

Communication management and the telecom sector: a case study

Dirección de comunicación y sector de telecomunicaciones: estudio de caso

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Abstract:

From an academic perspective, the role of communication in company management remains a topic of intense debate. However, by delving deeper into the issue from a strategic point of view one can see that hardly any empirical analysis comparable to other management realities can be found. The aim of this study is to analyse the structure and activity of the communications departments in the three leading companies in the Spanish telecommunications sector: Telefónica, Vodafone and Orange. For that purpose, a qualitative methodology was used based on questionnaires and interviews. Among the results, some of the indicators point to the complexity of the organization of the communications department, the importance of representation and participation by this department on senior management of the company, and the influence of communication on interdepartmental coordination.

Key words:

Communication; strategy; management; telecommunication; stakeholders

Resumen:

Desde la academia, la comunicación y su papel en la gestión de las compañías continúa siendo objeto de intenso debate. Sin embargo, cuando se profundiza desde un ángulo estratégico, apenas se hallan análisis empíricos equiparables a otras realidades de gestión. Este estudio tiene como objetivo analizar la estructura y la actividad del departamento de comunicación de tres empresas de referencia en el sector de telecomunicaciones español: Telefónica, Vodafone y Orange. Para ello, se ha empleado una metodología cualitativa basada en cuestionarios y entrevistas en profundidad. Entre los resultados, se apunta a la complejidad de su organización, la importancia de la representación y participación en los órganos de dirección, así como a la influencia de la comunicación en la coordinación interdepartamental.

Palabras clave:

Comunicación; estrategia; gestión; telecomunicaciones; grupos de interés

1. Introduction

The current context has given the company a predominant role, not only in the economic sphere, but also in the socio-political and cultural ones. Its role as a social institution is increasingly more underlined in academic and professional forums, the vision about its nature has broadened and its goals have been amplified.

More precisely, the relevance of business management is linked with the stakeholders of the social environment via their Corporate Social Responsibility (i.e. public institutions, NGOs and the local community).

Indeed, more members or representatives of different social groups are demanding to be heard, consulted and even to participate in corporate decisions. Managers progressively make their decisions, not unilaterally, but considering the ideas and demands of multiple stakeholders who become interlocutors and not merely passive recipients of information. Consequently, professionals have to face many challenges regarding how to manage the multiple stakeholders' demands and expectations who are increasingly more demanding about corporate information (Herranz de la Casa, 2007).

From the end of the twentieth century, some researchers have been analysing what the role of this discipline is in this equation: How to manage multi-stakeholder relationships? How to respond to the demands of sustainability and responsibility? How to recover and/or cultivate trust in the business world? These questions have been answered by some business schools from different theoretical backgrounds, i.e. stakeholder management, CSR, corporate governance, etc.

Nevertheless, this article is not focused on these theories, but rather to strengthen ties between the academic and professional community regarding the figure of the Chief Communication Officer (CCO) in companies. In order to achieve this aim, the structure of the paper is as follows:

- Firstly, a theoretical framework is focused on the communication department functions, the role of its manager in the C-suite and, the coordination with other departments.
- Secondly, the empirical study analyzes the case of three multinational companies in the telecommunication sector: Telefonica, Vodafone and Orange. And,
- Finally, the paper ends with the discussion of the results and the conclusions that opens the door to new challenges the communication departments will face in the future.

2. Strategic communication management: a holistic analysis

Much of the literature on corporate communication has attributed communication as a strategic dimension within organizations, a focus that has been reinforced in recent years (Miquel and Navarro, 2016; Recalde and Gutiérrez-García, 2015; Berger and Meng, 2014; Falkheimer, 2014; Gregory and Willis, 2013; Van Riel, 2012).

According to Falkheimer (2014: 130) "strategic communication is related to the relevance of maintaining, changing or strengthening the organization's image among its stakeholders". Cornelissen (2004: 5) defines corporate communication as "a management function that is responsible for the supervision and coordination of the work done by communication professionals specializing in disciplines such as media relations, public relations and internal communication".

In the same vein, Falkheimer et al (2016: 153) argue that "there is a strong belief in communication as a management function and in its professionals to do everything possible to integrate it as a natural dimension of management rationality".

This new management rationality is part of a multi-stakeholder environment. Freeman (1984) developed this idea in the stakeholder management theory. The author broadened the corporative focus, previously limited to the shareholders, and underlined those interest groups that affect or are affected by the organization activity (stakeholders) such as: clients, employees, providers, public institutions, ONGs, local communities, etc.

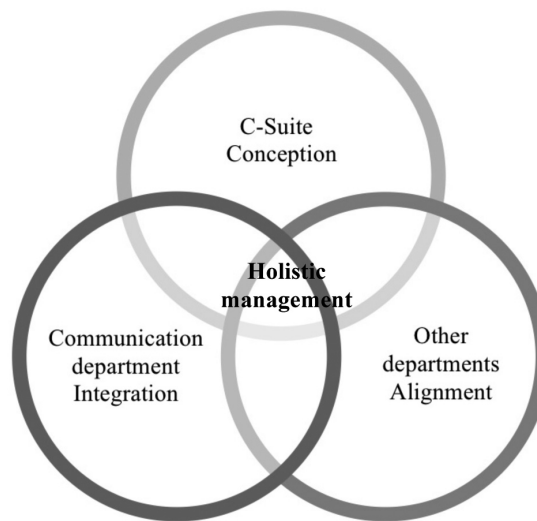
A literature review on state-of-the-art strategies both in the academia and the professional sphere highlights a taxonomy of communication department research. Hence, three key areas are identified:

- Firstly, the studies related to the departmental functions i.e. marketing, advertising, public relations, press office, etc.
- Second, the relationship between the Chief Communication Officer -CCO- and the C-Suite, and
- Finally, the coordination and bridges between the communication department and the rest of departments.

These three areas have a common core element: the holistic and the strategic view of communication, as Christensen et al. (2008: 3) illustrated: "Corporate communication is based on the metaphor of holism: The desire to embrace everything within a perspective or framework".

Figure 1 below represents an original theoretical framework, linking three big areas that have been fragmented in corporate communication studies so far. In order to fulfill the cited holistic approach, the management of communication departments must be guided by the principles of integration, alignment and the C-Suite conception.

Figure 1. Theoretical framework: a holistic and strategic management of the communication department



Source: by the authors

The following section will develop the above theoretical framework in order to present the case study.

2.1. Communication department-Integration

The existence of a department, division or area dedicated to communication activity reveals the importance given to communication (Blay, Benlloch and Sanahuja, 2014). According to the literature it is argued that communication must be guided by the principle of integration. Hence some authors define communication as "the concept and practice of aligning symbols, messages, procedures and behaviours so that an organization can communicate consistently, coherently, clearly and continuously within and across formal organizational boundaries" (Christensen et al. 2008: 424).

Following this statement, integrated communication is not only the diffusion of messages in the media, but it also takes on the responsibility of presenting a coherent view of the organization's identity (Costa, 2011; Losada Vázquez, 1998).

For this reason, the essence of communication management is aptly held by the CCO who is in charge of the team coordination, the monitoring of effective implementation, and the integral management of communication.

A holistic vision conveys a sense of unity as it facilitates the harmonious combination and the coordination of the communication areas. Although there might be more than one department in charge of communication activities, there

are some ways to coordinate them in a coherent structure that avoids overlaps and inconsistencies (Argenti, 2014; Cornelissen and Lock, 2001; Van Riel, 1997).

Like any other management area, communication requires professionals with different profiles, from technicians to managers, in order to plan and execute a wide range of functions and activities.

In the last decade, some researches have found relevant empirical findings on the state of the profession, and offered a portrait of the particular situation of each country (Zerfass et al., 2011, Swerling and Sen, 2009). Specifically, the European Communication Monitor analysed the results of 2,710 communication practitioners in 43 countries. In their study Zerfass et al (2016) provide longitudinal information (2007-2016) which reveals big changes in the management of communication, the communication channels and the skills, knowledge and competency development.

Additionally in Spain, la *Asociación de Directivos de Comunicación* (Dircom) regularly conducts research on practitioners' knowledge, abilities and responsibilities, as well as their implication and participation in high-level positions (Dircom, 2016, 2015, 2014, 2010, 2005).

In fact, a study published in 2015 pointed out that 80% of the professionals surveyed considered that communication had gained importance in their companies in the last few years. Furthermore, 74% recognized that the communication department directly contributes to the business strategy (Dircom, 2015).

2.2. Senior Management-Conception

Some authors and practitioners underline the need of an internal manager who participates within senior management, the Chief Communication Officer (CCO) (Gutiérrez-García, 2014, Johansson and Ottesting, 2011; Gregory, 2008, Gonzalez and Monleón, 2013).

Specifically, both academics and practitioners try to explain the relationship between the CCO and the C-Suite (Swerling and Sen, 2009, Grunig et al., 2002, Moss et al., 2000). Among its responsibilities, CCOs are able to advise, among other things, the identification of emerging social and strategic issues, i.e. the reputation impact. In addition, they represent the social demands and expectations of the stakeholders in order to improve the strategic decision-making processes (Gutiérrez-García and Recalde, 2016, Frandsen and Johansson, 2015, Swerling and Sen, 2009).

However, some empirical findings highlight the barriers to open the door to CCOs as a relevant member of Management Committees (Gutiérrez-García, 2014, Brønn, 2014, Cornelissen and Thorpe, 2001, Moss et al . 2000); including the relative youth of the profession, limited managerial knowledge, and sometimes the lack of understanding between senior managers and communication practitioners of the role of communication, beyond the tactical one (Arthur W. Page Society, 2007: 1).

Hence, according to Swerling and Sen (2009: 143), if CCOs report to the top management: "communication professionals must be involved in strategic meetings, their recommendations will have to be taken seriously to contribute to the strategic decision-making".

However, some studies show that reporting does not necessarily guarantee that CCOs participate actively in the boards or have a vote in decision-making processes. In this sense there is a significant difference, which is not trivial, between the participation in the decision-making process and simply being present when decisions are made (Moss et al., 2000).

According to Dircom (2015), 76% of CCOs are dependent on the first tier Executive level, a percentage that has been increasing gradually since 2005. Furthermore, 32.03% report directly to the Managing Director, 29.87% to the President and 15.58% to the CEO.

2.3. Other departments-Alignment

In order to understand the nature of communication, Cornelissen et al. (2006) describe it as cross-functional or cross-disciplinary because communication programs with key stakeholders might emerge from various places within the organization. In other words, it is necessary to bring communication specialists together vertically into one or a few departments, and it is also necessary to coordinate communication-related departments with other functional areas (e.g. Human Resources). Consequently, the communication department provides communication support to other functional areas as a managerial function in practice, which focuses upon how practitioners organize, plan, and coordinate multiple relationships with stakeholders, as well as implementing communicative activities, products and services.

That is why the internal systems to align the communication function with other departments are a key piece of the puzzle.

Horizontal structures can take various forms including committees, standardized work, meetings and project teams. All of them may report valuable information to the communication department and other areas, and at the same time facilitate the understanding of communication as a cross competence that requires a relational corporate culture.

The following presents a case study in order to illustrate the theoretical framework analyzed. The findings shed light on how communication departments in telecom companies are managed and their strategic contribution.

3. Methodology

3.1. Framework: Communicative management in telecommunications companies

Telecommunication companies have become a strategic industry with a clear impact on the socio-economic development of countries; and in specific sectors such as public administration, education and the health service.

The relevance of communication is inherent to an industry characterized by high market penetration, regulated and influenced by technological advances. In that framework, operators constantly receive information from their social environment and at the same time report information about their activities, commercial offerings and institutional values.

Therefore these firms establish and maintain relationships with a wide range of stakeholders and consequently are paradigmatic in analyzing and discussing the ideas described in the theoretical framework.

However, many studies of the telecoms industry are focused on their commercial dimension and more specifically on consumers (Cambra et al., 2012) and their loyalty (Wang, 2009). Nevertheless, academics as well practitioners have a great interest beyond commercial communication to highlight the corporate perspective. This is referenced by Caballero (2002) who describes the internal communication between headquarters and delegation levels, and Garcia de los Salmones (2001) who analyzed the corporate image and reputation.

To sum up, the academia considers that reputation is a key factor in consumer choice but emphasizes that "image needs a real substance, so managing the identity is also managing the image but it is not possible to reverse this process" (Waleska and Alvarado, 2009: 13).

In a nutshell, there are only a few studies focused on how strategic communication is managed in telecom firms and subsequently, it is easy to find a research gap regarding the communication department functions, the coordination with other departments, as well as its position in the C-Suite.

3.2. A study about strategic communication in telecommunication firms

An empirical and qualitative study was conducted with the aim of understanding the structure and activity of the communication department in three telecom companies in Spain: Telefónica, Vodafone and Orange. Specifically, the authors proposed the following hypothesis: the firms manage their communication strategically in a multi-stakeholder environment. Therefore, consistent with the theoretical framework presented, three objectives were pursued:

- 1) To study the communication departments: divisions and functions,
- 2) To identify its representation and participation in top management positions, and finally
- 3) To analyze the coordination with other strategic areas within the firm.

More precisely, these specific research objectives and their qualitative nature require a non-probabilistic sampling. In fact, the selection of the three companies -Telefónica, Vodafone and Orange- responds to a non-statistical theoretical sampling, that seeks a controlled selection of the sample (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994).

The above selection is justified in terms of relevance and homogeneity.

Looking at the relevance criteria, the latest annual report published by la Comisión Nacional de Mercados y de la Competencia reveals that these three companies have a significant market share in the Spanish market, with 79.5% of the mobile phone lines, 83.1% of income, and 77.8% of voice traffic (Comisión Nacional de los Mercados y de la Competencia, 2016). With respect to homogeneity, Telefónica, Vodafone and Orange have similar features that allow a comparative study: i.e. products and services, land-line telephony, mobile, broadband and audiovisual signal, a multinational organization and, finally, a consolidated structure in the communication department. An exploratory research was carried out to select the best professionals in each company who could provide information in response to the research objectives.

The sample for the study includes three professionals selected because of their expertise and knowledge, their strategic and executive vision, their previous experience in diverse divisions of the communication department and, finally, they have the appropriate authority to represent their organization. Although it is not possible to reveal personal information about each individual, some characteristics are set out in the following table:

Table 1. Sample characteristics

PROFESSIONAL PROFILE	EXPERTISE & KNOWLEDGE	AVERAGE IN HIS/HER CURRENT POSITION	PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE IN THE FIRM	SPECIFIC RESPONSIBILITIES
Communication managers (2nd level managers in the communication department)	Marketing, public relations and communication, strong knowledge and understanding of current trends	(3-8 years)	Areas: internal & external communication, digital, marketing & advertising, reputation management	Coordination of communication plans, event organization, media relations, documentation and research

Source: by the authors

The study was conducted with a qualitative focus (Maxwell, 1996; Patton, 1990) in order to offer a more in-depth account of why and how executives are managing communication. Qualitative methodology is crucial to a deeper understanding of how managers tackle complex features in their decision-making processes. The two tools selected are presented in the following:

- Questionnaire:

A questionnaire was forwarded to the communication manager previously selected in each company. This questionnaire comprised of 19 questions of different types: open-ended, multiple-choice, and Likert-scales.

- In depth semi-structured interviews:

In addition, as decision makers, these executives were interviewed. Interviews were conducted at the headquarters of Telefónica, Vodafone and Orange Spain in Madrid (Spain) respectively and the duration ranged from 30 to 45 minutes. One of the interviews was conducted by phone and lasted 20 minutes. These interviews are justified because some responses such as those related to the chains of command and the criteria of decision making require broader answers.

Table 2. Structure of questionnaire and interview

Questionnaire	Interview
1-Department and professional competences <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal coordination • Functions and activities • Budget control 	1-Chart <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Position • Reporting • Strategy • Internal communication
2-Stakeholder engagement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification • Evaluation • Communication programs • Professional opinion 	2-Communication <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identity, mission and corporate culture • Communication and telecommunication sector
3-Role of communication in decision making <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CCO professional profile • CCOs responsibilities • Representation in C-Suite • Professional autonomy 	3- Strategy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formulation • Alignment with strategic objectives • Innovation • Evaluation systems
4- Professional profile <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expertise and Knowledge • Age • Professional experience 	4-Relationship management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitoring of environment and trends • Input to C-Suite

Source: by the authors

Researchers analyzed the questionnaires and interviews using an inductive method based on three categories with different sub-categories.

- Communication department: structure of the department, divisions, internal coordination, functions and activities.
- Involvement in C-Suite: CCO functions, representation in top management, participation in strategic decision-making.
- Coordination between communication department and other areas: headquarters and subsidiaries, coordination of departments, frequency, communication channels.

4. Findings

The following addresses a debate about the role of the communication department within companies.

According to the theoretical framework proposed, the results are structured as follows: communication department (structure, functions, internal coordination), CCO and involvement in C-Suite team and, finally, coordination with other departments.

4.1. Strategic management for communication: a holistic analysis

This section discusses how communication plans are designed and aligned with the strategic objectives of each firm.

The communication manager in Vodafone stresses that communication is a strategic and managerial activity within the operator “we not only conduct operational communication activities –press releases, information diffusion or internal communication- we also participate in the strategic planning process” (Vodafone). Besides, the department designs its own plans although sometimes they consult some communication programs with other departments such as Business Units or Human Resources in an informal way. This manager considered it a “prudent” practice, and in this regard, the department regularly advises other departments in terms of communication, in writing and online (intranet).

The practitioner underlined the importance of the alignment with the business objectives as “the communicative objectives are totally linked to the business goals. That is why we work in coordination with the Business Units” (Vodafone).

In the case of Telefónica, in line with Vodafone: “Communication is a strategic tool and is aligned with the firm’s commercial objectives” (Telefónica). Moreover, when the annual communication objectives are formulated, they are directly aligned with the business objectives: market share, profitability, customer service, etc. The department draws up the communication plans but, in contrast to Vodafone, they do not consult their programs with other areas.

The Orange manager defines communication as a supporting activity of the business areas: “Our mission is to ‘translate’ what they do into the ‘language of the stakeholders’, highlighting what we consider the most interesting and relevant” (Orange).

Regarding strategic values, the interviewer points out that:

“The corporate image, as it is greatly appreciated worldwide, is in our hands. We also have a clear impact on the commercial results because we contribute with our work to sell the products and services and, consequently, to improve the results of our business. In this sense, it is also important to know what and how information should be communicated. Besides, we consider transparency as one of the most important corporate values. It is evident that the department should not communicate everything, but we try to be as transparent as possible. It is particularly relevant to build the trust of our clients and the media as well” (Orange).

More precisely, this statement stresses the multi-stakeholder environment cited in the first part of this article. All of the selected companies identify who the key stakeholders are in order to develop strategic and focused relationships. Although strategic management might be a relevant priority for operators, companies like Orange underline the challenges to instigate long term plans in the communication department. The manager explains:

“Making a communication plan is always a challenging task in our sector. What we do is to create communicative programs linked to the general plans, proactive or reactive depending on the circumstances. I would really like to make long term communication plans but, unfortunately, it is not always possible” (Orange).

The above findings show that the three interviewed professionals have to face the difficulties of developing long term plans since, as they argue, the sector is characterized by change:

“The telecommunication sector is so dynamic that communication must be active and effective as well” (Orange).

All the managers selected consider communication as a formalized activity, integrated in the management structures and in corporate governance within their organization. Also, as it has been shown, communication is linked to the strategic plans and, consequently, to the commercial and corporate objectives.

4.1.1. Research objective 1: communication department

As academics point out, the internal organization has a clear impact on the way communication is managed (Christensen et al., 2008). The following findings reveal the department structure, the most important functions, and the internal coordination mechanisms.

Structure

The purpose of the following charts¹ is not to show the organizational organigrams but to illustrate the divisions or areas of the communication departments in line with the objectives of this research.

The structure of Telefónica Spain is different in contrast to Vodafone and Orange as stated in the following figures.

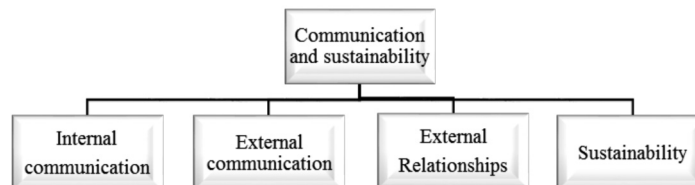
Figure 2. Telefónica Corporate Communication and Media Management



Source: own elaboration from interviews

However, Vodafone Spain organizes communication in a department called Communication and Sustainability Management.

Figure 3. Vodafone Spain Communication and Sustainability Management

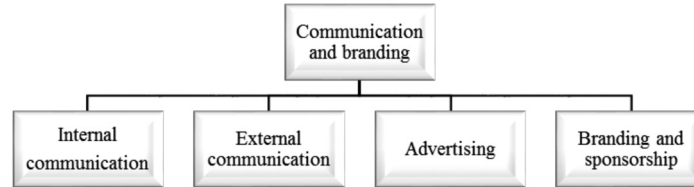


Source: own elaboration from interviews

¹ The management structures of the three companies described may have suffered changes by the time the results of this study have been published.

In the case of Orange, the communication department is called Communication and Branding.

Figure 4. Orange Spain General Direction of Communication and Branding



Source: own elaboration from interviews

Functions and activities

The communication departments analyzed embrace a set of specific functions which are necessary to reach overall goals. Empirical data from this table show the activities conducted by their respective departments.

Table 3. Functions of the communication departments

Functions	Vodafone	Telefónica	Orange
Internal communication	•	•	•
Relations with media	•	•	•
Online content		•	•
Institutional relations	•		
Advertising and marketing			•
Documentation and research	•	•	•
Relations with the community	•		
Management of public affairs, <i>issues management</i>	•		
Sponsorship			•
Publications		•	
Event organization	•		
Communication with investors			

Source: own elaboration from questionnaires

As it can be observed from the table, communication departments do not manage or control all the functions outlined in the academia. Some similarities between companies arise: the communication with employees (internal communication) and media relations are traditionally two functions associated with communications departments. With respect to the differences, Orange integrates marketing and advertising activities in its communication department, in contrast to Telefónica and Vodafone. Its manager clarified: “We are actually intermediaries with our stakeholders. In my opinion one of the most important, the core interest group, is the consumer” (Orange).

However, in Telefónica advertising and marketing functions are managed directly by business areas. The manager interviewed explains that both functions depend on commercial areas, i.e. digital, business units, etc. In line with Telefónica, at Vodafone these functions are also managed by the marketing area.

Additionally, although institutional relations are considered as a strategic area, it is not managed by the Communications department, except in the case of Vodafone.

Telefónica has a department called Public Affairs, and Orange manages this area from Sectorial Relations departments, both of them coordinate with the Communications unit.

Institutional relations are also part of the strategy of the organization, as these firms must adhere to a highly regulated sector.

They have to establish and maintain relationships with a range of institutions such as the “Comisión Nacional de los Mercados y de la Competencia”, the “*Consejo Asesor de las Telecomunicaciones y de la Sociedad de la Información*”, the “Oficina de Atención al Usuario de Telecomunicaciones” and various sectorial associations.

The variety of stakeholders, as well as the need to have a specialized legal knowledge, can explain why these relations are managed by departments created *ad hoc* and not by the communication areas. Another common practice is to hire companies specialized in communication services in order to give support in some projects, i.e. consultants, advertising or graphic design agencies.

Sponsorships are managed by other areas within the company, for example, Corporate Social Responsibility and, in some cases, managed by the firm’s sponsored foundations.

Finally, communication with investors is an area coordinated by the shareholder office.

Coordination within communication department

According to the doctrinal analysis, communication is an area whose complexity requires a coordinated administration and a common orientation of its objectives.

The three communication managers interviewed answered positively to the question: Is there any kind of coordination between the department functions?

Vodafone conducts sporadic meetings to work on common projects and to design some strategic plans. The interviewed professional underlined that: “Coordination in multinational companies like Vodafone is a 'necessity' in order to create a consistent corporate image” (Vodafone).

Likewise, Telefónica coordinates communication functions through a permanent committee which elaborates the strategic communication plans, designs projects and prepares communication reports: “The aim is to communicate with clarity and consistency inside and outside the company” (Telefónica).

Finally, Orange coordinates all communication areas -internal and external communication, advertising, branding and sponsorship etc. The CCO usually holds a meeting with all communication areas as:

“We have earned the trust of our stakeholders while building, at the same time, an internal context based on principles and values (...). Every communication program is aligned with these principle” (Orange).

These findings underline what the authors have highlighted in the theoretical framework: the relevance of aligning communication with the corporate identity (Christensen et al., 2009).

4.1.2. Research objective 2: Chief Communication Officer and the top level management

In the following pages authors describe the representation of the communication department within the top level positions.

As many authors and practitioners commonly state, the need of an internal manager who participates in senior management -the CCO-, highlights the relevance of the communication department within companies.

The answers regarding the role of CCOs are similar because all firms consider the CCO as the top communication executive. Moreover, in the three cases this position has an active role as a Board member.

In Vodafone the CCO is part of the Board and has some relevant functions: the CCO represents the communication area in high level positions, participates in strategic initiatives such as company mergers or in the launching of new products and services.

Besides, this professional turns out to be crucial as a strategic counsellor providing information/insights for decisions and activities, especially in the case of institutional decisions. The CCO reports directly to the President.

Similarly, the CCO for Telefónica also reports to the President, and therefore, the communication departments has representation on the Board. The manager interviewed stressed “This high level executive is not only part of the corporate

Board, but also participates actively in strategic initiatives in the company, so has an influence in the strategic decision making processes” (Telefónica). Specifically the main functions are: giving advice in specific areas such as institutional declarations or stakeholder relationship management and representing the communication department in the C-Suite.

And the Orange communication manager is also a member of the Board. Indeed, the manager interviewed considered this position as a key point, as the CCO reports directly to the CEO.

To sum up, as has been observed, in the three selected companies, the CCOs are progressively obtaining more recognition in the ‘C-Suite teams’. Empirical data suggest that they participate in executive committee meetings, manage some “critical” functions, and deal with strategic management processes such as decision-making or counselling. This participation is considered strategical otherwise “the communication department would not have any influence in the firm” (Orange). In particular, three indicators are analyzed in this current research.

- Firstly, CCOs are members of C-Suite teams.
- Secondly, they report directly to the President or the CEO.
- Finally, they also participate in the Boardrooms and, therefore, in the strategic decision making processes.

In this sense, according to the literature on this subject, there is a significant difference, which is not trivial, between the participation in decision-making process and simply being present when decisions are made.

As a manager explained: “The CCO is involved in all strategic plans from the conception to the implementation phase” (Vodafone).

4.1.3. Research objective 3: coordination between departments

Building bridges between departments are a key piece of the organizational puzzle. Cornelissen (2004) recognizes that communication with key stakeholders might emerge from various places within the organization, and that the process of developing and executing communication programs is therefore essentially cross-functional or cross-disciplinary.

The three firms suggest that communication requires a transversal management and, as a result, the coordination is very important in such complex organizations. On the one hand, between the Headquarters and the different countries in which they operate (or have a representation in); and on the other, coordination between departments.

With respect to Headquarters, a manager stressed: “There is a direct coordination with the Headquarters in France because communication must be aligned” (Orange).

Likewise, the coordination between departments helps companies to stay efficient and productive: “Communication department cannot act effectively in isolation as it offers its services to the other departments” (Vodafone).

In the case of this company the department establishes and maintains relationships with: Marketing, Human Resources, CSR, Legal, Business Units, Customer Service and R&D areas thanks to standing committees and meetings where top and middle-level managers participate in joint projects and the elaboration of strategic plans. In Telefónica “we build bridges between functional areas and between Headquarters and the different countries as well” (Telefónica). The Communication department develops various coordination mechanisms with Marketing, Human Resources, RSC, Legal, Business Units, Customer Service and R&D departments. Top and middle-level managers are involved (except in R&D) by means of standing committees in order to design joint strategic plans. The Communications department also conducts projects with Marketing, CSR, Legal and R&D departments. It also writes common reports in conjunction with Human Resources, Business Units and Customer Service.

Finally, in Orange Human Resources, Customer Services, CSR, Legal and Business Units also work with the communication area through standing committees, joint reports and research. In respect of the Business Units, the manager explained:

“We advise them in terms of communication, for example, in product and service launches or in specific projects. We need the information provided by these areas in order to establish a good communication with our stakeholders” (Orange). While the three companies manage different coordination mechanisms and the frequency of this coordination varies, all of them use internal systems to align the communication function with other departments as part of their horizontal structure.

5. Discussion

The above findings confirm the general research hypothesis: the three companies selected consider communication as a strategic function in a multi-stakeholder environment. Strategic communication, in general, challenges both scholars and practitioners, but when looking at the Telecommunications sector it becomes even tougher.

Internationalization, technology and digitalization are factors that impact directly within this complex industry. In addition to this complex scenario, long and short term objectives are two realities that co-exist, and demand an agile and flexible working dynamic.

In order to face these challenges, communication is recognized as a managerial function that enables inclusion of stakeholders’ views into its corporate strategy, which is a new conception driven by the growing recognition of the importance of stakeholder relationships and the debate on communication value.

From this standpoint, the firms surveyed have a Communications department, and the job of the practitioners consists of a broad range of activities. Its scope varies with the functional responsibilities and tasks that have been assigned to a communication department. The Chief Communication Officer (CCO) seems to play a crucial role in helping

telecommunication companies with the challenges mentioned above. The way in which communication practitioners and functional areas are organized is a key question as it not only determines to a large extent whether the communications function is aligned or not with business objectives, but also whether the communication activities that are carried out at various departments (Human Resources, CSR, Business Units) within the organization are streamlined and coordinated.

Firstly, the interviewed professionals stress the relevance of alignment with the strategic business objectives in order to communicate them. However, currently this interim succession/evolution does not make any sense as the CCOs already participate in the dominant coalitions of the organizations analyzed. The findings show that all of them contribute to elaborate and design the strategic plans balancing the institutional and commercial dimensions of the firms.

Secondly, regarding communication functions, some studies list the communication functions as shown in table 3. In the case of the selected telecom firms, some of these functions are managed by other areas such as public affairs, the marketing department or the business units. Nevertheless, the managers interviewed pointed out that what is really important is to have internal mechanisms to coordinate information and responsibilities.

As a consequence, some departments or functions like corporate communication, branding, advertising, sales, etc., must learn to speak the same language, working together towards common objectives. In other words, the way in which communication is organized carries with it important strategic dimensions, and is also crucial for the effective support and integration of a holistic approach of communication. Finally, the communication strategy may be designed by the communication departments; however, it will not have any impact unless the rest of areas are involved in the execution. Communication managers are at the same time involved in multidisciplinary groups with departments such as Human Resources, Business Units or Innovation (R&D). As they state, these kind of joint projects provide them with a broader vision of the firm, a key aspect for the effectiveness of communication. Since it is assumed that communication is also a transversal function in the organization, describing the activity of this department is still insufficient. This is why the research analyzed the bridges between departments.

6. Conclusions

Communication is a rich concept, in constant evolution. It explains why, to describe it as a tactical function, does not give it a full embodiment of the practicalities. Advertising is key for business but it does not have the capacity to respond to the complex 24/7 communicative demands of a multi-stakeholder environment; and to manage intangibles such as knowledge, trust, reputation, loyalty or corporate values.

All of these require strategies to remain competitive in a global scenario. In order to address these complexities, communication may be multi-stakeholder, managerial and transversal.

-Multi-stakeholder: a context marked by constant change, more critical, from demanding and organized citizens, and the explosion of new technologies have variously been cited to account for the need for a change in communication strategies.

The stakeholders demand not only to be heard by firms, but also to be consulted and even to participate in decision making processes that affect them. In this scenario, the communication department and its manager might be an important managerial function to establish and maintain these relationships, ensuring that stakeholder perspectives are brought into decision making processes.

In fact, stakeholders, like consumers, suppliers, employees or NGOs have diverse, and sometimes, contradictory demands and expectations with regards to the activities of the company. Thus, communication practitioners enact the organizational members through interaction and to give it meaning or purpose.

From this standpoint, a good management of these relationships provides valuable knowledge and insights to managers in order to listen to stakeholders' concerns and respond to their demands. The above ideas explain why literature focuses on the growing recognition of the importance of stakeholder dialogue in promoting environmentally and socially responsible behaviour in companies.

This communicative approach is more complex to manage than uni-directional models but it contributes to establish and build relationships by allowing dialogue and interaction between the organization and its different stakeholders. It explains why communication is becoming a more important function inside corporations.

-Managerial function: Communication is a strategic function that top managers must consider in their management and decision making processes. Nowadays, if the management of information has a critical importance, access to the C-Suite will be essential to CCOs in order to design a communication plan that reaches overall goals. Scholars and practitioners have been focused on the discussion of the manager-technician dichotomy role. Thus, some studies reveal that some CCOs belong to the dominant coalition (as this research has shown) but there are still a good number of exceptions. Indeed, there is a long way to go to place Communication in the Boardrooms at the same level as Finance or Business strategy.

The lack of expertise and knowledge are frequently cited as the most important factors that affect the participation of CCOs on the Board. It is emphasized that these senior managers need to have a thorough understanding of the firm and the issues that are likely to affect it.

Specifically, there are two challenges regarding communication practitioners: first, the necessity for improving the managerial knowledge in order to understand the business dynamic, and second, the design of new metrics and key performance indicators (KPIs) to integrate them into the Executive "balanced scorecard".

-Transversability: communication departments and professionals are often responsible for strategies and routine activities, while other members of the organisation communicate in the light of their particular positions.

Thus communication, far from being considered as a function restricted only to some communication practitioners, goes beyond its borders and requires the coordination with other departments. That is why communication should be aligned with corporate values: coherence, transparency and consistency. This view draws on new routines of collaboration, where the professionals within Communication will develop a huge capacity for interaction with other departments and areas inside the company. Since communication is, as mentioned, a porous reality in organizations, the routines and mindsets of professionals will have to be so as well. Values and capabilities like dialogue, trust, participation and cooperation will be highly valued for the exercise of this profession. At the same time, the other areas will have to be aware of the communicative dimensions of their roles and the relevance of intangibles (reputation, innovation, social responsibility, author's rights, etc.) whose management thereof provides tangible results such as pricing, product innovation or the success of business projects.

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