



Finding stars in a small universe

The changing world of the internal communications consultant - a personal view

- By Hillary Scarlett

Like most internal communications people, as VMA's recent research showed, I fell into internal communication by accident – I set out to be in advertising and marketing but got diverted in my mid 20's. Unlike most people, I have now been in this field for almost 20 years which means that when VMA asked me to write this article, it presented an interesting opportunity to reflect on how the sector has changed and the impact these changes have had on the life of a consultant.



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I first started out in internal communication in the late 1980's with The Wyatt Company, now Watson Wyatt. We must have been one of the first internal communication consulting teams in the UK. The work was largely focused on informing employees about pension plans (this was the time when employees were first allowed to opt out of their company pension schemes), pay and the occasional survey on what employees thought about communication, how it could be improved

etc. Of all the companies I worked with, just one had an Employee Communications Manager and he was a senior engineer on a one-year project who escaped back to engineering as soon as his year was up. Employee Communications Managers were thin on the ground.

After a stint working in-house for a healthcare company, I moved in the early 90's to the newly-formed Smythe Dorward Lambert (SDL). These were pioneering times: many organisations were just beginning to wake up to the fact that if they could engage their employees and create better working relationships, then employees might be able to contribute more and become more committed to the work they were doing. There were still many sceptics: I remember at one workshop with senior managers of a pharmaceutical company being heckled and told we were a bunch of communists for wanting to open up employee communication.

There wasn't much research around to demonstrate the link between employee communication, engagement and business performance and much of the work was based on a belief and gut-feel that this must be the right direction. A good number of the projects were focused on helping organisations to create their first employee communication strategy and helping companies to set up an internal communication team. Many editors of the in-house newsletter suddenly found themselves with the title of Employee Communications Manager – some happily made the leap, some didn't.

Through the 1990's more and more internal communication teams were set up, and experience in-house grew. This, I think, in part led to the demise of the large internal communication consultancies. Whereas in the 90's many clients would rely on external consultants to develop internal communication strategy or to take the communication lead on M&As or change programmes, by the early 00's employee communication managers had the confidence, experience and ability to do this themselves. After ten years at SDL, I left and in January 2003 became an independent consultant. My first project came through VMA: a part-time interim role on a

change project at BAA. A change project with the NSPCC followed and then a communications project with Virgin Atlantic Airways. I was off...

The current consulting market is different from ten years ago. It is much more Adult-Adult: clients and consultants work in partnership which, personally, I enjoy much more. Consultants are less in 'expert' or 'Doctor' mode: 'Just tell me what the problem is, and I'll sort it out for you', and recognise that ultimate responsibility lies with the client. (Although I do remember a couple of my colleagues in the middle of a merger being told by the client: 'Forget this process consulting stuff, just tell me what to do!'). Clients tend to use experienced consultants as a sounding-board or perhaps to undertake specific parts of communication strategy development or implementation where they do not have the resources or specific expertise in-house. One Government department I recently worked with created a small team of independent consultants they could draw on through their change programme. This enabled them to benefit from external experience while still owning and leading the change programme themselves.

One of the well-known challenges of being an independent consultant or interim is managing the workload and keeping one eye on where the next project will come from. There is no easy way around this: you just have to do both. The other challenge for interims and independent consultants is how to continue to learn. I've found several solutions to this: I read a lot of business books and business magazines. I'm part of a small book reading group that meets once a quarter to discuss a business book (we're currently reading *The Art of Possibility* by Zander and Zander). Also once a quarter, I meet some other independent consultants to discuss issues, share ideas and test out new thinking. I also book myself onto training courses each year.

So, what is the state of the internal communication consulting market? I think it is in a healthy state. Ownership rests with clients and they are now able to select consultants who meet their needs both in terms of skill and experience and in terms of cultural fit. However, some clients have commented that in this consultancy market of independents and interims, it can be harder to find the 'right' consultant.

There are other challenges and questions for the sector: the large internal communication consultancies were good training grounds for people new into the field. Now that they have largely gone, there are fewer opportunities for people who are just starting out. Will we be able to continue to attract highly-talented people?

The consultancies also prided themselves on bringing innovative thinking to the market and had the resources to invest in research. If our sector is to continue to grow and mature, we collectively need to continue to challenge, innovate and share those new ideas - and if, in the process, we get called a bunch of communists by some of our more sceptical colleagues, at least we know we have touched a nerve.

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