

CCOs' Strategic Role in Large Italian Companies

El papel del Dircom en las grandes organizaciones italianas

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Abstract

This study explores the extant state of art of Public Relations and Corporate Communication as profession in Italy. More specifically it aims to evaluate to what extent large organizations in Italy attribute strategic value to the function of communication, with a particular focus on the degree of its institutionalization and the strategic contribution provided by Italian CCOs to organizational competitiveness and success. To this end, an inquiry was conducted via a quantitative survey that addressed and outlined Communication department features and CCOs' profile in 300 largest organizations operating in Italy.

According to our findings, PR function has established itself within organizational structure, and Italian CCOs have become increasingly involved in strategic organizational decision processes. In their role CCOs serve as strategic advisors to CEOs and other Chief Officers.

Additionally, within the most innovative organizations, communication seems to play an extremely pivotal role and is exemplified by CCOs' high level of involvement in decision-making process.

Our study allows us to outline a precise description of current trends within large organizations in Italy in terms of communication function and its role. Thereby the study underlines weaknesses and strengths of Italian CCOs' role as well as it pinpoints areas

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that need improvement. Furthermore this study enriches the stream of research concerning institutionalization of PR and strategic communication as well as it provides practitioners and scholars with precise insights into the strategic role of communication and its link with innovation.

Keywords: Public Relations, Strategic Communication, Quantitative survey, large organizations, Italy, Institutionalization

Resumen

Este estudio explora el estado de las Relaciones Públicas y la Comunicación Corporativa como profesión en Italia. Concretamente, se pretende evaluar en qué medida las grandes organizaciones en Italia atribuyen valor estratégico a la función de la comunicación, con un enfoque particular en el grado de su institucionalización y la contribución estratégica proporcionada por CCO (directores de comunicación) italianos a la competitividad de la organización y el éxito. Con este fin, la investigación se llevó a cabo a través de una encuesta cuantitativa que dirigió y delineó las características del departamento de Comunicación y con el perfil del director en 300 organizaciones más grandes que operan en Italia.

De acuerdo con nuestros resultados, la función de relaciones públicas se ha establecido dentro de la estructura organizacional y los directores de comunicación italianos se han visto cada vez más involucrados en los procesos de toma de decisiones estratégicas de la organización. En su papel, los dircom sirven como asesores estratégicos a los directores generales y otros directivos.

Además, dentro de las organizaciones más innovadoras, la comunicación parece jugar un papel crucial y se ejemplifica con alto nivel de participación en el proceso de toma de decisiones de los dircom.

Nuestro estudio nos permite esbozar una descripción precisa de las tendencias actuales dentro de las grandes organizaciones en Italia en términos de función de comunicación y su papel. De esta manera el estudio pone de relieve las debilidades y fortalezas del papel del dircom italiano, al tiempo que señala las áreas que necesitan mejorar. Además, este estudio enriquece la corriente de la investigación relativa a la institucionalización de las relaciones públicas y comunicación estratégica, así como proporciona a los profesionales y académicos ideas precisas sobre el papel estratégico de la comunicación y su relación con la innovación.

Palabras clave: Relaciones Públicas, comunicación estratégica, encuesta cuantitativa, grandes organizaciones, Italia, institucionalización.

Summary

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Sumario

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1. INTRODUCTION

An established stream in Public Relations and Corporate Communication has emphasized the increasing relevance of communication function within modern organizations. Scholars highlight a line of research focused on investigating the characteristics of the Public Relations profession at international levels. To this regard, empirical studies have been conducted in Europe to explore the way the profession is practiced in different countries (Sriramesh, Vercic, 2009; Moreno et al., 2009; Moreno et al., 2010; Zerfass et al., 2013) and how it is institutionalized within the organizational structure by becoming more and more strategic.

However, little empirical research has been devoted to the analysis of the Italian context and to the evaluation of the institutionalization degree of the communication function. Consequently, it will be necessary to go deeper, to understand at what extent the role of communication is acquiring strategic relevance within organizations operating in Italy.

According to these premises, this paper is devoted to gauge the current state and the evolution of Public Relations and Communication profession in Italy and to explore to what extent large modern organizations conceive communication strategically. More precisely, the paper aims to evaluate the degree of institutionalization of Public Relations and Communication in the Italian context by exploring the role played by Italian CCOs and their hierarchical and organizational position. Furthermore the study covers specific areas such as CCOs' competencies and education; scope and content of communication activities; the integration of PR/Communication function within the organization and if it is accepted as a managerial function; communication results measurement and social media usage; tendencies of PR budget and relationship with consulting companies.

Finally, in order to better understand the eventual link between communication and organizational success, the analysis will focus on the strategic role assigned to communication by innovative organizations.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Within the last ten years, theoretical studies and empirical research conducted in the field of Public Relations have fostered a deep debate concerning the strategic role of communication and its features (Lurati, Eppler, 2006; Hallahan et al., 2007; Beurer-Züllig et al., 2009; Moreno et al., 2009; Moreno et al., 2010; Zerfass et al., 2013). As a result, a complex picture has emerged, where the acknowledgment of the increased relevance of communication represents a common factor that provides a vast array of contributions.

According to the authors, an institutionalization process of the communication function is under way. Indeed, it is expanding the number of organizations, where communication activities are centralized in and managed by a unique department reporting directly to the Top Management, exemplifying the growing importance of communication (Romenti et al., 2013). Furthermore communication function is becoming more and more an integral part of modern organizations (Tench et al., 2009) as it increasingly supports and facilitates the decision-making process, by contributing strategically to organizational value creation.

Even though communication is acquiring relevance within organizational structure, yet upon the examination of the concept of strategic communication, the analysis of the role of professionals and the nature of their contribution appear more complex and multifaceted.

As underlined by Hallahan et al. (2007), the concept of strategic communication has been examined in academic literature and has obtained as a result a variety of definitions and analytical perspectives that have put on evidence different features of the concept. In their seminal work, the authors summarize the different perspectives by providing a definition of strategic communication that is intended as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission” (Hallahan et al., 2007: 3). Furthermore the authors underline the relevance of the professional role implemented by

employees, top management and communication practitioners, who through “intentional activities” enhance how organizations advance their mission and achieve organizational aims.

As a topic, the professional role and its link to the institutionalization process has been broadened at the national and international level (Valentini, 2010; Moreno et al., 2010; Zerfass et al., 2013). For instance, upon examination of the Italian context at a national level, Valentini (2010), noted that a positive relationship existed between the institutionalization process of communication and the level of credibility and professionalism of Italian practitioners. According to the author, credibility and professionalism could improve the professional recognition of Italian Public Relations. At an international level, some authors emphasized that the role of the communicator as strategic advisor (Moreno et al., 2010; Zerfass et al., 2013) was significant. According to these authors communication professionals are required to show a proactive attitude in formulating proposals and advancing suggestions concerning strategic organizational decisions

Finally, in order to better understand the nature of PR professional contribution to organizational competitiveness and success, Invernizzi and Romenti (2011) proposed a more suitable conceptual framework to integrate the different ways in which strategic communication and its contribution have been conceived and pursued, while being debated amongst scholars. More specifically, by integrating the Entrepreneurial Organization Theories (i.e. Stevenso, Jarillo, 1990; Alvarez, Barney, 2004) with the theoretical principles proposed in the strategic communication field, they develop the Entrepreneurial Communication Paradigm (ECP) (Invernizzi, Romenti, 2011, 2013), with the aim to interpret the strategic role of communication according to the most recent contributions of the theories of the firm.

The new framework identifies four dimensions/components of strategic communication: 1) *Constituting*, that refers to the role of communication in interpreting the dynamics characterizing the competitive environment, in detecting strategic opportunities, and in suggesting new strategic options for the organization; 2) *Aligning*, that deals with continuous listening activity to include stakeholders’ needs and expectations in corporate

decisions and to engage them by creating a durable network of strong partnership; 3) *Visioning*, that refers to the role of communication in positioning corporate mission, objectives, and decisions in the mind of stakeholders with the aim of gaining legitimacy to operate and getting their support in achieving organizational goals; 4) *Energizing*, that is the role of communication in fostering organizational members and partners' creative and innovative potential in order to stimulate their cooperation and their ability to actively support organization's management and growth.

Based on such remarks, our study addresses and explores to what extent modern complex organization consider communication as a strategic asset in Italy. More specifically the study aims to achieve the following objectives: (1) to provide a detailed analysis of the communication profession development process within the large organizations operating in Italy, by illustrating on-going changes and trends; (2) to analyse the professional the role played by Communication Managers within the organizations; 3) to define and explore the strategic contribution communication could provide as an enhancement towards organizational competitiveness and success; 4) to explore the link between strategic relevance of communication and level of organizational innovativeness. Consequently, the following research questions are posited:

RQ1. What is the level of institutionalization of communication function within large companies that operate in Italy?

RQ2. At what level do Communication Directors of the large companies that operate in Italy play the role of strategic advisor?

RQ3. To what extent are the institutionalization of communication function and the strategic role of communication professionals linked to the entrepreneurial and innovative orientation of organizations?

3. METHODOLOGY

In order to achieve these aims and to answer the research questions, we conducted an extensive survey involving Italian CCOs. This survey represents the fifth edition of a national communication monitor conducted in Italy, prior to 2013, in 1994, 2004, 2008 and 2011.

We collected data using a dedicated on-line platform. The administrative process has been split into two stages. During the first phase, a questionnaire composed of 42 questions was sent to 15 practitioners with the aim to evaluate its efficacy and adequacy. During the second phase, the final version of the questionnaire was sent by mail to 300 Communication Directors of the largest organizations operating in Italy.

Our sample consists of companies that have been selected from the annual ranking "Leading Italian companies" published by Mediobanca, which collects the top organizations in Italy according to dimensions and revenue. The initial sample has been integrated with a list of public administrations and non-profit organizations in order to guarantee a proper representation in the study. The survey had a response rate of 61%, with a total of 183 respondents who compose the self-selective sample. All sectors are represented in the sample, accordingly to the related universe of Italian larger organizations: manufacturing industry; private services which include banking and financial companies; public services and non-profit. For each of them we obtained different percentages of answer: 42,3% of respondents operate in manufacturing industry; 25,2% in private service; 32,6% in public services and non-profit.

The questionnaire has been divided in eight sections: (1) the organizational structure of Communication Direction; (2) the role and the influence of communication within the organizational hierarchy; (3) contents and scope of communication activities; (4) communication results measurement and evaluation; (5) social media tools; (6) communication budget; (7) CCOs' profile; (8) organizational profile in terms of structure, entrepreneurial and innovative orientation, performance level.

Items that were utilized in sections 1-7 were created following the examination of literature on the institutionalization of PR and strategic communication. Items that focused on the entrepreneurial and innovative orientation of organizations' sampled in the survey was evaluated using Covin and Slevin's Entrepreneurial Orientation Scale (EOS) (1986, 1989). According to the authors, "entrepreneurial organizations" are simultaneously risk taking, able to change, and are proactive with respect to their overall business operations, product offerings and technologies, and interactions with competitors (Covin, Green, Slevin, 2006: 57). More precisely, EOS represents an eight

item scale: the first three items of the scale assess the firm's attitude towards change; the second three items evaluate the firm's proactive orientation; the last two items assess the firm's risk-taking propensity. Based on these three dimensions (ability to change, proactivity, risk) an EO index can be computed.

Furthermore, organizations that are leaders in managing technological developments, with a strong risk attitude towards unexplored organizational paths and practices and in conjunction with a proactive behaviour towards competitors are labelled as “innovative organization” (Daft, 1978; Ettlie, O’Keefe, 1982, Özsomer, Calantone, Di Bonetto 1997). To this regard, we also assume that innovative organizations not only need to implement new procedures and innovative ideas in order to compete successfully in their market but they need to sustain their ability to innovate themselves through the strategic use of communication (Zerfass, Huck, 2007).

Data was analysed using descriptive and statistical analyses. In the first case frequencies, means, standard deviation, and correlations were measured. In the second case an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted with a twofold aim. Firstly, this implementation allowed us to reduce the starting data concerning the entrepreneurial and innovative orientation into a manageable and smaller number of factors (Thompson, 2004). Secondly, through the EFA the aim was to uncover underlying structures and explore the interrelationships between the examined variables (Fabrigar et al., 1999). Finally, the results were statistically examined by using Pearson’s chi square tests and analysis of p values ($p \leq 0.05$).

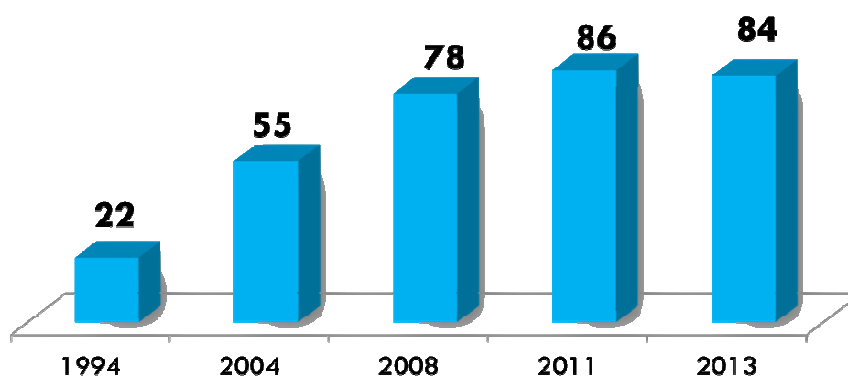
4. FINDINGS

Level of institutionalization of PR/Communication function in Italy (RQ1)

The degree of institutionalization of the Public Relation/Communication function has been analysed through four indicators: *the existence of a PR/Communication department presence, features and its position within the organizational hierarchy with particular regards to its reporting line; the quality of management and evaluation of communication activities; the control and usage of social media tools; the budget and resources allocated to communication.*

Within the large organizations operating in Italy, the presence of a PR/Communication department has been consolidated and communication has reached a relevant and strategic position within the organizational structure, as 84% of these organizations has a Communication department that centralizes the management of communication activities, as shown in figure 1.

Figure 1. Presence of Communication Department in large Italian companies from 1994 to 2013 (%)



At a general level, the communication department employs on average 16 people; more specifically in the most of organizations (68,4%) the PR department is comprised of up to 10 employees while just 10,5% of organizations rely upon a PR staff of more than 30 employees. Furthermore in terms of the reporting line, 54% of CCOs report to the CEO or chairmen directly; 22% to General Manager and only within 24% of organizations, CCOs report to executives of other departments such as Human Resources or Marketing.

With regards to the monitoring and the evaluation of activities, a substantial increasing of relevance has been observed. CCOs showed a preference towards those parameters, which evaluated the qualitative and quantitative organizational presence on different media: media clipping (83,7%) and analysis of content quality (87,7%) were the techniques most often utilized. Nevertheless, the measurement of quality of reputation (72,7%) and relationships (65,3%) were assumed to have shown an increased importance, while social media metrics were less developed (55,9%).

But what is really significantly noted was the projected increase in employment within three years of the measurement of the quality of a corporation's reputation. 55% of businesses stated that they would invest more in the measurement of an intangible asset that represents the reputation as a source of competitive advantage for the enterprise and was a summary measure of how stakeholders perceive what the company had done in the past and what it will continue to do. This figure is even more significant if we consider that the reputation is an indicator of a business's performance fully legitimized by the top management within that firm, and the impact on corporate financial indicators is scientifically proven.

Another important finding is the fact that a very large number of companies claimed to measure the impact of communication on key areas of their business performance.

More specifically they evaluated the effects of communication on competitive performance (71,8%) and internal audits (69,4%), followed by the measurement of organizational process performance (63,2%), local communities performance (62,5%), learning (54,7%) and financial performance (54,3%).

Regarding the use of social media in business, there is a pervasiveness that continues to grow with rates increasing at double-digits in Italy. Amongst social networking tools, Facebook (M: 3,01, SD: 0,944) Youtube (M: 2,76, SD: 1,091) and Twitter (M: 2,40, SD: 1,078) are perceived as more relevant from a professional perspective nowadays.

Over the next three years, more than 78% of companies predict that there will be an explosion in the use of Twitter. It appears that the areas of business that will be most affected by the phenomenon are Marketing Communication, Event Organization and Media Relations, furthermore according to these forecasts in the coming years businesses will use in a massive way corporate communications (76% of cases), CSR (69%) and environmental (65%). There are also two additional significant trends on the digital side that are important to identify. The first trend is that for large firms that operate in Italy their communication direction has more power and greater control (34% of cases) over budgets that are devoted to digital media with respect to the Marketing, Information Technology, Human Resources and Customer Care. The next indicator is the use of digital

media as a source of support in the realm of networking, and it's increased importance as a tools for working in the social arena, i.e the sharing of work processes themselves. In particular we refer to Slideshare, Delicious and wiki application tools, as for the previous survey conducted in 2011, this element was not prevalent, nor played a significant role within most companies.

Finally, with respect to the communication budget, it revealed the existence of fairly good margins towards future development in communications. Budgets that were allocated for public relations were reduced in 2013 as a result of the economic crisis, and to an extent, quite pronounced when compared to advertising (75% versus 72%). But the projected three year forecast indicated a trend reversal, since firms that provided increased stability for public relations reached 63%, whereas for advertising they had stopped at 59%. These budgets were expected to be allocated towards particular activities for internal communication, environmental communication and corporate social responsibility. The sponsorship sector also appears to have suffered a sharp setback . The carrying out these activities remained stable, a number of companies claimed that they were being advised by specialized agencies, bearing in mind that currently 51% of companies outsource up to a maximum of 20% of the budget that's devoted to communication. The request for assistance from external consultants will continue to increase, being driven by the search for original and creative ideas (20%);the goal of acquiring a specific audience (18%) as well as the need for strategic points of view to be integrated within these companies (18%).

The strategic CCOs' role and their strategic contribution (RQ2)

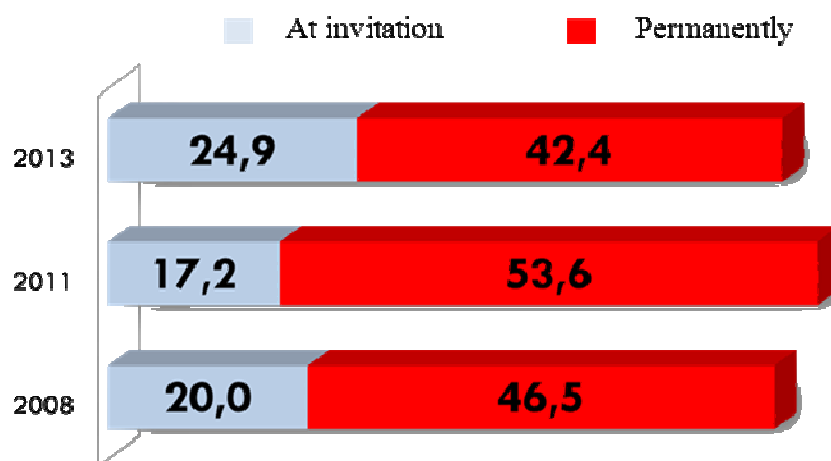
We also explored the CCOs' role expressed in terms of influence and level of power as well as the nature of their contribution to the organizational management. The level of influence and the power of CCOs' within organizations were expressed by their involvement and participation in strategic decision-making and more specifically, by surveying the following parameters: *CCOs' participation to the executive committee and their inclusion at the decision making table; their level of credibility perceived by Top Management; the level of collaboration between communication professionals and members from other organizational departments.* Concerning the assessment of the

strategic contribution of communication towards organizational management, we have assessed it by referring to the Entrepreneurial Communication Paradigm (Invernizzi, Romenti, 2011; 2013), and by operationalizing the four strategic dimensions of communication: *Constituting, Aligning, Visioning and Energizing*. We have examined how CCOs evaluate such dimensions and more specifically to what extent they consider that each of them is prominent in their organizations.

To be involved in the Executive Committee, via invitation or as a permanent figure, is significant for CCOs; the power of participating in decision-making on behalf of the company are what furnish these important strategic contributions.

Within large organizations operating in Italy, a direct relationship exists between Communication department and Top Management: 67,3% of CCOs are members of the executive committee, permanently or at CEO's invitation, as shown in figure 2.

Figure 2. Presence of CCO to Executive Committee, at the invitation or permanently 2008-2013 (%)



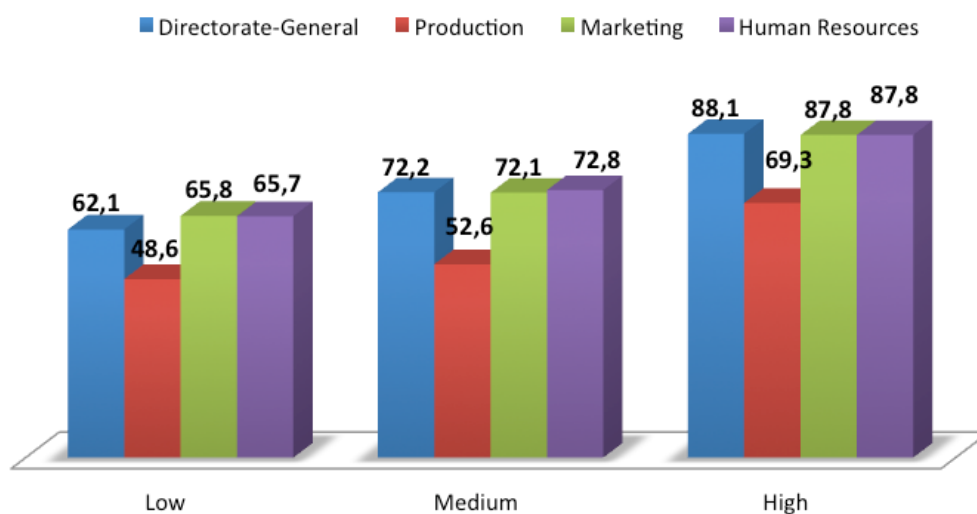
Furthermore, 58,7% of CCOs' declared that they were constantly involved in the decision-making process, while 29,3% declares to participate only from time to time.

Regarding CCOs' credibility as it is perceived by Top Management, this aspect was investigated by analyzing to what extent Top Management consider important CCOs' proposals and suggestions. The results show that 58,7% of respondents declared that Top Management attributes slight relevance to their suggestions and the same percentage of respondents precise that their suggestions are seriously taken into account by Top Management. In 59% of the cases, the CCO was involved exponentially regarding making some of the most significant decisions for companies, such as those that concerned the development of new products and the development of strategic investments.

One of the main current trends in the communicator role in business growth support revolves around the CCO and their structure and how it provides assistance to other corporate departments in the decision-making processes and in the organization. The relationship between the Communication Department and other functions is a challenging topic that involves a significant commitment on the part of the CCO to understand the internal functions as well as the business direction, and activities that will be executed. It is vital that they are able to inform and teach working professionals from various departments the valuable contributions that communication will be able to provide to the business.

More precisely, in the most successful companies in terms of the level of innovation and performance, it has been established that a good relationship and that highly collaborative efforts exist between the Communication Department and other departments such as Production, Marketing and Human Resource. This result testifies the strategic role that communication is able to exert on the organizational processes and its results (figure 3).

Figure 3. Level of cooperation between the Communications Department and other departments according to the level of innovativeness of firms



The relationships between the different functions of course assume a configuration that varies from company to company, but in general terms it can be said that the main concern for the margin of developmental cooperation lies within more technical areas of activity of the business, such as production and information systems.

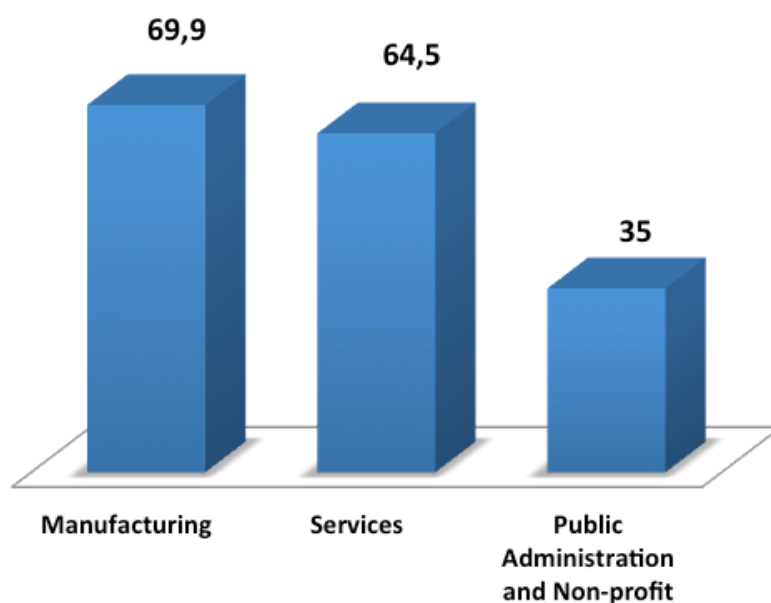
With regards to the strategic contribution of CCOs to organizational management, it seems to concentrate on the Visioning component (M: 3,94; SD: 1,014), followed by Aligning (M: 3,59; SD: 1,062). In the first case, communication contributes to share guidelines, mission, aims, and organizational decisions with relevant stakeholders, with the aim to gain their support and the legitimacy to operate. In the second case, communication represents a link between internal and external environment and it plays a permanent role in aligning the organizational initiatives with stakeholders' expectations and needs. Within the next three years, the dimension of Energizing (M: 3,99 SD: 0,977) will acquire more importance.

The results concerning the institutionalization of communication are even more significant when we introduce two comparisons: the level of organizational innovation and the industries of companies that are responding.

On the one hand, the data illustrated a strong positive correlation between the level of organizational innovativeness and the type of assistance provided by the communication strategy in terms of Constituting ($r= .241$, $p < 0.01$), Aligning ($r= .375$, $p < 0.01$) and Visioning ($r= .310$, $p < 0.001$).

On the other hand, the significance of these results were increased when we compared the importance assumed by communication in firms belonging to the manufacturing sector., which are traditionally more cautious and concerned with the return on investment, compared to those in other sectors. In the manufacturing sector, it had a particular significance, and in fact indicated that 70% of the communication directly depends on top management (figure 4).

Figure 4. Communication Department depends on Top Management to a greater extent in the manufacturing sector.



5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The process of the institutionalization of communication in complex organizations in Italy has been established and it has been confirmed by results from this research. What has arisen from the results of this survey is rather represented by the margins of development within the strategic role of communication and what levels have been reached as of the present.

In fact, beyond the massive presence of the Communications Department in large enterprises that defines the degree of institutionalization, there is a growing support provided by the CCO and its structure to the CEO and other corporate departments within the decision making processes.

As results show, the institutionalization process is at an advanced level: a majority of companies has centralized communication activities within a Communication department that reports directly to the Top Management (CEO). Additionally, the increasing relevance of specialized activities such as measurement and evaluation could be considered a sign of growing legitimization of communication function. A high number of companies attested to measuring not only the efficiency and efficacy of communication processes; they also assessed the impact of communication over different organizational performance areas, such as the competitiveness (72%), which is where improvements in brand image and brand equity are measured. Even though it may still be habitual to measure communication outcomes such as media clipping or coverage quality and content, an increasing number of organizations consider it relevant to assess the quality of organizational reputation and most of the 50% declared that it will be the parameter in which focus on, in the next three years in order to demonstrate the real value created by communication within modern companies. One of the biggest challenges for strategic communicators will consist in applying systematic methods and tools for measuring results that are able to illustrate and prove what impact they have on the business activities and investments. Measurement is one of the most crucial areas for communicators as it legitimizes their role in the company, by including them in fully-fledged areas of management, which have been known in the past to be more accustomed to monitoring the performance of its activities with dashboards and standardized key performance indicators.

In order to support organizational value creation, a relevant role will need to be played by strategic use of new digital tools that are at the disposal of all organizations. The rapid diffusion of digital media will continue for the next three years and it will affect different communication areas. New media will be used not only for supporting the introduction of new products or services, but also in support of Corporate Communications, CSR and

Environmental Communication activities. An area of particular relevance affected by the introduction of digital media is inside the company: there is a tendency to focus on collaborative tools and social working applications that support the processes of knowledge sharing and learning.

Regarding the role of CCOs, results also have provided new insights. Italian CCOs seem to play more a role of strategic advisor with a high level of influence on Top Management. They are increasingly included and invited to decision-making meetings by the executive committee and their role moves beyond the traditional communication activity. The positive correlation between CCOs involvement and level of innovation of organizations testifies to the increasing relevance of CCO's function within organization.

The role of strategic advisor is also implemented towards other departments. CCOs is increasingly involved in cooperative activities with other functions, that could be considered a proof of the increasing legitimacy and acknowledgement of their value by the whole organization. If we also consider that the most innovative organizations present a high level of collaboration between Communication department and other functions, such as Production, Marketing and Human Resources, we can assert that communication could play a concrete strategic role by affecting organizational processes and results.

In terms of strategic contribution to organizational management, Italian professionals seem to exploit more their ability to transfer organizational aims and decisions to stakeholders in order to involve them, legitimizing organizational initiatives and make them more understandable. At the same time, they play a role of alignment, by actively being proactive listeners towards stakeholders and encouraging organization to take notice of stakeholders' needs and include them in their decisions. Also concerning the strategic contribution, the high correlation between organizations with high entrepreneurial and innovative orientation and strategic dimensions of communication attests the importance of communication function and its relevant role for organizational success.

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