



PublicAffairsAsia

# STATE OF THE INDUSTRY REPORT

# 2021

A Report By Prospect and PublicAffairsAsia



Breakdown of respondents by location of their employment

|                    |     |
|--------------------|-----|
| Australia          | 4%  |
| India              | 4%  |
| Mainland China     | 6%  |
| Hong Kong          | 37% |
| Singapore          | 37% |
| Other Asia Pacific | 12% |

To download the full report visit:

[www.publicaffairsasia.com/soi2021](http://www.publicaffairsasia.com/soi2021)

[www.prospectresourcing.com/blog/soi2021/](http://www.prospectresourcing.com/blog/soi2021/)



Over 300 practitioners were engaged in the compilation of this report, with 257 professionals from across Asia Pacific taking part in the quantitative survey. 40% worked for agencies and 60% were holding in-house roles.

In terms of seniority, 65% classed themselves as being in senior roles, 30% were in middle-ranked roles and 5% considered themselves to be in junior-level roles.

In terms of gender, 64% of respondents were women, 34% were male and 2% preferred not to say.

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# Foreword:

## Emma Dale, Prospect



Over the 10 years of the State of the Industry Report, we have witnessed the evolution of the public relations, communications and public affairs industry in Asia Pacific. Throughout this time, the industry has adapted to a changing media landscape, navigated economic fluctuations and socio-political shifts.

It has also confronted gender inequality, aligned work-life balance, and claimed a seat at the table in an increasingly crowded and competitive environment.

And then came COVID-19.

The challenges of 2020 were extensive, with many individuals deeply impacted by the global pandemic. The communications industry has not been immune. However, with each challenge there has been opportunity for humanity, creativity and authenticity to shine through.

As Margaret Key, Chief Executive Officer, Asia, Middle East and Africa, at MSLGROUP said, "If there has ever been a time where PR has risen above, it is now."

As we reflect on the events of the past year and embark on 2021, there is much to look forward to. There is overwhelming sense of fatigue, but there is also hope and cautious optimism. Vaccines are being rolled-out and, in some markets, people are returning to the office environment.

The primary questions facing many in the industry are what are the long-term implications for the public relations, communications and public affairs sector? And what will the 'new normal' look like?

As we look to provide a road map for addressing these questions, we sought the perspectives of more than 300 communications, public relations and public affairs professionals throughout Asia Pacific. This report has been compiled from these conversations and questionnaire responses.

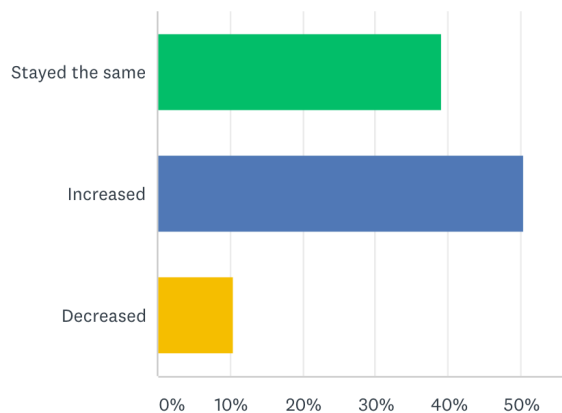
We hope this report provides an informative look at the industry in this region, while providing a sense of optimism for public relations, communications and public affairs professionals across all stages of their career.

Emma Dale  
Co-Founder and Managing Director, Asia  
Prospect



## Salaries in 2020 compared to 2019 (agency and in-house respondents)

Compared with 2019, in 2020 has your monthly salary:



## Pay

2020 proved to be a tough year for our industry, and this was reflected in pay packets. Nearly four in 10 professionals saw their pay frozen, with 50% receiving a pay rise – and a significant number, 10% of respondents, seeing their salary reduced last year.

When the data set is assessed on the basis of agency compared to in-house, it emerges that a broadly equal percentage saw their salaries remain the same. However, those holding in-house roles were more likely to receive a salary increase last year, and significantly less likely to have seen their pay cut. Only 6% of in-house respondents saw their salary reduced last year, but a significantly higher number (17%) of agency staff suffered pay cuts.

Taking into account overall packages, including salary, bonus and benefits, it proved to be a pretty bleak year for the industry.

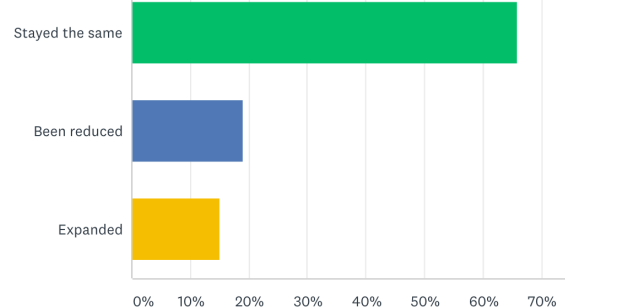
Over 45% said their overall packages had remained the same in 2020 as in 2019. However, 37% reported an overall increase, while 17% reported a cut in their total compensation.

Most employees, 55%, believed that their companies were applying company-wide approach to pay and compensation as a result of COVID-19.

Only 16% of respondents thought that communications and public affairs divisions were being treated differently in comparison to other parts of the business.

## Benefits in 2020 (agency and in-house respondents)

Compared with 2019, in 2020 have your work-related benefits:



## Benefits

Across the world, there was a sense of battenning down the hatches in 2020, as countries, companies and communities tackled the COVID-19 pandemic

As many employees switched to home working, the majority saw little or no difference in the benefits offered by their employer: 67% of respondents saw their benefits remaining the same, with 19% seeing the scope of their benefits reduced, while 15% received a boost to the benefits they received.

Among the benefits received, private healthcare was the most common (69%) with non-statutory pensions and paid travel being among the least common benefits.

Reflecting a renewed focus on work-life balance, which may in part be a response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to work from home, 55% of respondents said they received some form of benefit, such as flexible working hours, to address this.

## Bonuses

2020 also proved to be a relatively tough year in terms of the bonuses received by communications and corporate public affairs professionals. At the time of survey, 40% of respondents confirmed that they had received a bonus - but nearly one in four said they were not going to receive a bonus last year.

And for those who received bonuses, there was a mood that payments were less generous than in previous years: with more than 25% receiving a month's salary or less - and only 11% receiving more than three month's salary.

Compared to 2019, 21% of respondents reported bonuses being broadly the same, while 16% saw an increase, compared to 20% who experienced a decrease in their bonus payment.

At the time of the survey, 40% of respondents were still waiting to find out what their bonus would be.



## SPECIALIST VIEW



CEO ADVISORY

**Lisa Foley, Asia Managing Partner, Brunswick Group**

The way people expect CEOs to communicate has changed, internally and externally. People don't expect CEOs to stand on their own anymore, they expect CEOs to build a bench of trusted leaders to stand with them, to provide perspective to them on the varying issues that their organisations are facing.

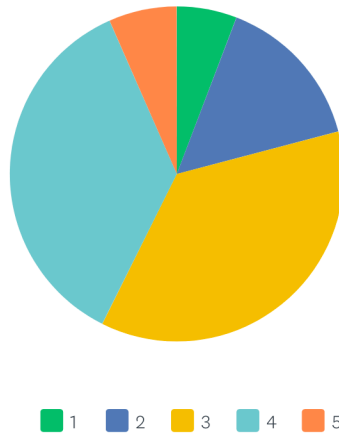
That has been quite a change in Asia Pacific. CEOs are seeing real value in very good, on-point, realistic, up-to-date advice.

There has been a change in how they approach being a CEO. There has been a much greater understanding of the concept of empathy within leadership – how you build trust as a leader and how you engage with the increasing range of stakeholders around being a leader.

The stoic man or woman who never twitches and never has a bad moment has moved off the table. The human element to a CEO has accelerated and rocketed up the scale.

## Satisfaction Levels

On a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 being extremely unsatisfied and 5 being very satisfied) how do you feel about your current salary, bonus and benefits?



## Satisfaction levels

Despite the stresses, strains and the curbs on their compensation caused by COVID-19 satisfaction levels about pay, bonus and benefits amongst those working in the industry remain relatively high.

On a scale of 1 to 5, some 80% of respondents reported satisfaction levels of 3 or above. Only 6% reported being extremely unsatisfied by what they were being offered by their employer. This could be a sign that at a time of heightened unemployment fears, people are more concerned about holding down their job than the precise salary, bonus and benefits they are receiving.

When asked to consider their overall job satisfaction levels, the picture was broadly similar. However, the effects of COVID-19 were causing concern. Several respondents said they were "anxious" about their role, with agency practitioners stressing that some clients were being more demanding despite there being smaller budgets overall.

Others reported a high workload, which could at times be hectic and busy, but not necessarily intellectually challenging.

COVID-19 appears to have added to the workload of practitioners and growing sense of unease about future job security within the industry. However this has not necessarily dampened satisfaction levels, perhaps because many of those in work are aware of the risks to their employment.

As one respondent said: "At least I have a job – for now." While 2020 proved challenging and unprecedented, it is clear that concern about the future remains high among the industry.





“There’s nothing like a crisis to showcase the communications profession helping to maintain business continuity and recovery.”

Hsu Yi Foo, Director, Communications, Asia Pacific, SABIC

## A Seat at the Table

In Asia Pacific, communications professionals across both agencies and in-house roles have had an uphill battle in educating companies about the value of communications.

While significant in-roads have been made, in the last few years we continued to hear stories of competitive pitches in which public relations and communications agencies have gone head-to-head against digital or branding specialists. In these situations, agencies were competing not only on the strength of their ideas but also on the value of public relations as a discipline. Similarly, all too often in-house communications departments were perceived as executional not strategic and excluded from company-wide strategy discussions and decision-making.

In the weeks following the emergence of the coronavirus, the tide turned. The strategic importance of public relations for business survival became undeniable with many firms seeking to reassure internal and external stakeholders while mitigating potential long-term risks to their reputation.

Charlotte Bilney, Co-CEO Asia Pacific, Citigate Dewe Rogerson observed, “PR is always going to come out better out of challenging situations versus advertising and events because people need to protect their

reputation and need to communicate in some way. PR is more resilient to crisis.”

Within this period, 71% of agency and 100% of in-house survey respondents noticed a greater appreciation of the value and importance of the communications function. With one third saying that this greater appreciation has been shown by the increased inclusion of communications teams in business discussions and decision-making.

“Corporate Affairs has been included in strategic meetings, group management board level discussions, meetings with the Chairman and executive leadership team much more than in previous years,” noted Lynne Mulholland, Director, Group Corporate Affairs, The Hongkong and Shanghai Hotels Limited.

In cases where the communications function was previously highly valued by the company, the events of 2020 further solidified this position. As one Chief Communications Officer of a financial institution stated, “Communications expectations are very high. We are now engaging a far broader range of stakeholders and have more connectivity with other business units such as risk and compliance which has deepened our relationships across the bank.”

In many instances, the increased recognition of the value of communications has resulted in greater pressure and expanded responsibilities, oftentimes without enhanced resources. Within companies whose regular business operations were most impacted by the pandemic and the related restrictions, there remains a constant pressure for communications teams to remain visible internally.



[CLICK HERE TO WATCH VIDEO:](#)

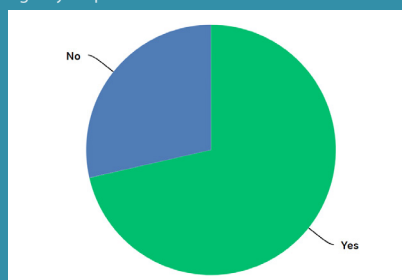
“The only thing we can do is remain as visible as possible, and show we are hyper-responsive.”

Anna Tehan, Executive Vice President, Corporate Communications, Fung Group

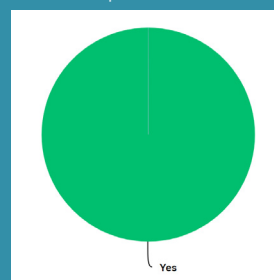
### Appreciation of the function (agency and in-house)

Have you noticed a greater appreciation within corporations of the value and importance of the communications function?

Agency Respondees:



In-House Respondees:





# Underpinning Resilience

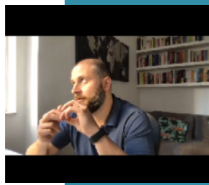
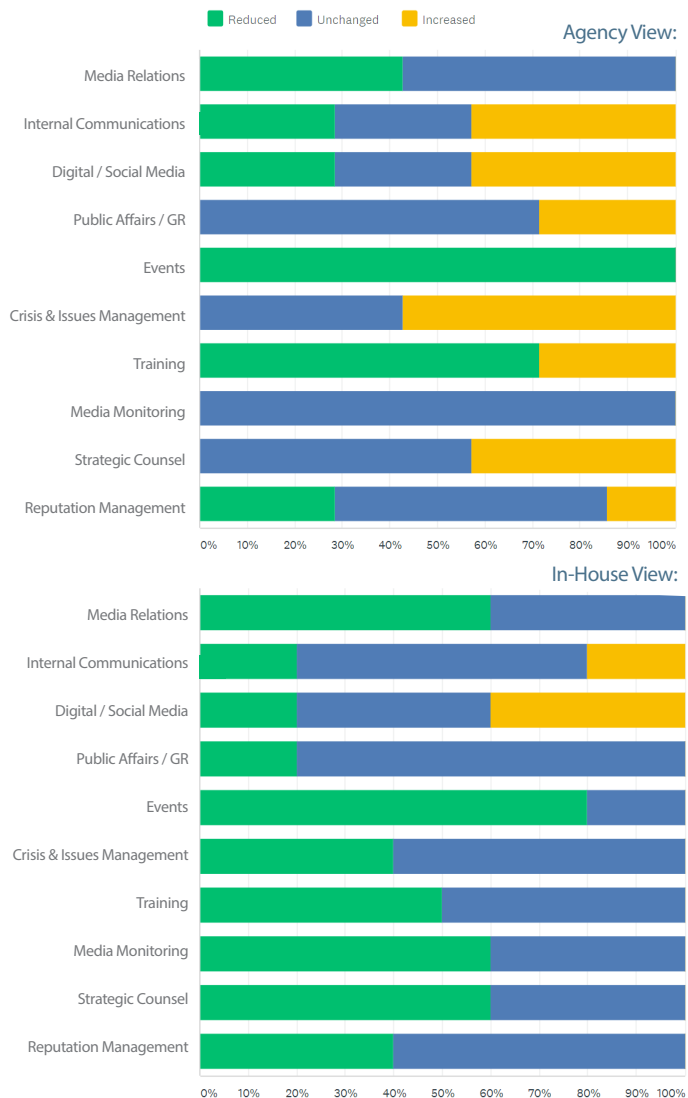
After a prolonged period of economic prosperity in which brand marketing and consumer activations were cornerstones, the events of 2020 necessitated the communications industry to return to its core value proposition. As a regional director of communications and public affairs for a global pharmaceutical company observed, “2020 really brought home the importance of a back-to-basics approach.”

Once the global nature of the pandemic became a reality, business continuity was the immediate goal across the board. Communications professionals were called upon to support companies to calm the fear and provide guidance and reassurance to internal and external stakeholders across cultures and geographies.

While half of agencies surveyed observed an overall reduction in their clients’ agency budgets, the specialties that remained in demand in 2020 were internal communications, digital and social media, crisis and issues management, and strategic counsel.

## The impact on agency budgets

Have budgets for these agency services been reduced, unchanged or increased?



[CLICK HERE TO WATCH VIDEO:](#)

“Where clients have succeeded and agencies have been able to succeed, the clients have been able to manage their internal stakeholders.”

Adrian Warr, CEO Hong Kong, Taiwan & Thailand and APAC Employee Experience Leader, Edelman

The most successful companies were those that adapted quickly to the changing situation and communicated with authenticity throughout the pandemic.

Kiri Sinclair, Founder & CEO, Sinclair, noted that Asian companies fared better than those in the West a result of their experience of the SARS pandemic ([click this link to watch video](#)). “In Asia Pacific, companies were able to pivot their direction and respond to their colleagues, clients and customers very quickly. SARS meant we had some experience in what was about to happen, at least at the beginning.”

Xiaowei Liu, Vice President, External Relations, Asia Pacific, Shell, ([click this link to watch video](#)) stated that the core of corporate communications “is to keep the conscience of the company and of the brand; doing the right things for employees and the communities where you are.” And when companies were honest, authentic and put people first, there was little downside.

Authenticity has been shown to extend beyond messaging, permeating the relationships between agency professionals and their clients.

Due to the prevalence of Zoom and Microsoft Teams, people were juggling work and home life. As Margaret Key, Chief Executive Officer, Asia, Middle East and Africa, MSLGROUP said, “Very formal relationships with clients have turned less formalised. Watching the client with the dog in the background or the child coming up to talk, you start to see your clients not as a ‘client’, but as a person like you and I.” Everyone was in the same boat, facing technical challenges from their home ‘offices’ and doing the best they could in an unprecedented situation.

Similarly, in certain situations there was a shift in the relationship between agencies and companies from a commercial agreement to a personal connection.

Some agencies supporting clients in industries hardest hit were able to reduce fees or provide services pro-bono for a period of time.

Shih-Huei Ang, CEO and Co-founder, Klareco Communications said, “We built goodwill through the tough times and now it’s paying off. Clients are coming back to us, appreciative of the commitment we showed them and are now investing their budgets into longer term assignments with us.”

One regional communications head of a hotel chain agreed, “Agencies that are trying to add value while being aware that you don’t have much budget, these are the ones that will be remembered.”

## SPECIALIST VIEW

### CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS



**Adrian Warr, CEO Hong Kong, Taiwan & Thailand and APAC Employee Experience Leader, Edelman**

In Asia Pacific in 2020, crisis communications capability has been 20 times more important and it has been enormously valued. I've seen a convergence of public affairs and crisis, and more crisis management that has a significant internal communications factor to it.

A lot of the crisis management was introspective and by that, I mean the basis for why the crisis needed to be handled was the impact on employees or close stakeholders of the business rather than customers or external factors.

The focus of what a lot of the crises have been about were different in that you needed to have a greater understanding of public affairs, employee communications and to some extent healthcare. From an agency point of view, it was about reconfiguring teams. There were nuanced shifts and a continued evolution towards that fact that it has to be done with a digital mindset first rather than just traditional media.

I will be trying extremely hard over the next few months to make sure that all of my clients have a better crisis prevention plan. There are about 10 mega-risks that we all know exist, none of which have a playbook, none of which have any training against them.

I would keep moving in the evolution we're going which is to have more blended teams to manage crisis, rather than just the crisis expert. And making sure that our digital people, branding people and our employee engagement people are exposed to crisis work.

## Traditional Skill Sets

The industry is split on the issue of whether traditional toolkits and skill sets are going out of fashion. In some areas like events budget cuts were very noticeable. Other areas experienced a drop at the start of the year but rebounded relatively quickly, thereby avoiding mass job cuts.

As in many other areas in 2020, the measure of success was the ability to adapt to the changing situation. Individuals with a specific skill set such as brand strategy, digital production and creative strategy, saw a shift in their job function away from experiential events and sustained campaigns to guerilla marketing and social content.

Similarly, writing was no longer a standalone skill, as writers were also expected to provide solutions around marketing the content they created.

Tom Evrard, Senior Managing Director, FTI Consulting described this agility, "Several practitioners who previously focused on traditional media relations and communications expanded their portfolio of clients and experience into different sectors and disciplines.

The need for internal communications support was an imperative that clients appreciated more than ever. We were proud to advise and stand alongside them during this unprecedented time. While we certainly wouldn't have wished for a situation like this one positive staff development outcome is greater awareness of geopolitical issues impacting our clients."

COVID-19 has changed the way people communicate and the channels in which companies communicate with their stakeholders. Anna Tehan, Executive Vice President, Corporate Communications, Fung Group ([click this link to watch video](#)) explained, "People aren't going through the media to get to customers. People are getting more and more direct."

Similarly, the widespread adoption of video conferencing opened up more avenues of engaging with stakeholders, who previously were only willing to participate in-person.

Whether it was virtual media roundtables, or online media training, the approach and outcomes remained the same while the format changed dramatically. Charlotte Bilney, Co-CEO Asia Pacific, Citigate Dewe Rogerson observed, "Suddenly they (journalists) were thrown into this necessity to engage online. It has expanded ways we are able to engage."

However, the fundamental skills remain as the demand for media relations, media monitoring, and training were consistent throughout the year.



# How are Communications Professionals Faring?

Overwhelmingly throughout the industry we heard that the biggest challenge of 2020 was team management. The responsibility of providing job security, managing staff mental health, and keeping the lights on in the business made 2020 the most difficult of years.

As one regional leader of a global agency explained, "Trying to maintain a creative business when the majority of your staff are, quite frankly, depressed is very hard."

COVID-19 accelerated changes to the working environment which had been in motion for the past decade. Technologies facilitating remote working had, in many cases, already been adopted as part of initiatives to provide flexible working and increase work-life balance. So that when governments advised companies to temporarily shut their offices and encourage staff to work from home, the workforce was able to comply without too much difficulty.

But that's not to say it was an easy process.

Angela Campbell-Noe, Senior Partner, Asia, Tulchan Communications said smaller and mid-sized agencies were able to fare better, "We had a strong, stable team culture and that was the glue which maintained good work and collaboration in the virtual reality that we are in. Larger agencies which didn't have this culture and had larger over-heads may have found this period much harder."

People at all levels of their careers noted that the concept of work-life balance has fallen by the wayside. Work life and home life have blended into one. Working hours have increased in the absence of 'breaks' for commuting, watercooler chat or socialising over lunch.

As Jeremy Seow, Managing Director, Growth and Innovation, Asia Pacific, Allison+Partners said, working from home is challenging. "I have worked at every single level of the agency world. I do miss the social aspect of the work, and the connections I have with co-workers. It's been challenging. Other than sending a pigeon I've used every single communications channel I can."

In July, agencies rated work from home productivity an average of 8.1 out of 10. However, by November the rating dropped to 7.7. This could either be a reflection on the effectiveness of working from home in the long-term, or a signal that people are exhausted by their situation and their personal circumstances.

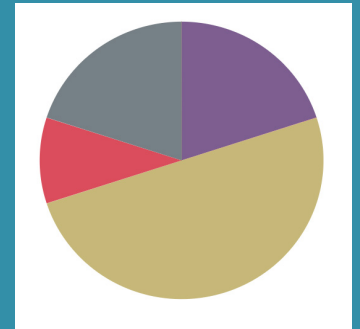
Prospect tracked the views of industry leaders as the pandemic unfolded. This was their views on the issue of productivity during the COVID-19 crisis.

## Agency Benchmarking: Work from home productivity



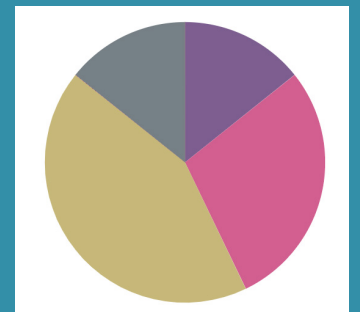
July 2020

How would you rate the productivity of your team while working from home?



November 2020

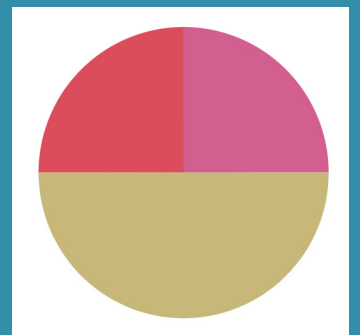
How would you rate the productivity of your team while working from home?



## In-House Benchmarking: Work from home productivity

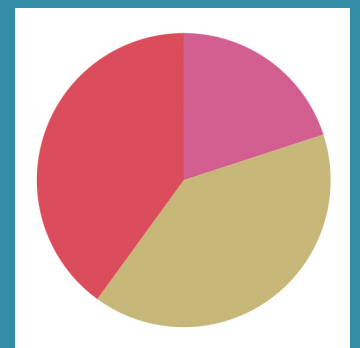
July 2020

How would you rate the productivity of your team while working from home?



November 2020

How would you rate the productivity of your team while working from home?





Dan Billings, Regional Team Leader, Corporate Communications, Invesco Asia Pacific, summed it up by saying, “Remote working just sucks for comms. When you’re not all together you miss little things. It’s hard to have meaningful development conversations and harder to address issues.”

Companies and agencies supported their teams throughout the year in a variety of ways. Industry leaders cited numerous examples of the additional support that companies have provided including increasing the number of one-on-one Zoom check-ins, drafting in mental health professionals to engage staff, and providing access to ergonomic experts to ensure home office set-ups are optimal.

In the absence of team spirit generated by in-office comradery, agencies and companies have sought to build a team culture in smart and creative ways. Companies have undertaken virtual townhall meetings, karaoke nights, drinks sessions and competitions through social media platforms.

Rosemary Merz, Managing Director, Archetype Agency elaborated, “It’s important to make sure people feel rewarded. We’re investing a lot in developing this, from gifting, to share your cat and dog day, to bakery runs. We need to help motivate people, to make sure they don’t burn out.”

This approach seems to have been largely effective, with 80% of survey respondents reporting satisfaction levels of 3 or above (on a scale of 1 to 5).

## SPECIALIST VIEW



### MEDIA RELATIONS

**John Dawson, Founder & CEO, Acara Strategy**

One of the major impacts on media relations from the pandemic, and this is global, has been the dislocation of personable communication between the journalist, the client and the story. Zoom is not the same. Period.

The silver lining has been the speed at which people, journalists and PR, have adapted. Journalists still crave a good story, and that certainly did not change last year. The one difference in 2020 has been the channel through which stories are pitched.

Evaluating successful media relations in 2020 requires a whole new yardstick. There is no other year to compare it to. In a nutshell, success can be best measured by the quality of the coverage achieved – both in content and by reach. Looking back over 2020, some of the digital media campaigns have been refreshingly innovative, particularly in the healthcare space where a clear channel of communication has helped save lives.

The proliferation of so-called fake news means we are paying a lot more attention to articles that are properly-sourced, researched, well-written and authored by journalists who are professionally trained and who abide by the industry’s code of ethics. “Earned media” (as opposite to the less authentic “paid media”) feels a lot better when it appears – and you are able to hit your key messages - in a credible and respected publication. This is the holy grail of media coverage.

Naturally, these relationships are harder to build, as they require a lot more forethought, investment of time and better story pitching. It’s worth that extra effort, even to sit down with your team and properly brainstorm a story pitch.

[CLICK HERE TO WATCH VIDEO:](#)



"The ability to produce good content especially with a social media distribution and how to engage with your audience, that will be a very special skill in need in the market."

Bastian Wong, Founder and Director,  
Flare Communications Group

## Towards the Future

With a seat at the decision-making table comes an increased expectation upon public relations, communications and public affairs professionals. Viv Lines, Chief Executive Officer, Lines Consulting Ltd observed, "Clients want more senior people advising them, particularly at this time. Grey hair is certainly a benefit at the moment."

The great challenge facing the industry is how to continue to evolve in parallel with clients, stakeholders and society. Said a Head of Asia Pacific Communications of an insurance and reinsurance company, "We demand counsel, not just execution."

COVID-19 fast-tracked changes that were already developing across many industries. Jill Tan, Head of Communications and Resources, Investor and Financial Education Council, Securities and Futures Commission said, "Digital transformation has always been on our agenda but it has now been accelerated."

Similarly, in public affairs, the reliance on personal interaction as a means of building relationships with external stakeholders was challenged as a result of the pandemic-related restrictions.

Ada Wong, Asia Public Affairs Lead, Sanofi, explained, "A very strong element of public affairs is to see people in-person to build the relationship. Now that you can't do face-to-face meetings, how can you use other platforms to maintain that relationship?"

More than ever, 2020 provided an opportunity to reflect on whether the traditional ways of working are the best. Everything from identifying growth industries, markets and disciplines right through to flexible working arrangements, training and career advancement are now under the spotlight.

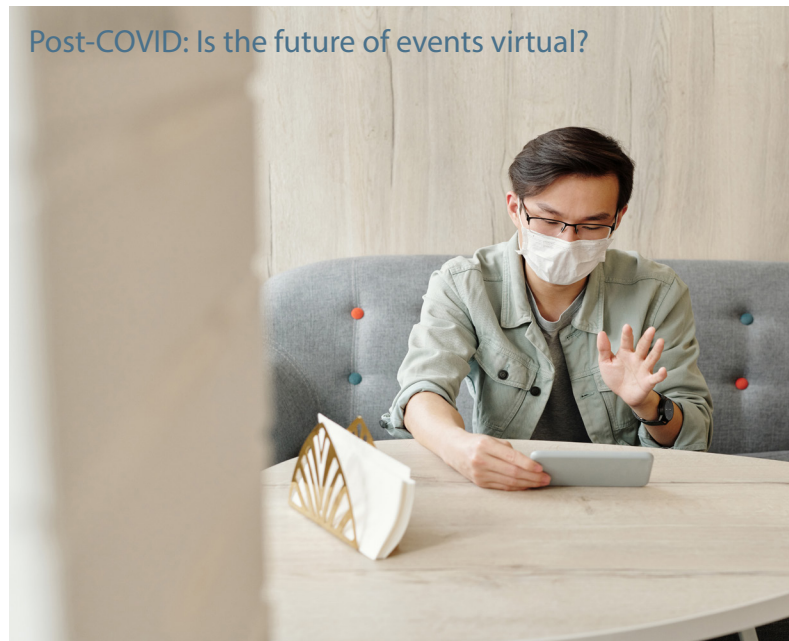
## Growth Opportunities

In the future, the communications industry will value people who are agile and adaptable. While specialisation may have been a priority in the past, last year seems to have created an atmosphere in which the generalist can shine. Discipline-based silos will be dismantled to better integrate and expand in accordance with different channels of communications.

Industry insiders believe that events which target media, stakeholders or consumers will become increasingly virtual in the future. Rachel Catanach, President and Senior Partner, Greater China, FleishmanHillard ([click this link to watch video](#)) observed, "Learning how to manage and do virtual events well has been a challenge for all and I think technology innovations mean the experience will develop even further."

Strategic approaches will also continue to be rooted in data, as one Head of Asia Pacific Communications of an insurance and reinsurance company noted, "The biggest opportunities will be around a data-led digital approach."

### Post-COVID: Is the future of events virtual?





## SPECIALIST VIEW

### INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

**Eva Sogbanmu, Head of Communications,  
Asia Pacific, JLL**

In 2020, internal communication has gone up the value chain. The perception of internal communication began to change as we went into COVID and the demand for communicating health, safety and travel policies to employees was so critical.

At the same time, how do you make sure your leaders are reaching right through the organisation with messages of hope, optimism and reassurance as we face this awful crisis?

This context meant there was a lot more focus on internal communication and how it supports organisational objectives – in good times and bad. It goes beyond simply the function and is about empowering leaders to be better communicators.

A lot of companies have really shown that they were doing the right thing during the crisis. They value their employees and want to provide them with information that keeps them safe, supports their wellbeing and mental health. I hope companies don't back away from that. Even when things get better, let's continue with that compassion and concern.

I think internal communication has often been something that's handled solely by in-house teams, but I do believe many companies would benefit from the help of outside experts. Having that expertise in agencies is really valuable.



## Talent Issues

HS Chung, President, Asia, Hill+Knowlton Strategies predicted, "PR will function more on a consultation level, but are we ready and is our staff at that level?"

The biggest recruitment challenge faced by agency and in-house leaders is finding mid-level candidates who can combine a strategic mind-set with proven executional abilities. However, there is a general acceptance that these candidates don't just appear in the market. Increasingly, the responsibility falls to companies and agencies to train and develop teams with these capabilities.

While internal training has been identified as a priority in past reports, the enforced separation of teams and increased workloads in 2020 resulted in a decrease in both on-the-job and formalised training opportunities.

In some cases, this void has been filled by outside organisations through mentor programmes and online courses.

However, many organisations recognise the importance of adopting a more formalised approach. Lauren Myers-Cavanagh, Head of Policy Communications, Asia Pacific, Twitter said, "In the year ahead we need to focus on internal upskilling."

Over recent years, there has been an increased demand in the region for communications professionals who can span markets by demonstrating both an understanding of cultural differences and language capabilities. This trend looks set to continue.

2021 is set to be a competitive environment for recruitment. Emma Smith, Chief Executive Officer, Sandpiper Communications said, "In some respects there has been a bit more talent on the market as some people have been quite disenchanted with the firms they've worked with or the type of work they have been doing and are looking for a change."

It may seem counter intuitive for people to seek a change to their working situation during a period of wide-spread uncertainty. However, industry leaders are already observing this trend throughout Asia.

In this region many young professionals live in the family home for longer which means that they are not as constrained by the financial burden faced by their contemporaries in other markets.

Firms seeking to attract the best talent have a difficult task ahead. In the past, opportunities between companies could be differentiated by culture, benefits, people and career progression, but 2020 has changed some of these priorities.

## Working from Home

2020 has proven the business case for remote working, and effectively sounded the death knell for the days of 'presentee-ism'. This is a significant shift in Asia, which has historically been slower than other regions to adopt flexible working arrangements.

While there are likely to be more opportunities to work from home in the future, across the board industry professionals were overwhelmingly keen to return to the office environment. The rationale for this enthusiasm was three pronged: to facilitate more cohesive teamwork, to enable greater on-the-job training opportunities, and to ease the pressure created as a result of working in a domestic environment.

As one regional director of communications and public affairs for a global pharmaceutical company described, "People are working in very different circumstances. Especially in APAC where people are living in small apartments and both partners might be working from home. They might be looking after a parent. It's a challenge."

The long-term impact of working from home on career advancement remains front of mind amongst many junior and mid-level employees. One Chief Communications Officer of a financial institution gave credence to this concern saying, "I wonder whether people's careers can really advance (if they are working from home) in a classic organisation like ours."

Just less than half of survey respondents noted that their teams had already returned to the office in some form. An additional third expected teams would return in 2021, with the remainder unsure of when working from the office would resume.

Most industry insiders foresee the implementation of a hybrid model of working with discussions to formalise remote working currently underway within many organisations. Additionally, numerous companies have called a halt to office expansion plans in favour of reconfiguring existing office space to make it more conducive to hot-desking.



## Getting back to 'normal'

In November 2020 we asked a number of agency and in-house leaders when they expected their staff to return to their city-centre offices.

Opinions differed widely.

There were some optimistic assessments, with some believing that they might have returned to work in offices by the end of 2020.

While some offices were getting back to work, largely on a minimal attendance basis, more realistic assessments suggested that normality might not return until the end of 2021, or when widespread COVID-19 vaccination programmes take off.

Those who have traditionally encouraged working from home are optimistic that the new normal will be one which includes widespread home-based working.

However, others suggest that an end to COVID-19 restrictions will necessitate a return to the office for the vast majority of workers, bringing to an end the culture of working from home for most employees.



[CLICK HERE TO WATCH VIDEO:](#)

"Management has a better appreciation for the comms function. But how do you keep that momentum to always be at the forefront?"

Andrew Seah, Head, Corporate Communication, Marketing (APAC), Training & Talent Development (Commercial), DB Schenker

# OUR TOP FIVE takeaways for 2021:



The pandemic has accelerated widespread recognition of the value of communications and has led to increased responsibility and expanded scope. Additional resources are needed to sustain this level of activity on an ongoing basis.

Communications professionals are known for being agile and adaptable. However, as demand shifts towards internal communications, strategic counsel and digital skill sets, the importance of professional development and training to elevate existing talent is keenly felt.

Remote working is not optimal for an industry that is centred around teamwork and communication. While 2020 has shown that it can be done, the future way of working will likely be a hybrid model incorporating in-office and remote working.

2020 was a year in which authenticity and establishing genuine connections with people has been imperative. The impact of these connections will likely be maintained and remembered in the future.

2021 is shaping up to be a year of opportunities for people at all stages of their careers. As always, the market is likely to become incredibly competitive as firms seek to differentiate themselves and attract the best talent.

More than any other year, 2020 has provided an opportunity for people to take a step back and ask the big questions. In the public relations, communications and public affairs industry, this has meant taking a deep dive into the purpose of the industry, challenging accepted models of working, and stepping up to the plate as strategic contributors.

As we embark upon new year, individuals and organisations have an opportunity to enculture new ways of working and eliminate outdated approaches.





Prospect is a global talent resource consultancy within the PR and corporate communications sector with offices in London and Asia.

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