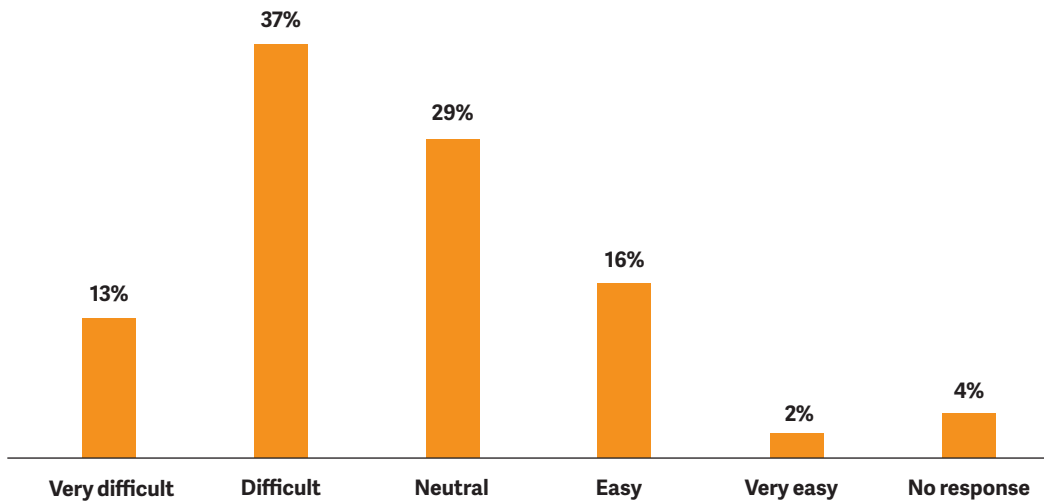
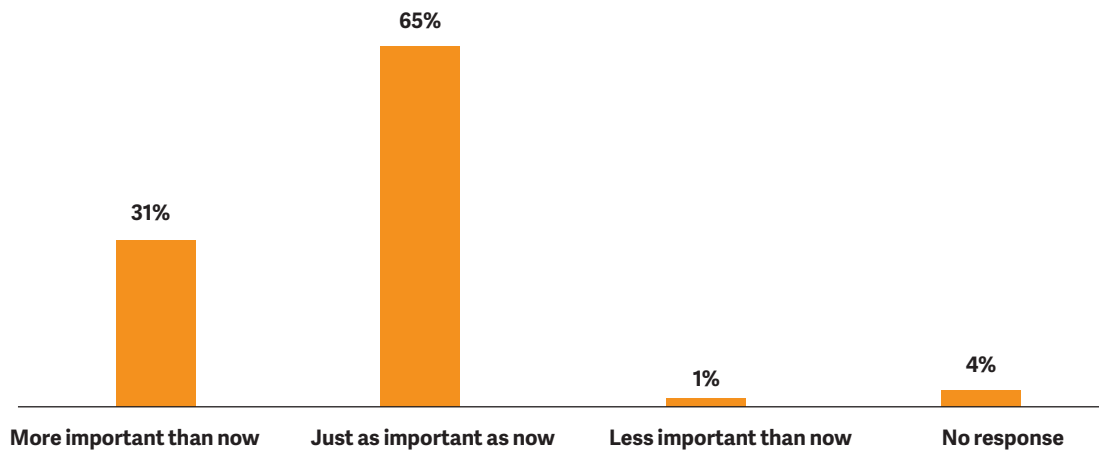


Figure 14: How important do you think emotional intelligence skills will be in 2025 compared to now?



Expert Thoughts on Emotional Intelligence

// In my undergraduate public interest communications class, we focused a lot on the strategic value of empathy. Both in terms of the empathy you might have for those whose condition you're hoping to change, which will help make you a more compassionate and authentic storyteller, but also the empathy you have with your target audience and really figuring out what their values are and where their values intersect with yours. Empathy is still sort of brushed aside as being too soft a skill, but it's something that is really at the core of your ability to use research and data really well. If you can get inside the mind of your audience, or those who you would need to convince and understand what matters most to them, and how to preserve that or give that to them, you're going to be in a much better position to be successful. //

— **Ann Christiano**, The Frank Karel Chair in Public Interest Communications, Professor, Department of Public Relations, University of Florida

// Emotional intelligence is the unsung hero of the social impact sector. It is this underlying skill that, I think, is important to a purpose-driven individual who does this work. They don't do it just for the paycheck. There's a little bit of disparity sometimes in organizations and in people's minds about how important emotional intelligence is. In many ways, the entry-level person has to be that generalist, and then you go to management and the executive and then the specialist. As an executive and specialist, you really have to dial up those emotional intelligence skills. Sometimes people are not being educated earlier in their career about the importance of emotional intelligence. //

— **John Trybus**, APR, Deputy Director, Center for Social Impact Communication (CSIC) at Georgetown University

Foundational Skills

Foundational skills refer to the basic skills required in communications work:

- i. **Marketing:** Refers to ways in which an organization or a business promotes and sells products or services, including market research and advertising.
- ii. **Writing:** Refers to the ability to develop and present ideas and information in concise, creative, and compelling ways to multiple audiences.
- iii. **Branding:** Refers to the process of creating a name, symbol or design that identifies and differentiates your organization's product or services from those offered by other organizations.

iv. Messaging: Refers to the ability to create critical organizational messages for key internal and external constituents and stakeholders.

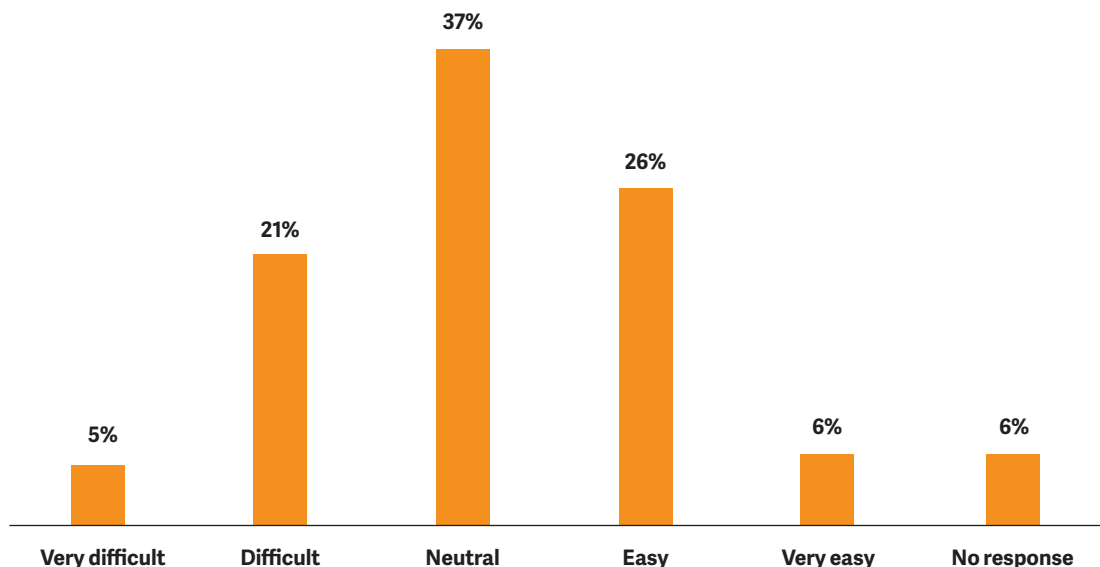
v. Social media engagement: Refers to the level of engagement that a piece of created content is receiving from an audience on a social media platform e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram. It shows how much and how often people interact with the content.

Survey respondents gave foundational skills an average rating of 8.9 (on a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being very important and 1 being not important), as shown in Table 9. A quarter of respondents (26%) thought that it was either difficult or very difficult to find someone with collaboration skills in the communications field (see Figure 15).

Table 9: On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being very important and 1 being not important, how important do you think foundational skills are in communications work?

Rating	Number	Percent
1-4	-	-
5	6	2.0%
6	7	2.4%
7	30	10.2%
8	47	16.0%
9	62	21.2%
10 (very important)	123	42.0%
No response	18	6.1%
Total	293	100%

Figure 15: How difficult is it to find someone with foundational skills for your organization?



When asked to rank the foundational skills by order of importance, most respondents ranked messaging and writing highest (at first and second place) compared to the other skills (see Figure 16). Tables 10 and 11 show how respondents ranked the different foundational skills in greater detail.

Figure 16: Average rankings -- foundational skills

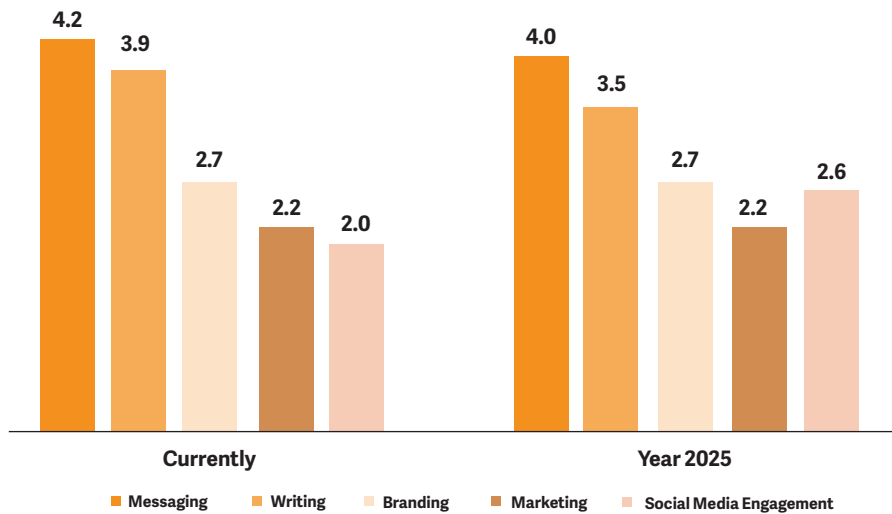


Table 10: Please rank these skills in their order of importance

	1	2	3	4	5	No response
Messaging	45%	31%	8%	5%	3%	8%
Writing	32%	34%	16%	8%	3%	9%
Branding	9%	13%	29%	20%	20%	8%
Marketing	3%	9%	19%	28%	32%	9%
Social Media Engagement	2%	5%	20%	31%	34%	7%

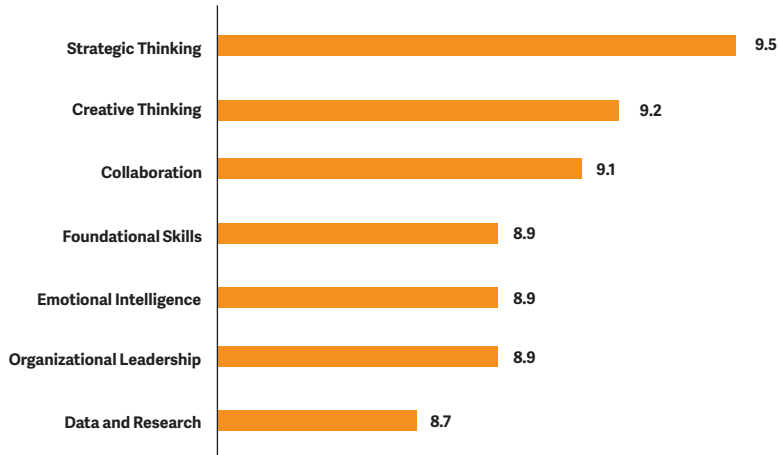
Table 11: Please rank how important you think these skills will be in 2025

	1	2	3	4	5	No response
Messaging	35%	28%	12%	9%	3%	13%
Writing	30%	19%	14%	14%	10%	12%
Branding	10%	16%	22%	21%	20%	11%
Marketing	6%	7%	16%	25%	34%	12%
Social Media Engagement	6%	18%	25%	19%	23%	9%

Comparing Competencies

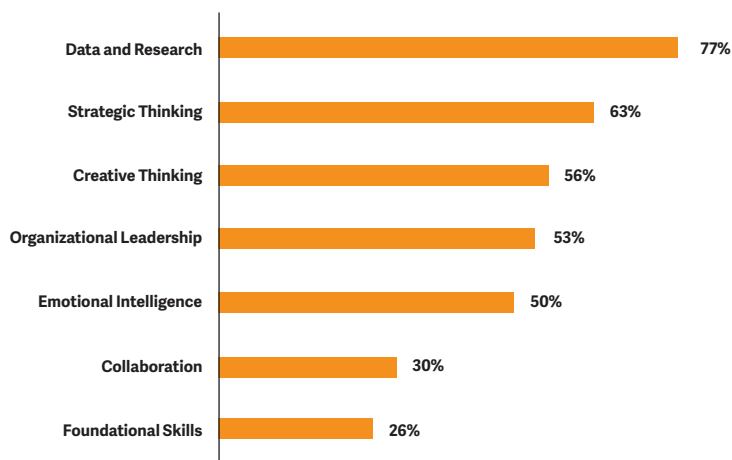
Overall, respondents gave all competencies high ratings, suggesting they thought each of the competencies were important to communications work (see Figure 17).

Figure 17: Average ratings of competencies



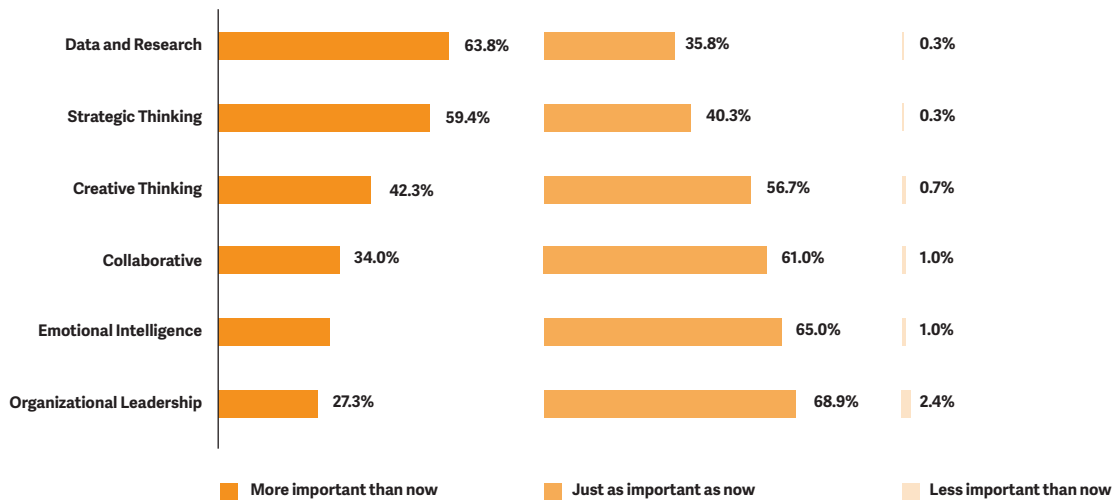
Survey responses show that data and research skills and strategic thinking skills are more difficult to find than collaboration and foundational skills in the communication field, as shown in Figure 18.

Figure 18: How difficult is it to find someone with these competencies? (responses combine difficult and very difficult)



More than half of respondents thought data and research and strategic thinking skills would be more important in the future compared to now (see Figure 19). Additionally, respondents thought creative thinking, collaboration, emotional intelligence, and organizational leadership skills would be just as important in the future as they are today.

Figure 19: How important do you think these competencies will be in the future compared to now?



Importance of Strategic Communications at the Organizational Level

More than half (59%) of respondents thought that their organization has an effective communications strategy (see figure 20). The question “how integral is strategic communications in your organization’s overall change strategy on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest rating?” received an average rating of 7.2, implying that many of the respondents work in organizations that consider strategic communications important to their mission (see Table 12).

Figure 20: Do you think your organization has an effective communications strategy?

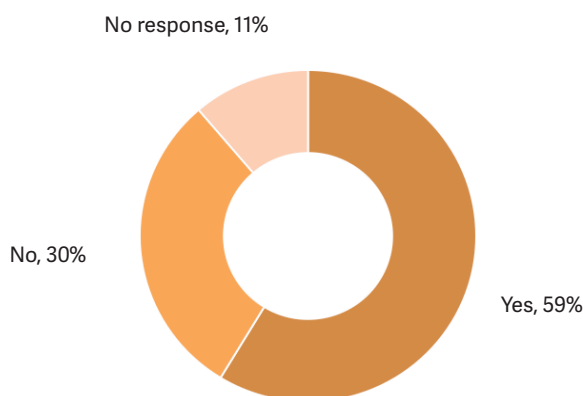


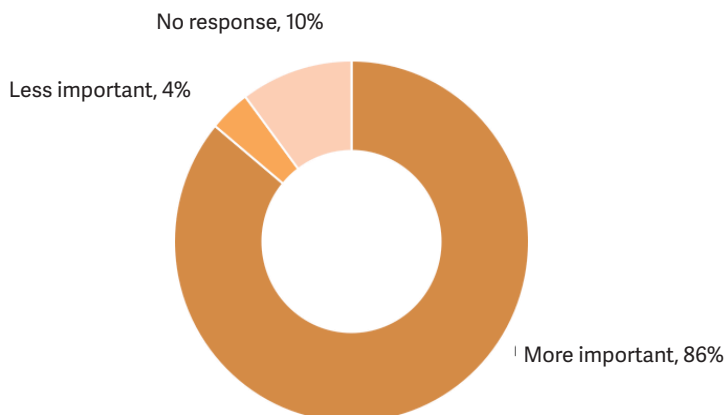
Table 12: How integral is strategic communications in your organization’s overall change strategy on a scale of 1 To 10, with 10 being the highest rating?

Rating	Number	Percent
1 (low)	3	1.0%
2	2	0.7%
3	6	2.0%
4	8	2.7%
5	16	5.5%
6	25	8.5%
7	30	10.2%
8	68	23.2%
9	41	14.0%
10 (high)	64	21.8%
No response	30	10.2%
Total	293	100%

As shown in Figure 21, the majority of respondents thought that strategic communications had become more important to their organizations. They gave a variety of reasons for this change, such as increased awareness of the importance of communications work at the organizational level, having leaders who provide support and resources for communications work, the need to use strategic communications due to the clustered communications landscape, and the importance of directing resources to the most effective strategies.

Respondents who worked at organizations where strategic communications had become less important in the last five years gave a variety of reasons for the change, including unsupportive leadership, lack of resources, lack of training for staff, and not having enough time to engage in communications work.

Figure 21: Has strategic communications become more or less important in your organization the last five years?



The biggest challenges organizations faced when using strategic communications to drive social change included the following:

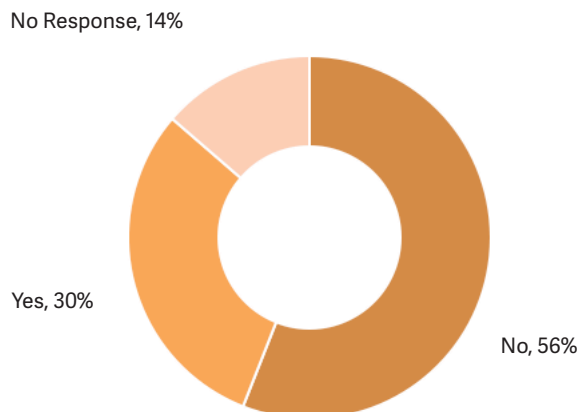
- i. Lack of understanding of what strategic communications work is
- ii. Lack of resources (time, funds, staff)
- iii. Training: some staff don't have the required skills
- iv. Audience issues
 - a. No unified understanding of who the target audience is
 - b. Inability to define the target audience
 - c. Inability to change audience attitudes and behaviors
 - d. No effective strategies for audience engagement
- v. Lack of buy-in from leadership or unsupportive leadership
- vi. Crowded media landscape: too much competition for audiences
- vii. Lack of collaboration within and outside of organizations
- viii. Lack of internal buy-in; not everyone is on board with communications work
- ix. Lack of a strategy or unclear organizational strategies
- x. Lack of a unified vision at the organizational level

Respondents thought the following would enable their organizations to communicate better: having leadership support for communications work; having buy-in from the organization as a whole (integrating communications into the culture of the organization); having clear and targeted organizational goals; having unified or clear and consistent messaging; having more resources (funds, staff, time); and training for staff.

Additional Competencies

Some of the survey respondents thought there were additional competencies that are also important for effective communications (see Figure 22). These competencies include empathy, intercultural competency, knowledge of the field, budgeting and more. A full list can be found in Appendix A.

Figure 22: Are there additional competencies you think are important for effective communication?



Appendix A: Additional Data Tables

Table 13: What is your current job role?

Job Role	Number	Percent
Communications Director	117	39.9%
Vice President	28	9.6%
Executive Director	27	9.2%
Director	23	7.8%
Communications Manager	17	5.8%
Communications Officer	15	5.1%
Communications Consultant	9	3.1%
Communications Coordinator	6	2.0%
Principal	5	1.7%
Program Officer	4	1.4%
Communications Associate	3	1.0%
Communications Specialist	3	1.0%
Owner	3	1.0%
Writer and Content Manager	3	1.0%
Board Member	2	0.7%
Development Manager or Officer	2	0.7%
Editor	2	0.7%
Founder	2	0.7%
Strategist	2	0.7%
Associate	1	0.3%
Chief of Program Development	1	0.3%
Cofounder	1	0.3%
Communications & Engagement Coordinator	1	0.3%
Communications & Strategic Initiatives Manager	1	0.3%
Communications Analyst	1	0.3%
Communications Researcher	1	0.3%
Communications Strategist	1	0.3%
Community Engagement Officer	1	0.3%
Donor Experience Manager	1	0.3%
Executive Recruiter	1	0.3%
Marketing Consultant	1	0.3%
Marketing Coordinator	1	0.3%
Marketing Specialist	1	0.3%
Media Relations Manager	1	0.3%
Partner	1	0.3%
Professor	1	0.3%
Program Manager	1	0.3%
Special Assistant	1	0.3%
No Response	1	0.3%
Total	293	100%

Table 14: Please list any additional competencies you think are important for effective communication below.

Competency	Number
Empathy	9
Intercultural competency	7
Knowledge of field	7
Budgeting	6
Awareness of current events	5
Desire to grow/learn new information	5
Project management	5
Writing	5
Adaptability/flexibility	4
Business acumen	4
Curiosity	4
Diplomacy	4
Language skills (oral, written, and verbal and non-verbal)	4
Managing relationships	4
Political savvy	4
Resilience	4
Active listening	3
Community development and mobilization	3
Creativity	3
Engagement	3
Fundraising	3
Listening	3
Presentation skills	3
Technical skills (coding, systems, and tools integration)	3
Visual communication/graphic design	3
Humility	2
Measurement and impact	2
Mentoring	2
Passion	2
Public speaking	2
Risk tolerance	2
Analytical skills	1
Bravery	1