

**Charu**

Thank you, Sarah. Thank you, Stephen, for joining us today on Mrigashira.

**Sarah**

Thanks, Charu.

**Stephen**

Thanks for having us.

**Charu**

Our new normal brings with it a lot more challenges as well as opportunities. It's an evolutionary moment, not just for businesses, but for communications as well. So Sarah, allow me to begin by asking you to shed more light on these challenges and opportunities, in line with some of the major findings of the report by the Institute of Public Relations, IPR future of communications in Asia

**Sarah**

It's pleasure joining you Charu, and perhaps it would help if I just share some background into why we conducted this study. What the IPR strives to do is create research that can actually be used in practice by communicators. And it's, you know, really the institute is underpinned by bringing academic rigor to the type of research that we do, but developing research that can be useful to practitioners in the world of communications. And myself and Stephen have been trustees of the IPR for some time now. And one of the things that we've strived to do is create more research that's relevant for communications practitioners in Asia. Because a lot of the research that we've sort of seen coming out, and for years and has come out and in relation to this profession has predominantly focused on Western markets. So you know, we felt it was very important to try and develop a piece of research, our initial piece of research that is that is relevant for this region. And it was a follow on report from a future of work study that we done, that had focused on the US market. And in in reading that report and that research, we recognize that there would likely be some differences. If we were to conduct a similar study in in Asia. Stephen, perhaps I'd throw it over to you to talk a little bit about what those key findings were.

**Stephen**

Sure, Sarah, thank you. So I think the outcome of the report was a number of clear themes. The first one being that just a recognition that the Asia Pacific region is a very diverse region. And I while it's an obvious fact, I think it's one that does need to be talked about when we're considering our communications in the region. The fact is that we face very different challenges and opportunities in different markets around the region. And the point of personalization, and localization of communications is an important one. And I think it speaks to the complexities faced by the communications leader in Asia, unlike in many Western markets, a single approach doesn't work. So diversity was was one of the first things that we we identified. Secondly, we also were able to point quite firmly to the fact that the this function is evolving in the region. And in the past, I think it's fair to say that the in house communication function has been regarded quite as quite tactical in nature as an order taker. But but this is rapidly changing, as companies today are looking for communications

functions that are highly strategic in nature, and which operate on an informed basis to deliver business results. And one of the the findings of the report was that clearly the COVID pandemic has accelerated this, this, this process. Then the third thing that the report identified was around technology and the fact that many practitioners are continuing to tailor their programs and their content to the smartphone, and over there is still very much a place for earned media. The participants in the survey noted that they rely more heavily on own In shared media, as well as online influences, participants also talked a lot about the rise of machine learning, data analytics, etc. But again, coming back to the diversity point, I think it's it's very uneven in terms of where different companies and different markets around the region are at with their adoption of technology. And in some instances, practitioners talked about still making use of things like the fax machine. So clearly, we've got some ways to go. Sarah, do you want to touch upon internal communications as a theme?

### **Sarah**

I think the last two themes that came out and one that was, you know, I think quite interesting for this region, particularly was the the rise of internal communications and the the effect of COVID. And the pandemic has definitely sort of put a spotlight on on internal communications. And I think rather pleasing me. So it's, you know, it's an area that widely was was recognized by participants as having been sort of the poor cousin of external communications previously, and now is really front and center of executives minds, as they have struggled to sort of grapple with remote working, mate keeping, you know, constant lines of communication to the the employee base, and it's, you know, it's really thrown a spotlight on the power of, of the employee, and can developing strong communications to them. And then the final one, which, you know, I think, is really having a great effect on to certain degree, the nature of the function is really the rise of what we would call the stakeholder society. And I think this is really touching on on to degree what the future of the function will look like, where, you know, now, it really is the function that a lot of businesses are turning to, as the sort of guiding force around purpose around the the environment, the the social piece, the governance piece, what, you know, what direction should should the organization be taking? And, and so, you know, I think, increasingly, communications to Steve's point is, is what we saw from participants becoming less tactical, and, and far more strategic as, as businesses start to think very carefully about these different stakeholder audiences, and how they're engaging with them.

### **Charu**

It's good news for us communicators, as businesses are finally getting an understanding of the communication function. And you know, and and what's happening is the role of internal communications, it's completely, relooked at and the way it's handled, and you know, the kind of recognition it's getting. So one trend, which particularly intrigues me, and what you just talked about is the one on the rise of the stakeholder society. And there's something very interesting, which caught my eye about more and more companies will be speaking out. We all know that with the increasing trust deficit, the role of the CEO and, becoming a strong voice on issues is going to be what is going to help companies define what they truly stand for, and how true they are to their purpose. I really would like to understand more about this

### **Stephen**

You're absolutely right. And certainly, the report and what the the feedback from the participants of the report will echo this trend. And as you say, it's now is a great time to be working in communications more than ever, because of a number of trends and one is this move to a stakeholder society away from away from shareholder capitalism. Right and most notably to champion by people like Larry Fink, from from BlackRock, and I think that, that that and as you also mentioned, the the trust deficit and I think the most recent Edelman Trust Barometer cited that globally, business is now the most trusted institution over institutions like government and NGOs and the media. So there is, without question, serve a heightened expectation and focus on companies to be be involved in a wider conversation, to be taking a stand on broader societal issues. Probably one of the most prominent being sustainability and environmental matters. And I think that this, combined with the fact that our digital society amplifies everything, means that the communicator is being relied on more than ever to help the organization navigate through this a complex pass shifting landscape. So I think that in our region, we are coming, frankly, speaking from quite a long way back for many companies, I think for a lot of companies that are headquartered in the region, the the communications function, traditionally has been quite rudimentary in nature. But I think the trends and the opportunity is there for the communications function to step up and to play a valued role in helping the organization achieve sustained success.

### **Sarah**

Yeah, and actually, on that, I just love to jump in there, I think it's a really valid point that the Steve raises that, you know, what, what we did observe, and it's sort of a comparison with the US study that we did previous to this is that, you know, Asia, to some extent, remains at a different point in time, obviously, there there are those organizations that, you know, are ahead of the curve, and, you know, really putting their head above the parapet on this, but, you know, generally speaking, it was felt by by respondents that, you know, their organizations were more prepared to, or CEOs more prepared to take a stance be explicit about certain elements of of, you know, broadly the ESG agenda, more so than others. And, you know, I think I think that's very different to what you see, for instance, in the United States, where, you know, you you will often have, and certainly in the last couple of years, I've had organizations taking quite, you know, quite firm political stances, that I think is not something so common, and is not the path of sort of travel that I imagined we will see here in in Asia.

### **Charu**

So, another area, which has been, constantly under discussions is data. Right. So they're having sustained discussions around use of data analytics and communication programs and evaluation, how do we make this a reality?

### **Stephen**

That's the million dollar question. Um, and I think in the report, a lot of participants did know that their organizations broadly are starting to adopts new technologies and new practices in this area, but they're yet to filter through to the communications function. And of course, the rise of, of contact does allow for the foot for potentially a significant heightening of the way in which communications programs are rolled out in a far more precise manner than they have in the past, targeting right down to the individual level. And then of course, being able to provide that depth of analysis about the effectiveness of the program. But my feel is based on the report and also anecdotally is that we we were still at a a

fledgling stage. In, in the region when it comes to being able to properly embrace these new tools that are available, and there's a lot, a lot of upside to come when it comes to the adoption of content.

### **Charu**

Right. So for businesses to emotionally engage and connect with their consumers and be able to meet that growing demands, they need that common threat. And this makes the communication function more strategic and influential. Right. So yet, we do not get close enough to that much deserved seat at the table. What are the deterrents?

### **Sarah**

Um, I think, you know, that one of the struggles that the communications function has often had pretty broadly as is justifying its existence, versus, you know, a much more, I guess, easily measured, sort of function like, like marketing, you know, it's a typical comparison. You know, deceives point with, you know, the rise of contact tools that, and a sort of better, an increasingly better understanding of what to measure and how to measure that, that's one way of doing it. You know, I think we're a long way from from actually being fully there, I believe that, you know, actually firmly that communications functions need to think about staffing their functions with different sort of people from from different backgrounds, you know, from more data analytics, backgrounds, bringing those skill sets in to the function. Ultimately, you know, all of this comes down to, to demonstrating commercial value to the business. And I do think that some of the dynamics we have in the world right now, where, you know, you've got geopolitical tensions, you've, you've got the dynamics of the pandemic, or opportunities for the communications function to demonstrate value, everyone knows that in times of crisis, this function tends to shine. The The question is, how do you make that stick? How do you make it sustain and not just be the sort of momentary point in time where it adds that value? And I do think the onus is really upon practitioners in this field, to really constantly come back to the question of what is the the commercial value in what I'm doing here? And, and continue is the linking back to that in their activity?

### **Charu**

This brings me to your last question, advice to communicators on upskilling to be future ready?

### **Stephen**

It's a great question. And I think it's one way young communicators in particular have so much opportunity in the time ahead to build really strong careers that it's worth their time to be thinking about these types of questions. So from my perspective, and I think Sarah touched on this in her last response, but concentrating on being a business leader is really important, I think building up a substantial understanding of the industry that your company is in your company's business model, the commercial practicalities, around which the company operates, all of these things are really important in order to, to to operate as a as a true business leader and partner within the organization. I think a simple element but an important one is to focus on building meaningful relationships. And these relationships can be both internal relationships and also external ones. I think that the, the the environments in which companies operate today are complex. They involve a wide array of stakeholder relationships and issues. The communicator is really well placed to be able to build enduring relationships, both on the inside of the organization and outside in order to help that organization interact with its stakeholders and achievements, collective goals. I think that we've talked a little bit

about data in this session, I think it's important for communicators going forward to be data driven. And there should be no more guesswork with regards to the effectiveness of a communications program. So I think being able to understand how to effectively employ employee research at the beginning of the program throughout and at the end, and also provide an also undertake an appropriate analysis of how effective the program is, is really important. And then, sort of I'll in the interest of time, I'll just mention one more quickly. But I think another simple one, but an important one, is just to focus on asking good questions. I think that the the job of the communicator in a in a boardroom is to not is to not be afraid of asking hard questions or asking questions that they think might be silly questions. I think oftentimes, probably there's a number of people around the table who would be thinking the same thing. So I think being able to ask thoughtful questions, is really important to get to the nub of the issue, and to be able to address it appropriately.

**Charu**

Yes, I think we need to just hone our skills on becoming the devil's advocates. And that's really going to help us a lot of enriching insights for our listeners. And thank you so much, Sarah, thank you so much, Steve, for joining us today on Mrigashira.

**Sarah**

Thank you, Charu

**Stephen**

Thank you, Charu