



Women in Communications

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Changing Communications: Closing the Gender Leadership Gap in the Communications Industry

What is it about the communications and PR industry that is encouraging women to leave prematurely?

Overwhelmingly young and female, the sector is an outlier; 67% of the workforce are women, with the most common age range for workers 25-34 and the average age 33. However, a gender pay gap of 13.6% draws attention to the imbalance in position underlying the demographic figures. Despite making up the majority of the workforce, women occupy many of the more junior roles and are not represented at the senior levels of organisations. Indeed, writing on the PRCA's blog, Claire Eden reveals that women earn £5,000 less than men within three years of starting out in PR, whilst 33% of women leave PR before they reach senior leadership level.

Out of balance

The pressing question remains of why this is. Findings of the PRCA's 2019 PR and Communications Census shed some light on this; amongst the data gathered on all aspects of the profession, work-life balance stands out as key area of concern, with overtime standard across the board. 32% of PR professionals make work-related calls and emails outside of office hours every day. Over half of PR and communications professionals consistently work longer than their contracted hours. When considering agencies alone, these findings are particularly stark: overall, over half of agency Managing Directors claim to work more than 55 hours a week, a quarter of whom work more than 60

hours weekly. These figures reduce, but remain high, for more junior team members, with the majority (69%) of agency junior account executives working 45 hours a week.

Further survey data suggests that such working patterns are prohibitive for women with families, and perpetuate gender norms around women as caregivers. Whilst 31% of PR and communications professionals do not take advantage of any flexible working arrangements, 10% of the industry work part-time – 12% of women and 7% of men. Although 83% of part-time women choose this arrangement due to responsibilities at home, this is true for only 40% of part-time men. Furthermore, compared to 2018, 9% fewer PR and communications professionals reported having children or dependants -- at 30% overall, the figure accounts for 35% of men and 27% of women. Neha Khatwani, Public Affairs, Policy, and Research Manager at the PRCA, who spoke with us for the purposes of this article, acknowledged that the working model of long hours and little flexibility is likely responsible for large numbers of women working freelance which, although provides more flexibility, is also more insecure and unstable (as the COVID crisis has highlighted).

This working model and its impact is also indictive of a broader issue with work culture and practice, however. Khatwani drew attention to the fact that, beyond those with caring responsibilities, such a work-life structure is undoubtedly unsustainable for many others -- for example, for people with a disability or mental health condition, or even just for people for whom work-life balance is important for their wellbeing. Findings of the PRCA/Opinium report, 'Opening the Conversation: Mental Wellbeing in Public Relations', supports this claim -- the study found that 89% of PR professionals struggled with their mental health at one point in the last 12 months (compared with a national average of 62%), whilst stress levels were also reportedly 12% higher than the national average, and 8% higher amongst agency workers than in-house staff.

One for all and all for one

Such working practices and customs come ultimately at the cost of a diverse workforce, blocking the entry and progression of a large demographic, thereby restricting the talent pools from which businesses can recruit, retain and promote staff. The 2019 PRCA census found that the PR and communications industry is 89% white, with only 4% of employees reporting a disability. By comparison, official figures report that 85.6% of the working population are white, whilst 19% of the working-age population have a disability, and over half of that demographic are in employment. For the communications industry, the business impact of this is immediate – as Khatwani outlines, 'if our job is to communicate with the masses, how can good decisions and communications come from a very small minority of people? This is why we have PR disasters'.

Increasing flexibility and fostering a supportive culture which enables a diversity of people to thrive is necessary to address these discrepancies. Across sectors, the habit of replicating what is perceived to 'work', rather than closely examining processes for potential improvement, is a common mistake. The communications and PR industry is evidently not immune to these foibles. There is an upshot, however -- the lessons learned when addressing cultural and structural change in other sectors can guide this industry too. Concerted efforts to promote diversity, operate inclusively, and support staff in contributing their best work will widen the scope of communications, both as an employer and as a communicator. Women – as a core demographic who begin their careers in the sector, only to be squeezed out by structural and cultural barriers as they progress – will be keenly affected, with a closing of the gender leadership gap likely a significant positive side-effect of such change. As has been demonstrated time and again in other industries, however, the business case and evidence strongly support the assertion that the advantages of diversity and inclusion extend to all.

[Women in Communications](#) [1] will take place online on Wednesday 2nd September 2020.

This conference will provide attendees with practical advice and coaching on how to develop their careers in the communications sector, from perspectives such as tackling the cultural and practical obstacles to leadership, developing and retaining a growth mindset in the face of challenge, honing networking skills, developing an executive presence, protecting your wellbeing to contribute your best work, and leading a change in culture.

Sources:

Claire Eden, 'How do we smash the glass ceiling in PR', <https://www.prca.org.uk/How-Do-We-Smash-The-Glass-Ceiling-In-PR> [2]

Commons Research Briefing, 'People with Disabilities in Employment', (January 2020) <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7540/> [3]

GOV.UK, 'Working age population', (August 2018) <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/demographics/working-age-population/latest> [4]

PRCA and Norstat, 'PR and Communications Census 2019', (2019), https://www.prca.org.uk/sites/default/files/PRCA_PR_Census_2019_v9-8-pdf%20%285%29.pdf [5]

PRCA and Opinium, 'Opening the Conversation: Mental Wellbeing at Work', (October 2019), <https://www.opinium.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Opening-the-Conversation-on-Mental-Wellbeing-at-Work-Digital-version.pdf> [6]

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Links

[1] <http://communications.professionalwomenseries.com/>

[2] <https://www.prca.org.uk/How-Do-We-Smash-The-Glass-Ceiling-In-PR>

[3] <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7540/>

[4] <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/demographics/working-age-population/latest>

[5] https://www.prca.org.uk/sites/default/files/PRCA_PR_Census_2019_v9-8-pdf%20%285%29.pdf

[6] <https://www.opinium.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Opening-the-Conversation-Mental-Wellbeing-at-Work-Digital-version.pdf>