25. Strategic science communication: the value of communication for the performance of the organization

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Introduction

In the past decade there have been many attempts to define ‘strategic communication’ (Hallahan et al, 2007). In her inaugural lecture as professor in strategic communication in the Netherlands, Noelle Aarts described strategic communication as: ‘to organise meaningful interactions to ensure adequate positioning of the organisation in the networks that people form with each other, both within and outside the organisation’ (Aarts, 2009).

But how to define ‘strategic science communication’? In a first attempt to get a grip on strategic science communication, Nielsen in the previous paper relates it to persuasion, to organisational communication to public relation management (Nielsen, 2012). In this paper I will use the definition of Aarts and describe strategic science communication as ‘strategic communication within the science and technology domain’: communication to ensure adequate positioning of an organisation in the science and technology domain.

The science and technology domain is characterised by the fact that science and technology has high impact on the societal issues. Another important factor is that the knowledge workers in this field, working in R&D departments, laboratories, specialised governmental bodies and knowledge institutes, are granted more authority than in other areas of society. Their visibility implies that their communication can have immediate effect on the positioning of the organisation as a whole. This situation will probably pose specific requirements to the communication department of the organisation.

The question is: does the structure and management of the communication function of organisations within the science and technology domain indeed differ from those in other domains? Do the organisations in various fields pursue similar objectives? And to what extent and how does the communication function contribute to these objectives? In this paper we describe a benchmark study that provides insights into the link between organisational objectives and the structure and management of companies in different domains.

Communication benchmark 2011

The Science Communication section of Delft University of Technology in The Netherlands was commissioned by communications consultancy Boer & Croon to design a benchmark that provides insight into how the communication function of large companies and organisations in the Netherlands is organised, and to find heuristics for the development of the communication function that actually contributes to the success of the organisation.

An important principle in developing the benchmark is that the benchmark should be able to yield measurable results of the success of the communications department and connect
the activities and composition of the communication department with the performance of
the organisation. To obtain an insight into causality, we have based our benchmark on the
Balanced Scorecard (Kaplan & Norton, 2004). The balanced scorecard considers strategic
objectives of an organisation as a series of explicit and testable causal relationships and lists
the conditions that will lead to the desired results (Critical Success Factors). These CSFs are
characteristics of the organisation necessary for the success of the organisation and therefore
of specific interest. Based on literature (Boer & Croon, 2010) we focused on six objectives
(see figure 1).

In addition to questions about the objectives and CSFs, we added several questions in our
questionnaire about the current structure of the communication function. These questions
were related to the communication disciplines that are present in the communication
department (such as internal communication, web communication, sponsoring, brand
communication, public affairs). The questions concerned the available budgets per discipline,
the number of professionals who perform tasks related to a specific discipline, and the
occupational level at which the professionals perform.

In early August 2011, some 170 directors or managers of communication departments of
Dutch companies and organisations received an email with a link to the online survey inviting
them to participate in the benchmark study. 49 of the addressed persons completed the
digital survey: a response rate of 26 per cent. In addition, 40 respondents partially completed
the survey. Their data are used wherever possible in the benchmark. The data enabled us
to compare organisations to a general average but also to more similar companies in peer
groups.

Performance of the respondents

The average scores on the Critical Success Factors (CSFs) are placed in figure 1. The spider
web can be used to visualise the scores of one organisation related to the average scores
(figure 2) and to visualise the average scores of several groups of respondents. One of the
outcomes was that the scores of semi-public organisations differed from those of businesses
(table 1).
The average overall scores on the CSFs as presented in the spider diagram will not provide communication directors and managers with sufficient information about how to develop a communication function that actually contributes to the success of the organisation. A first step is to analyse and interpret the data, to find possible causes to explain poor scores. In the end, the communications director and his team have to decide which (combinations of) causes apply most to their situation. Next step would be to find solutions that fit in the causes and implement them. In this paper we focus on the first stage.

### Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategic objective</th>
<th>Benchmark</th>
<th>Semi-public</th>
<th>Business</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To play a strategic role in the organisation</td>
<td>4,2</td>
<td>4,2</td>
<td>4,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To make the organisation communicative</td>
<td>3,2</td>
<td>3,2</td>
<td>3,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be accountable to the organisation</td>
<td>4,0</td>
<td>3,9</td>
<td>3,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To manage and reinforce relations with stakeholders</td>
<td>3,9</td>
<td>3,7</td>
<td>4,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To timely detect and effectively manage issues</td>
<td>3,3</td>
<td>3,4</td>
<td>3,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To reinforce the corporate reputation</td>
<td>4,1</td>
<td>3,8</td>
<td>4,2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Possible interpretations

To enable the respondents to interpret the benchmark data several data were combined. Two sets of factors were clearly identifiable and have potentially major impact: the levels on which the professionals perform to achieve an objective and the budget available for the objective.

As seen in Table 1 respondents generally scored high in terms of reputation management and playing a strategic role within the company. This seems hardly surprising, as it appears that to achieve these objectives, particularly professionals with the most strategic (the “highest”) profiles are employed. In addition, to enhancing the reputation relatively much money has been spent.

Communications departments scored much lower on the targets ‘to timely detect and effectively manage issues’ and ‘making the organisation communicative’. If we connect these goals with allocated budgets and job levels, it is apparent that in reaching the goal ‘effective issue management’ relatively many professionals with a strategic profile are involved, but that the allocated budget is relatively low. In case of the second objective we see the opposite. Although the budget is relatively high, there are only few professionals who operate on a tactical-strategic or strategic level. The observed absence of high-level professionals and/or sufficient budget could be an explanation of the lower scores.

The scores on other specific CSFs could explain a relatively poor score in one of the objectives as well. It is for instance striking that in achieving both objectives with the relatively low scores (‘to timely detect and effectively manage issues’ and ‘making the organisation communicative’) the co-operation of communication professionals with the line is essential. This co-operation requires different knowledge and skills than in achieving other objectives:
rather than the expert role, it is mainly the analytical and social skills that characterize the role of the professionals involved.

**Strategic science communication**

In this paper the Communication benchmark 2011 has been introduced as a means to make the value of the communications function for the organisation visible and measurable.

The benchmark design enables an organisation to compare its communication function with other companies and organisations on the basis of various criteria, provided that there are enough participants in the benchmark. A first tentative step has been set to develop guidelines to interpret the benchmark data and find causes for the scores.

Until now, several research institutes, universities, and hospitals took part in our benchmark. But we do not have sufficient respondents from the science and technology domain yet to compare the data of companies and organisations in this field with those from other domains.

Our hypothesis is that ‘to organise meaningful interactions to ensure adequate positioning of the organisation in the networks that people form with each other’ in the science and technology domain requires a focus and structure of the communication function that differs from other domains. At Delft University of Technology we have started several research projects in order to answer this question.

**References**


