The robots are coming!

AI, automation and the future of Corporate Communications

A discussion paper by Wayne Aspland

Thank you

I would like to commence this paper with a thank you to four people.

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1.
Introduction:
the robots are coming

"Technology used to be a cost, but today that same technology is the business. For many of the same reasons, communication used to be seen as a cost but is now becoming the business."

Saskia van Uffelen, CEO, Ericsson Belux[1]

In Huis Ten Bosch – Nagasaki's Dutch-inspired tourist precinct – there's a boutique hotel called Henn-Na.

Like any tourist precinct, there's quite a few hotels in Huis Ten Bosch, but Henn-Na stands out for one quite curious reason.

It's almost entirely run by robots.

We live in an era that Professor Klaus Schwab, the World Economic Forum's Founder and Executive Chairman, has called the Fourth Industrial Revolution (or 4IR)[2]:

> *"[The Fourth Industrial Revolution] is characterized by a range of new technologies that are fusing the physical, digital and biological worlds, impacting all disciplines, economies and industries, and even challenging ideas about what it means to be human."*

It is a time when a blinding array of emerging technologies – all empowered by accelerating computing power and network speed – are converging to reshape our society, organisations and lives (*see Appendix: the robot army*).

Over the coming years these technologies will progressively assume many tasks that we once regarded as 'human'. In other words, despite its diversity, this 'robot army' is descending on us with a single goal: **automation**.

This new wave of automation will ask three questions of every communicator:
- What is the potential impact of automation on the organisations we support?
- How will automation change the way communicators perform their roles?
- What can communicators do today to build the organisations of tomorrow?

With that in mind, the role of this paper is to consider (and hopefully spark a conversation about) each of these questions. To do this, we will explore the many ways in which automation could change both our organisations and our profession.

In the end, the paper draws two conclusions.

First… the prognosis for the Corporate Communications profession is incredibly positive, provided we can embrace the opportunities and navigate the challenges that this new wave of automation will bring.

And second… the robots are coming, so get ahead… or get out of the way.

2.
The road ahead:
our organisations

What is the potential impact of automation on the organisations we support?

Automation will profoundly impact our society, organisations and lives, driven by one inescapable reality. Machines can perform a rapidly growing number of tasks faster, cheaper and better than we can.

A profound impact on our society, organisations and lives

In reality, there's nothing new about automation. We've been automating human activities for centuries.

But this new wave is different for two reasons:

- The sheer number of human tasks that will be automated over a short period of time
- The automation of not just the physical, but the cognitive as well. In other words, we're seeing a rapid increase in *thoughtomation*: where technology is automating not just what we do with our hands, but what we do with our minds as well.

We're already seeing the establishment of digital home automation. According to eMarketer[3], for example, 36.5m people, or more than 10% of the US population, are using a voice-enabled speaker, such as Google Home or Amazon Echo, at least once a month.

We're being amazed by stories of driverless vehicles traversing our roads, nanobots coursing through our veins and artificially intelligent robotic bees pollinating our flowers. Mind you, if the latter idea sounds appealing, you might want to avoid watching series 3, episode 6 of Charlie Brooker's extraordinary TV series, Black Mirror[4].

And, over the last few years, we've seen automation accelerate in our organisations, through the growing pursuit of digital transformation, business process automation (BPA) and operational excellence. It has emerged through the widespread adoption of cloud-based business applications: everything from Microsoft Office 365 and Adobe Creative Cloud to Trello, Evernote and Slack. And automation is, perhaps, most publicly noticeable in the growing use of social media and customer service chatbots.

Moving forward, this wave of automation will only escalate. It will transform our society, organisations and lives, driven by one inescapable reality. Machines can perform a rapidly growing number of tasks faster, cheaper and better than we can.

The impact of this escalation will be profound.

On the positive side, automation will deliver previously inconceivable benefits in health, transport, communication and many other areas of our lives.

Automation could also drive huge economic gains. McKinsey predicts it could deliver between 0.8% and 1.4% productivity growth: more than the steam engine (0.3%), early robotics (0.4%) and IT (0.6%)[5]. At the same time, it could enable exciting organisational opportunities, such as improved customer value, deeper understanding, more productive, agile operations and enhanced innovation, product development, collaboration and growth.

But it isn't all smooth sailing. Socially, these technological advances will pose serious questions regarding ethics, privacy and security. Ultimately, they will even test our economic and social frameworks.
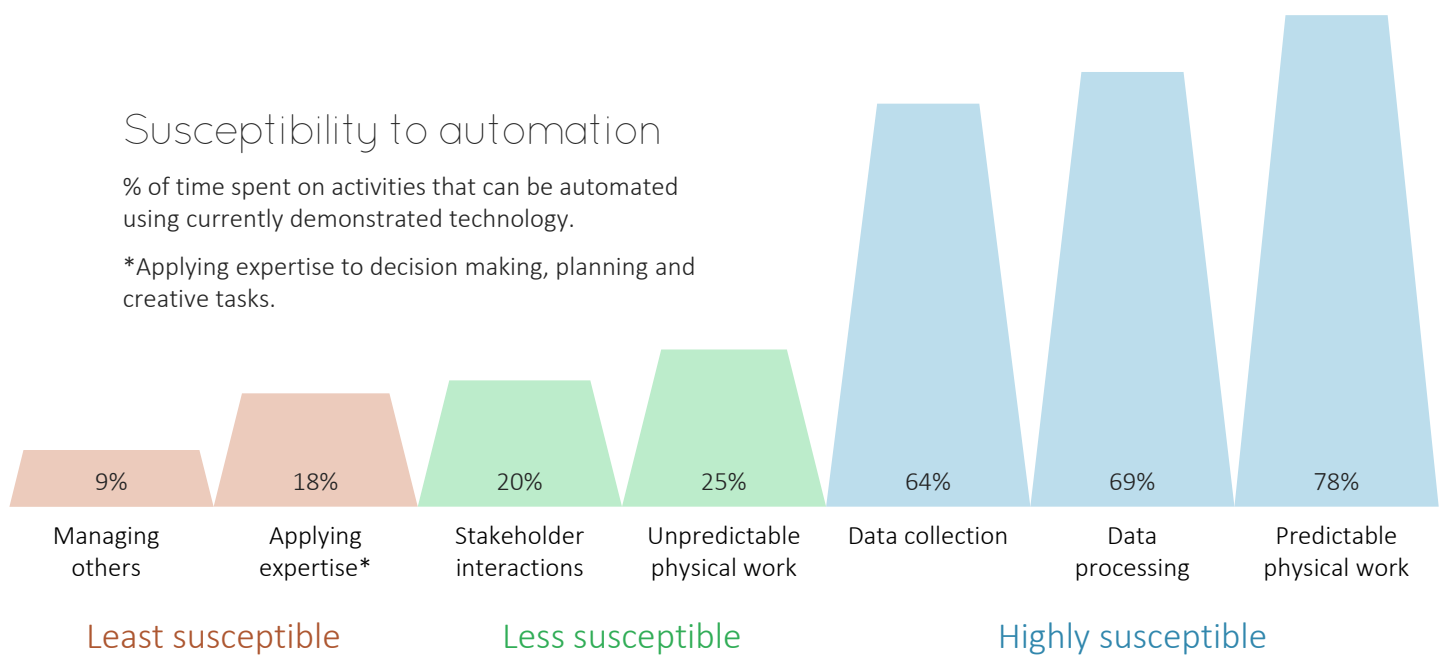
And, from an organisational perspective, competition will continue to grow and diversify. Customer choice and expectations will continue to rise. Challenging leadership and operational issues will need to be confronted. The cost and pace of change will only accelerate. And, of course, there's the looming prospect of job replacement.

Partial automation, or augmentation, will demand a constant and ongoing focus on re-structuring, re-skilling and cultural change. It will also demand that people become far more adaptable when it comes to their skills, careers and ways of working.

Automation and the evolution of work

We often think about automation in terms of jobs replaced, but it isn't quite that simple.

McKinsey has observed that only about 5% of jobs can be fully automated and, as such, they talk about the automation of *activities*, rather than *jobs*. Their research suggests that about 60% of occupations could see 30% or more of their activities automated using currently demonstrated technology[6]. As part of this research, McKinsey has compared a broad scale of organisational activities based on their susceptibility to automation.

Susceptibility to automation

% of time spent on activities that can be automated using currently demonstrated technology.

*Applying expertise to decision making, planning and creative tasks.

Managing others	Applying expertise*	Stakeholder interactions	Unpredictable physical work	Data collection	Data processing	Predictable physical work
9%	18%	20%	25%	64%	69%	78%

Least susceptible   **Less susceptible**   **Highly susceptible**

There are three important observations that emerge from McKinsey's work.

First, the more a task relies on higher-level 'human' qualities, such as creativity, judgment and relationships, the less susceptible it is to automation.

Second, the more repetitive or templated a task is, the more susceptible it is to automation.

Third, organisations will need to manage the partial automation (or augmentation) of people's jobs. This will be challenging. Augmentation will demand a constant and ongoing focus on re-structuring, re-skilling and cultural change. It will also demand that people become far more adaptable when it comes to their skills, careers and ways of working. As Susan Lund, a Partner at the McKinsey Global Institute, recently said[7]:

> *"The idea that you get education when you're young and then you stop and you go and work for 40 or 50 years with that educational training, and that's it… that's over! All of us are going to have to continue to adapt, get new skills, go back, possibly, for different types of training and credentials. But I think what's very clear is that what our kids need to do is learn how to learn, and become very flexible and adaptable."*

Etherable's story

The potential for business automation to streamline and improve our work was highlighted in a strange way by a recent post on The Workplace Slack Exchange online community[8]. One member, by the name of Etherable, asked the community a question… "is it unethical for me to not tell my employer I've automated my job?".

Etherable is employed in a full time "glorified data entry role" and is lucky enough to work from home. Being a qualified computer programmer, Etherable couldn't resist the temptation to create a program that would streamline things a bit. The end result of this tinkering is that Etherable can now perform what was a full-time job in only one to two hours a week.

However, there's more to this story than time saved. Etherable felt the need to "insert a few bugs" into the reports. Why? Because a computer can return perfect results every time – something very few humans can do. Etherable was concerned that the quality and consistency of the work would raise red flags with the boss.

Automation and tomorrow's organisations

To understand the changing role of Corporate Communications, it is important to appreciate how the organisations we support are evolving.

To understand this, several recent global surveys have been considered[9]. While each survey asks different questions, a number of common themes emerge in the answers. They point to the factors that are likely to underpin future organisational success, as shown below.

People first... customers | employees | society

Superior value
Prolific at identifying, creating, delivering and measuring customer and societal value

Talented
The right people with the right support and the right functional and human skills and values

Innovative
Able to rapidly identify, develop, commercialise and scale new ideas.

Collaborative
Able to work seamlessly across the organisation and with external partners

Agile
Able to move quickly and shift in response to market, competitive and regulatory changes

Productive
Highly streamlined and efficient with strong returns on investment

Data and digital as key enablers

Having described these factors, it is worth noting that the journey to achieving them will be just as relevant to this paper as the factors themselves. This journey will be significant for three reasons.

First, **the road ahead is challenging**. In fact, many organisations have been struggling with these capabilities for years. While technology makes achieving them more realistic (and important) than ever, it is still going to require challenging decisions and significant investments in knowledge, technology, capabilities, operations and customers. For most organisations, this transformation will take years, not months.

Second, organisational change is only going to accelerate. This **radical change** will be driven by the growing pace of change in both technology and customer, market, societal and regulatory demands. It will require organisations to think differently about change (*see section 4. First steps*).

And third, this isn't just an exercise in technology. In fact, **the most important lever we can pull to transform our organisations isn't technology. It's culture**. It's about helping people:

- Not only cope with radical change, but welcome and leverage it as an opportunity
- Work in new ways internally and externally. This includes the complexities of working in roles that are increasingly augmented by technology. That is, to collaborate with technology, not just use it.
- Change their individual culture and behaviours to meet the needs of the future. After all, changing personal behaviours is, ultimately, the only way to change an organisation's culture.

> *In the end, the more automated organisations become, the more homogenous they will be. The only thing that will differentiate them will be the capabilities, decisions and actions... the culture... of their people.*

A comment on culture: soft is the new hard

This leads us to the truly great irony of automation. It's the reality that **soft is becoming the new hard**.

In an early 2017 episode of his program 'The Next Five Years', the well-known Australian demographer, Bernard Salt, interviewed Dr Hugh Bradlow[10]. Hugh is the Chief Scientist of Australia's largest telco, Telstra, and one of Australia's most highly-regarded technology futurists.

During the interview, Bernard asked Hugh what he thought were the most important skillsets we will need as we move into a more automated future. Coming from a self-confessed "geek", it would be reasonable to expect Hugh's first answer might be STEM or coding.

But his first answer was actually something quite different. It was **empathy**.

There is a tendency to group organisational skills into 'hard' and 'soft'. Hard skills represent the more technical, functional skills that a person brings to an organisation. Meanwhile, soft skills are the more human capabilities, like collaboration, creativity and emotional intelligence.

Traditionally, organisations have valued the hard skills, while the soft skills have been pigeon-holed by many (although, definitely not all) as the touchy-feely stuff that Communications and HR teams talk about.

But, with the rise of automation, a shift is coming. Many of the hard skills are becoming automated. Already, there are machine-based options for activities as diverse as bricklaying and auditing.

At the same time, soft skills will become more important than ever. In other words, **the more prevalent automation becomes, the more important humanity becomes**. This irony exists for three reasons.

First, the ability to **work with others** (be it leading, collaborating, selling or serving) will remain critical and hard to automate. So will other 'human' capabilities, such as creativity, complex judgment and problem-solving.

Second, as already discussed, change will keep on accelerating. This **radical change** will be enormously challenging for both people and organisations. The ability to support people and guide culture will be more important than it's ever been.

And, finally, it is people, not technology, that will ultimately **differentiate** an organisation. In the end, the more automated organisations become, the more homogenous they will be. The only thing that will differentiate them will be the capabilities, decisions and actions... the culture... of their people.
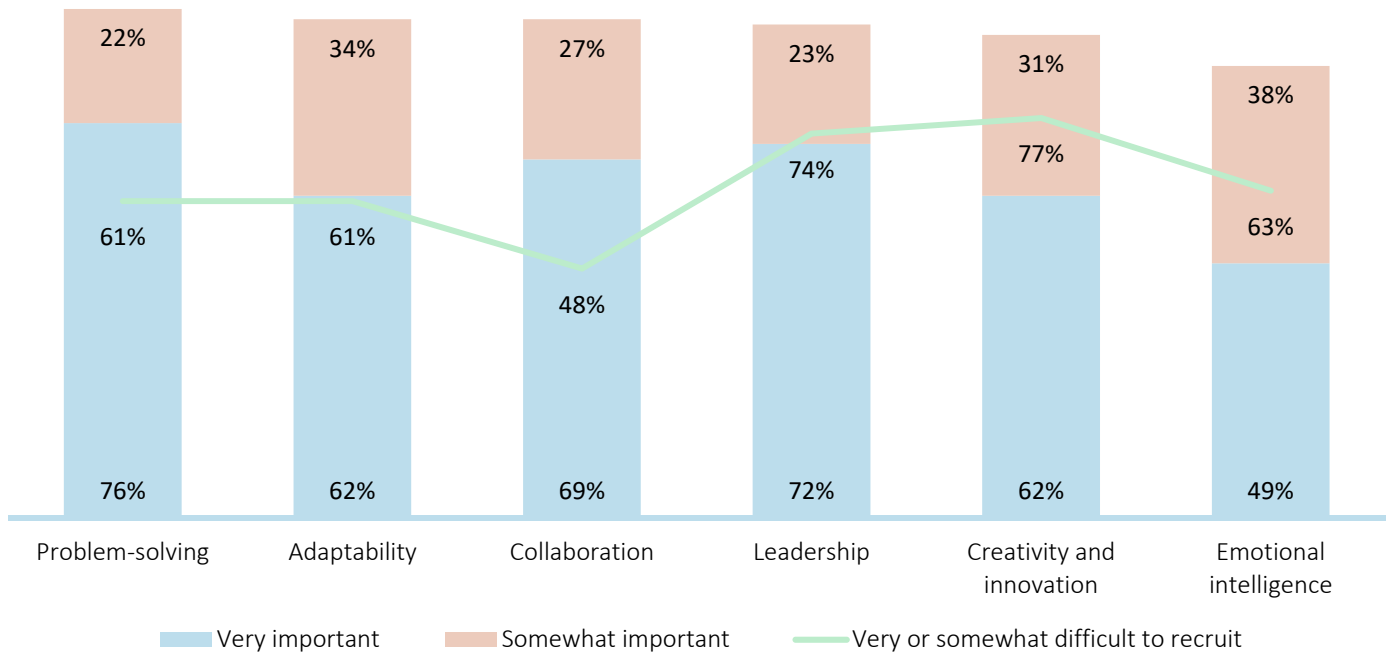
'Soft' skills by the numbers

In their recent 20th Global CEO Survey[11], PwC provided a valuable insight into how many of today's CEOs now rate the importance of these 'softer' skills. The survey also showed that CEOs tend to regard these same skills as difficult to find.

PwC demonstrated this by asking two questions:
- "In addition to technical business expertise, how important are the following skills to CEOs' organisations?"
- "How difficult do CEOs find it for their organisation to recruit people with the following skills or characteristics?"

It's particularly interesting to note that all six of these skills were seen by global CEOs as significantly more important than both digital and STEM skills.

Human skills: important, but hard to find

	Problem-solving	Adaptability	Collaboration	Leadership	Creativity and innovation	Emotional intelligence
Somewhat important	22%	34%	27%	23%	31%	38%
Very important (middle)	61%	61%	48%	74%	77%	63%
Very important (base)	76%	62%	69%	72%	62%	49%

Legend: ▬ Very important   ▬ Somewhat important   ▬ Very or somewhat difficult to recruit

The fact that soft is the new hard is a critical distinction that all organisations will need to make. And it is vital to the future of Corporate Communications, because of the role we play in managing stakeholder relationships and outcomes. Our ability to guide our leaders, people, customers and stakeholders through the wild ride we're embarking on will be central to our organisations' – and our profession's – future success.

3.
The road ahead:
our profession

How will automation change the way communicators perform their roles?

Corporate Communications could have a vital, and significantly expanded, role to play in the future. And technology will empower us with the time, information and capability to fill that role.

Clearly, the journey ahead for today's organisations will be both exciting and challenging. To take that journey, leaders are going to need some pretty special people to support them. Among the extensive strategic, operational and technological capabilities required, organisations will need people who can:

- Bring the future to life to help set the direction and drive the impetus for change
- Bring everyone together (including partners and stakeholders), align them to customer and organisational goals, move them rapidly forward and change direction when needed
- Drive knowledge and understanding across the organisation to a new level
- Lead the charge to build new capabilities across the organisation
- Lay the foundations for greater levels of collaboration and innovation
- Provide the context for making and accepting business decisions, which will sometimes be difficult to make and/or hard to understand.

These capabilities are all core to Corporate Communications. As such, communicators could have a vital, and significantly expanded, role to play in this future. And technology will empower us with the time, information and capability to fill that role. Let's look at how.

Art without arthritis

As already stated, there is nothing new about automation. In our profession, there are already many widely-used apps that automate different communications activities. These include:

- Social media (Buffer[12] and Hootsuite[13])
- Email marketing (MailChimp[14] and Campaign Monitor[15])
- Event invitations (Eventbrite[16] and TryBooking[17])
- Web publishing (WordPress[18] and Wix[19])
- Design (Canva[20]).

On top of this, there are a growing number of companies moving into the 'intelligent content' space. They are using different combinations of big data, machine learning and natural language generation (NLG) to produce and publish a wide range of marketing and corporate content.

The Associated Press[21] is using NLG to write earnings reports about 3,500 US companies each quarter. Their partner, **Automated Insights**[22], claims it is now generating more than 1.5bn pieces of content a year using NLG. Right now, the technology is limited to more data-heavy, templated forms of writing, but this is likely to evolve in time.

Quantified Communications[23] is using AI to simulate target audiences and help companies predict the right messaging and the right way to deliver it, including tone of voice, speech rate, facial cues and body language.

Textio[24] uses a massive database of global job ads to drive an 'augmented writing platform' for job ad writers. You simply type your ad and Textio will automatically suggest ways to improve it as you type. Textio also provides the rationale behind its suggestions.

Persado[25] is using similar techniques (an extensive database combined with AI) to provide a Textio-type service for marketing and communications content.

We're also seeing the emergence of artificial intelligence in the creative arts. **Taryn Southern** used the open-source AI platform, Amper Music, to compose parts of her latest album[26]. And, in 2016, **Oscar Sharp and Ross Goodwin** produced 'Sunspring', a short film based on an AI-generated script[27].

Meanwhile, communicators are increasingly relying on bots to improve and automate publishing and social media.

For example, The New York Times and BuzzFeed are using **Slack bots** (apps created using the collaboration app, Slack) to predict and measure the performance of articles[28].

And, according to the recent European Communications Monitor[29], about 6% of European organisations are using **social bots** to automate social media tasks. This is expected to rise to just under 15% by 2018. These bots are being used to:

- Respond, reply or comment on posts or tweets (51.5% of users)
- Identify and follow users on social networks (28.3%)
- Like forward or retweet posts/tweets (45.8%)
- Create content and post/tweet it on social networks (39%).

Hello Harvey

These examples provide an insight into how technology is already changing the way we communicate. But, how far could this change take us in the future?

This is where Harvey comes in. Harvey is your computer. Actually, that's not quite right.

Today, we live with all manner of devices – computers, smartphones, tablets, smart TVs, smartwatches etc. The list just keeps getting longer. Every one of these devices is different. Different operating systems. Different storage. And so on.

In the future, you'll have someone like Harvey. Harvey is an intelligence that lives in the cloud. He supports and collaborates with you through all your devices.

These devices will no longer be a disconnected plethora of electronics. Each will be a window to Harvey and, in that respect, they'll be completely united.

Harvey is your eyes and ears in the digital world. Harvey is all your folders and files. Harvey is your computer memory. Harvey knows pretty much everything there is to know about you. And Harvey can talk to just about every other Harvey on the planet. We'll all have our own Harvey, although they'll, no doubt, have different names.

Driven by a growing array of intelligent technologies, Harvey will almost seem human… or, perhaps, superhuman. Imagine Google's Assistant, Siri, Cortana or Alexa, but 1,000 times smarter. Or imagine a simpler version of Iron Man's JARVIS or The Good Place's Janet. That's Harvey.

Harvey is going to reinvent the way you communicate in the years to come. To illustrate, let's imagine what the world of communications might look like with Harvey at the helm.
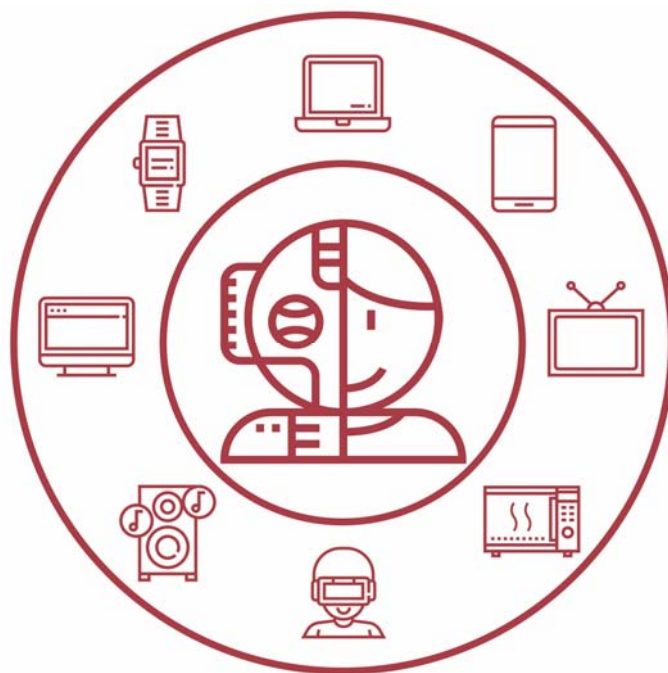
Imagine...
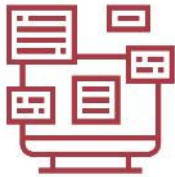
Imagine you're publishing a new **online thought leadership article**. You press 'post' and Harvey not only publishes the blog, but analyses it, optimises it for search, writes 'share-worthy' comments, decides where and when to post them and schedules the activity. He also identifies the most relevant stakeholders (such as journalists) and messages them. Harvey then monitors all the social feedback and responds in real-time to 75% of it, while routing the 25% he's not programmed to deal with to you. Along the way, Harvey has identified an emerging new influencer in your industry. He's provided you with a full profile covering her background and attitudes, together with an engagement strategy recommendation. Harvey has done all of this without you lifting a finger.

Imagine sitting in a conference room surrounded by white boards. You are participating in a hastily-convened meeting to **brainstorm ideas and plan an urgent global recall**. However, neither you nor the other 25 attendees from around the world have had to leave your desks. The entire workshop is being conducted via virtual reality. Harvey not only convened the meeting, but is facilitating it. He knows the full background to the recall. He's contributing research, listening to and translating all your comments (because not all of you speak English). Harvey is also noting the key points and actions on the white boards. At the end of the meeting, he confirms the actions with the team and schedules each action with the responsible person. He also takes note of the recall and everything that led to it. He will use this to suggest longer-term remedies and flag a potential issue if he sees a similar set of circumstances in the future.

Imagine **writing a results announcement speech**. Harvey gathers and analyses all your performance data as well as the comparative performance of other industry players, based on releases, news and analyst reports. He uses this data to write the speech. By the time you touch it, the speech is actually more than half done. All you need to do is review Harvey's draft and add in the more creative sections, such as case studies, personal stories and so on. As you write these, Harvey helps you in real-time by suggesting ways to improve the messaging and tone of your writing.

Imagine **planning the announcement of a major new community initiative**. You decide to go for a walk to think it through. While walking, you decide to have a chat with Harvey via your mobile. You ask Harvey questions. He answers you. As you talk, Harvey analyses the real-life social and mainstream media activity surrounding similar announcements worldwide over the last five years. He also looks at the dynamics of each impacted community. He takes this information and briefs you on the most effective announcement strategies for each community. He also predicts the potential results and issues that could come from each strategy to help you make a final decision.

Imagine you've been tasked with **reviewing your organisation's strategic and brand narrative**. A major part of this process is engagement and, among many other activities, you're planning a survey. But, then, something occurs to you. Harvey not only has access to every single digitised word written by or about your organisation over the last five years, but he can analyse them as well. He can also analyse what has been said by your customers based on research, social and mainstream media, contact reports and so on. To add to that, Harvey can also 'deep-dive' your competitors. He can analyse all this data to look for patterns, themes, messages and tone. And he can identify gaps, such as a mismatch between what you say and what your customers think. He can use this analysis to suggest the ideal you, the real you and what you should be saying and doing to really drive performance and stand out in the marketplace.

CHIPS & BRAINS:
automation and our profession's future

So, we've imagined the future with some specifics… a few random examples. Let's now look at the future more generally. How could this new wave of automation help you and what could you be doing as a result?

We can do this using an analogy… CHIPS & BRAINS.

More and more, the chips (technology) will…

CHIPS

The chips (technology) will be able to…

C Create
H Help
I Inform
P Publish
S Streamline

Create: Take on a large share of the content creation that occupies so much of your time. This will begin with more routine, templated and data-driven work (in effect, anything that you can write a rule for). Over time, however, increased computing power, machine learning and more sophisticated applications will put even complex writing and design within the reach of machines.

Help: Help and guide your work. Technology will help you choose the right audiences and channels and define the right messages and multimedia. It will take care of the more 'routine' social and customer service conversations and flag the complex ones for your attention. It will help you plan and report and collaborate. And, over time, technology will guide your decision-making by showing you how past approaches (both your own and other companies') worked in given circumstances.

Inform: Give you access to far more knowledge about your organisation and the world you operate in. You'll be able to access knowledge without wading through spreadsheets or lists of links. Instead, you'll ask natural language questions and get natural language answers to just about anything you need: from organisational performance and dynamics; to changing customer and stakeholder needs; to important influencers and conversations; to looming market shifts and issues; to new ideas and technologies you could be using.

Publish: Automate just about every publishing activity: from planning and scheduling to posting and measuring. This will free up an enormous amount of time and make the distribution of content far more precise. For example, you'll be able to produce a single media release and, in seconds, tailor and publish it to 100 different community media outlets.

Streamline: Ultimately, this means that technology will dramatically streamline just about every routine task you do… and, over time, many of the non-routine tasks as well.

That leaves the brains (you!) with more time, information and capability. You'll be more free to focus on:

Building: Building the vision for your organisation and the capabilities, networks, plans and processes to achieve it. Building the skills, alignment and engagement of your people. Building the engagement and understanding of your customers, partners and stakeholders. And building your own skills, so you can provide greater value and be more prepared personally for the future.

Researching: Increasing your understanding of the organisation (how it operates, how it's performing and what it needs) and the dynamics and needs of your marketplace. At the same time, becoming even more expert in the key themes and topics that will drive your communications.

Advocating: Becoming a more vocal and informed advocate for your people, customers, stakeholders and society in general. Ensuring their voice is heard in every organisational decision – from the annual strategy review to the day-to-day (*see page 24*).

Influencing: Increasing your influence both within and outside your organisation is a particularly important opportunity. Your ability to influence will be crucial to leading change, ensuring stakeholder needs are met, enabling collaboration and quality decision-making, as well as many other activities.

Networking: Expanding and strengthening your internal and external networks to increase your ability to understand needs, develop plans and influence the results. At the same time, of course, we all have a role as communicators to build everyone's networks… not just our own. With a greater focus on connecting people, you can vastly increase engagement, understanding, alignment and collaboration.

Strategy: Finally, taking the time saved on routine, tactical tasks and using it to focus on the bigger-picture strategic issues facing the organisation. How can you influence strategy development? How can you more directly impact the profit & loss and balance sheet? How can you smooth the road-blocks and improve your organisation's operational performance? And, of course, how can you better demonstrate the business impact of your efforts?

BRANS

This will free the brains (you!) to focus on…

B Building
R Researching
A Advocating
I Influencing
N Networking
S Strategy

4.
First steps

What can communicators do today to build the organisations of tomorrow?

Two forces. Two choices.

This paper has looked at two primary forces that will increasingly change the role of Corporate Communications.

The first is **the impact of automation and radical change on our organisations**. Organisations will need far more communications support to navigate and benefit from this change.

The second force is **the impact of automation on the communications function**. Technology will automate many routine tasks. In doing so, it will empower communicators with more time, information and capability.

When we consider these changes, we're left with two options as a profession.

The first is to **keep doing what we're doing, but do it faster and better**. Clearly, this is a positive outcome, but it has two significant downsides. We will miss an enormous opportunity to expand our influence, impact and the value we create. And we will experience downward pressure on the size of Corporate Communications teams, because fewer people will be needed to perform the same tasks.

The second option is to raise the bar. In other words, **expand the role of Corporate Communications to meet the needs of our radically changing organisations**. This has the potential to dramatically increase the value of Corporate Communications and the demand for (and investment in) our services.

Our STAKE in the future

So now we get to the pointy end of this paper.

If you choose the second option, what can you do? The following are five initiatives that could help you bring this opportunity to life. None of them are new. They can all be started now. And they will all help to build:

- Efficiency, while freeing the Corporate Communications team from routine tasks
- The skills that organisations will desperately need as technological and cultural change accelerates
- The role the Corporate Communications team plays and the value it delivers
- The business case for investment in Corporate Communications.

Importantly, each of these recommendations will not only help prepare you for the future. They will strengthen your team today as well.

So, at the risk of overloading you with acronyms, welcome to our profession's STAKE in the future:

- **Strategic alignment:** the ties that bind
- **Transformation:** the champions of change
- **Advocacy:** the voice of the people
- **Knowledge:** the cult of curiosity
- **Education:** the voice of the future.

1. Strategic alignment: the ties that bind

A 2015 McKinsey survey[30] found that "Creating a shared vision and alignment around strategic direction across the organization" was the most important and second most challenging activity an incoming executive could undertake. As the pace of change accelerates, strategic alignment will become increasingly critical because it:

- Underpins strategy execution by ensuring that everyone is moving in the same direction… united by a clear, shared understanding of the strategy and goals
- Helps to de-centralise decision-making, leading to a more agile organisation. Among other things, this will make it easier to shift gears when the market changes unexpectedly (which it will)
- Supports far more clear marketing and communications, which will drive internal and external engagement, collaboration and overall organisational performance.

For these reasons, there is a strong argument that strategic alignment should become a foundation metric for every Corporate Communications team.

Recommendations:

Work closely with Marketing and Strategy to create a simple, credible, inspiring strategic narrative that brings your purpose, value proposition, brand, values, strategy and vision together. This narrative should, at least at the high level, make it easy for everyone to internalise:

- Who you are
- Where you're going
- How you'll get there.

Work closely with Strategy, Finance and HR to ensure that the principles underlying this narrative are embedded in your:

- Planning
- Goal-setting (organisational and personal)
- Performance management.

Work with the Executive and Senior Leadership teams to ensure they understand their crucial responsibility in driving alignment, and how they can live up to that responsibility.

Ensure that all communications and conversations are clearly aligned to this narrative. **You're one organisation. Ultimately, you only have one story.**

Go beyond your organisation. How can you align external stakeholders, such as customers, partners and influencers, to ensure they're willingly on the same journey with you?

2. Transformation: the champions of change

As change accelerates, organisations need to shift from change management to change leadership. While they may seem similar, change management and change leadership are quite different. As John Kotter has explained[31]:

> *"Change management… refers to a set of basic tools or structures intended to keep any change effort under control. The goal is often to minimize the distractions and impacts of the change. Change leadership is much more associated with putting an engine on the whole change process, and making it go faster, smarter, more efficiently."*

Another way to think about this is transforming the organisation…

- From **change takers:** begrudgingly accepting change as a costly, disruptive necessity
- To **change makers:** successfully managing change on a day-to-day basis and actively leveraging it as an opportunity to improve, grow and build competitive advantage.

Recommendations:

As former US President, Barack Obama said in 2008[32], *"We are the change that we seek."* Inspire change leadership by becoming a change leader yourself. Obtain Executive support to actively look for ways to automate and transform the Corporate Communications team. To support this, build the business case for what the team could be: performing an expanded role and delivering greater value.

Build a clear picture of what change leadership looks like, why it's important and the potential benefits it could bring. Then, use your experiences (see above) as a case study. As a relatively small team, Corporate Communications is ideally placed to be a testbed for change leadership strategies.

Take an active role in any transformation planning so you have a full understanding of the steps being taken and can contribute to the planning process.

Make sure you have control over change communications. Ensure that any incoming change communicators (e.g. as part of a change management consultancy) are inextricably aligned to the Corporate Communications team.

3. Advocacy:
the voice of the people

As has already been discussed, the coming years will be marked by radical change. This will create many opportunities (as change always does), but it will stretch the capacity of both organisations and people.

Automation will also lead to a very delicate balancing act. One of the most exciting aspects of automation is the ability to improve efficiency and customer experience at the same time. But, if you go too hard on the efficiencies (which some will be tempted to do), you'll run the risk of seriously compromising the outcomes you deliver for people.

To further complicate this, our organisations will face many difficult decisions regarding technology adoption. These range from complex moral, ethical and leadership dilemmas to questions about:

- How we manage and support our people
- How we create and manage our growing army of technologies, algorithms and bots.

A clear priority in all these conversations is the need to focus on people. This isn't simply a case of being nice. The only way to build sustainable growth is to create sustainable value. At a time of growing competition and consumer choice, voice and mistrust, failing our stakeholders could be catastrophic in the long-term.

Somewhere in all this change, someone has to stand up and be the voice of our colleagues, customers and communities. Someone has to help our organisations build their sense of openness, trust and caring… of humanity… during what could be a wild ride.

There are few people more attuned to these issues than the Corporate Communications team. As such, there are few people better placed to perform this vital advocacy role than communicators.

Recommendations:

Leverage technology (as already discussed) to deepen your understanding of your organisation's many stakeholders – who they are, how they're changing and what they need.

Find your way into the middle of the key discussions. When strategy is being developed. When change programs are being mapped. When the technology and algorithms that will drive our processes and customer experience are being planned. Be the voice that's constantly asking… what about our people? What about our customers and stakeholders? What about our communities? Are we doing the right things for them? Will the outcomes of our decisions work for them?

Work to bring your colleagues together and build a more 'human' culture within your organisation. Give people the opportunity to share and discuss their fears, concerns and ideas.

And, most importantly of all, make sure the organisation listens.

4. Knowledge: the cult of curiosity

Knowledge is the absolute bedrock of Corporate Communications' future. The greater our knowledge, the more effective our work will be.

Technological advances will arm you with an unprecedented amount of information. But, it is up to you to turn that information into knowledge. That, of course, requires curiosity.

Recommendations:

Build a thirst for knowledge about:

- **What's coming:** technological, economic, social and industry trends and what they mean for the organisation and its customers and stakeholders

- **Other people:** an appreciation of the needs of those you work with – customers, stakeholders, partners, colleagues (across the team and the organisation) and leaders

- **The organisation:** a deep understanding of what the organisation does, how it operates, its strategy, performance and competitive position

- **The numbers:** the ability to analyse and interpret the growing bank of financial, operational and statistical data and get to what it means. This might seem counterintuitive given the emergence of cognitive analytics. Nevertheless, it's vital because communicators need to know enough to ask the right questions, interrogate, interpret and 'sense-check' the responses and, ultimately, uncover the most valuable insights.

- **Emerging communications technology and practices:** communicators can only make the most of new communications innovations if they know of their existence.

Make knowledge sharing and discussion a regular and significant part of your team meetings.

Leverage collaboration apps to share and discuss knowledge across the team. Apps such as Toby and Trello are inexpensive, simple and powerful ways to capture and share information.

Build your focus on training and upskilling. Understand which of today's skills will be important and which won't. Also, understand the best options for insourcing vs outsourcing. Focus on building the important skills that will drive greater long-term value and adaptability.

5. Education:
the voice of the future

For communicators, it isn't enough to acquire knowledge. Passing it onto others is both our responsibility and a powerful opportunity.

One of the most important areas for education involves bringing the future to life. That is, to help the organisation prepare for change by fostering a deeper, shared understanding of what tomorrow will look like.

Recommendations:

Research heavily and work closely with the CEO, Executive and internal/external subject matter experts to build a clear, compelling and research-based picture of:

- How the marketplace is changing
- How customers' and stakeholders' needs are evolving
- What this means for the organisation.

Develop an extensive communication plan to drive this understanding across the organisation.

Go beyond communication. Seek a role in the strategy review process so you can input and develop a deep understanding of the strategy. You will need this to build strategic alignment (which was covered in the first recommendation).

At the same time, use the knowledge you are gaining to:

- Provide a more extensive Executive and Senior Leadership counsel
- Build a deeper appreciation of the organisation's performance and decisions through broader communication, contextualisation and discussion. This will ensure that people have the information and context they need to navigate radical change as both individuals and teams.

Expectations... not just aspirations

Earlier this year, the Arthur W Page Society released a report looking at how CEOs saw the role of the Chief Communications Officer (CCO)[33]. This report was the third in a series that began in 2007: giving the Society an opportunity to map the changing views of CEOs over the last decade.

The five key changes in CEO sentiment are shown below. They send a clear message that many of the skills covered in the five STAKE recommendations aren't just 'nice-to-haves'. They are now what is expected of Corporate Communicators by their CEOs.

Total business knowledge
In 2007, CEOs hoped CCOs would know about their organisation in detail. In 2017, they require it.

Corporate strategy
Communications was seen as an important contributor to strategy, but did not have a seat at the table. Today, CCOs are recognised as having an important role to play in the creation and implementation of strategy.

Social value
CEOs saw social value and CSR as important, but not a key priority for Communications or Strategy. Today, social value is seen as a key part of both... and a major role for the CCO.

Authenticity
In 2007, CEOs recognised that consumers wanted transparency and authenticity. Today, they are looking to CCOs to help them manage their online engagement to ensure it is authentic and consistent with the brand.

Risks vs. Threats
CEOs saw the CCO role as largely tactical with a focus on identifying and countering threats. CCOs are now expected to be able to identify and counter issues before they escalate into threats.

Similar sentiments were also expressed in European CEO interviews conducted by the VMAGroup in 2016[1]. The following quotes come from this report.

"In my view, the involvement of communications needs to take place at the very beginning of the strategy-building process. It's important for them to be there, challenging ideas and highlighting opportunities: 'What does that really mean?' 'Can we live up to these standards?' 'Have you thought about A, B, C?'"

Andreas Joehle, CEO, Hartmann Group

"We are currently seeing a complete revolution, as the world rapidly becomes ever more transparent. The pressure to increase transparency is enormous, and I believe that corporate communications can play a very significant role in that process. The ability to steer this process in the right direction – to communicate your story, your strategy, your culture – is becoming ever more important."

Stepan Breedveld, CEO, Ordina

"I think that's one of the internal things that a really good corporate comms person does: they hold a mirror up to the organisation and keep everyone honest, and they do it by focusing on what's important and what's real and understandable."

David Lockwood, CEO, Laird PLC

"The key challenge is: have that foresight to anticipate what is likely to become important over the next few years, because if you get it wrong now, it's going to be hard to recover."

Mike Hawes, CEO, SMMT

"Communications people should be closer to the business. They should be able to understand the company figures properly – to understand the business, but also where it's heading and what issues it's going to face."

Paul de Krom, CEO, TNO

In Conclusion

As a result of automation, the next few years will be exciting, but complex and challenging for Corporate Communications. It will also be a time of fantastic opportunity: the chance to dramatically expand our role, while increasing the value we deliver and the subsequent investment in our services.

To do this, however, we need to embrace automation. We need to free ourselves from routine tasks and take on more of the work that will meet the radically changing needs of our organisations. And we need to start this process today.

To put it another way, (and in blunt terms), we can either allow automation to heavily de-humanise Corporate Communications or we can embrace it as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reinvent the role we play inside and outside the workplace.

The choice would seem obvious.

Appendix: the robot army

There are literally hundreds of technologies (applications, devices and networks) that make up 'the robot army' – the emerging technologies that are reinventing our societies, organisations and lives. The following is a list of some of the more prominent terms that you, as a communicator, are likely to run into.

Automation: the ability for technology to perform tasks and help to reduce or eliminate the need for human input. In this respect, it is not so much a technology in its own right, but the output of a wide range of different technologies, including some of those listed below.

Algorithm: an algorithm is a set of step-by-step instructions, or rules, that tell a computer how and when to perform a specific task. We tend to think of algorithms in terms of computing but, in reality, they are everywhere. For example, a recipe is a form of algorithm.

Artificial intelligence (AI): the ability for machines to perform intelligent human functions, such as acquiring knowledge, solving problems, learning, communicating in natural language and perceiving their environments. Google's Director of Engineering, Ray Kurzweil, believes computers will reach human levels of intelligence by 2029[34].

Augmented reality (AR): the ability to superimpose relevant computer-generated content over a view of the physical world. In doing so, AR effectively 'unites' the virtual and physical worlds. An example of AR is the soon to be released next generation of Google Glass.

Big data: refers to the enormous quantities of real-time data that is now being generated by digitised services and processes. The volume of data being produced is so large that specialised tools to capture, store and analyse it are required.

Bots: are applications that are designed to automate a specific task and/or replicate human actions. Bots are everywhere – integrating platforms, automating processes and enabling communications (e.g. **chatbots**). On the darker side, they're also a feature of viruses and malware.

The cloud: refers to the ability to outsource computer storage and functionality, rather than manage it internally. Like **fast networks**, and **accelerating computer speed**, the cloud is a critical enabler of this new era of change.

Cognitive analytics: technology that can analyse large quantities of data and provide answers to natural language questions. Cognitive analytics also refers to the ability to 'learn' from each analysis to improve the output of future analyses… i.e. machine learning.

Internet of Things (IoT): the seemingly endless array of devices that are being internet-enabled and embedded with a range of technologies, such as software and sensors. These devices have millions of potential applications in both consumer and industrial situations.

Machine learning: the ability for technology to learn and improve future outputs without being explicitly programmed to do so.

Natural language generation (NLG): the ability for technology to express structured data as a written narrative. Another field – **natural language understanding** – takes this to the next level by processing unstructured data.

Pattern recognition: the ability for technology to detect, analyse and respond to patterns in a wide range of content. This encompasses many fields, with the most well-known being speech and facial recognition.

Virtual reality (VR): a three-dimensional scene or environment that can be interacted with using either a VR headset or a specialised VR viewing room.

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