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# Insights from Industry Leaders: A Maturity Model for Strengthening Communication Measurement and Evaluation

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**ABSTRACT**

## Abstract

Much scholarship has been devoted to identifying barriers that prevent the advancement of communication measurement and evaluation. This research focuses on the characteristics, objectives, and practices of chief communication officers (CCOs) with successful measurement and evaluation programs. Three key dimensions of practice emerged from in-depth interviews: communication executives' measurement practices and evaluation programs were used to adjust communication strategies; were aligned with other business units; and were integrated with business priority plans. Interviewees also focused on the ability of communication measurement practices and evaluation programs to provide insights for executives, to align communication with the work of other business units, and to connect the organization with the outside environment and stakeholders. This study extends strategic communication scholarship by discussing how overcoming barriers and advancing measurement and evaluation work relates to roles adopted by organizational leaders. This article also offers a preliminary, scalable maturity model that aids in the development, formalization, and optimization of strategic communication measurement and evaluation. This study demonstrates the capacity for communication evaluation to overcome perceived barriers, realize appropriate stature with organizations, and grow communication functions accordingly.

Strategic communication is a global field with many disciplinary contributors. Zerfass, Verčič, Nothhaft, and Werder ([2018](#)) define strategic communication as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization or other entity to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals” (p. 493). They write that issues are strategic when they become substantial enough to impact an organization's development, growth, identity, or survival (Zerfass et al., [2018](#), p. 493). Evaluation must be a critical part of strategic communication for, as Macnamara and Gregory ([2018](#)) point out, “evaluation answers the question: ‘what works, for whom, under what circumstances, and how?’” (Macnamara & Gregory, [2018](#); Pawson & Tilley, [1997](#), p. 342). Yet, determining if communication practices are truly successful in impacting an organization's development, growth, identity, or goals has been a challenge. Academics have lamented the state of measurement and evaluation practice within strategic communication for decades (Volk, [2016](#)).

Much scholarship has been devoted to identifying barriers that prevent the advancement of evaluation. Instead of further exploring barriers, this research focuses on understanding the characteristics of executives and organizations with successful measurement practices and evaluation programs. Measurement practices are defined as the use of quantitative and qualitative social scientific research methods to collect and analyze data as a basis for assessments of desired effectiveness, with effects measured against predetermined objectives, and thus, a particular element of more broad evaluation programs (Buhmann & Likely, [in press](#)). Evaluation programs are the systematic assessment of strategic communication initiatives' value and part of a process whereby effort is evaluated at different stages: planning (formative evaluation), implementation (process evaluation), and outcome (summative

evaluation), with outcome judged against business unit objectives, organizational goals, or broader stakeholder relationships (Buhmann & Likely, [in press](#)).

Despite the general bumpy and glacial advancement of communication measurement and evaluation, there are organizations that are successfully building robust evaluation programs and executives who are dedicated to continually improving their efforts. How do these leading organizations develop effective and functional evaluation programs in communication? What potential practices and trends might be identified that have helped CCOs develop sophisticated measurement and evaluation programs? To explore these questions, this article reports in-depth insights from communication leaders who are invested in improving their measurement and evaluation efforts. We draw upon insights generated from in-depth phone interviews to better understand how measurement and evaluation leaders have grown the sophistication of their programs and roles within the organization, to identify themes in the practices of top leaders, and to illustrate how communication practitioners might advance evaluation programs. Results from this study suggest examining how measurement practices, motivations, and programs mature is a promising direction for future scholarship, and the discussion section presents an initial maturity model to guide future research endeavors.

## Theoretical overview

This study draws upon previous work on strategic communication roles, organizational structure, and culture to understand theoretical factors that inform our examination of high-performing communication executives' practices and their orientation towards evaluation. Begun almost 50 years ago, research in this area has focused on identifying patterns of practitioner behavior and connecting these to different roles that communication professionals enact within organizations (Dozier, [1992](#); J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, [1992](#); Leitchty & Springston, [1996](#); Toth, Serini, Wright, & Emig, [1998](#)). Broom and Smith ([1979](#)) used roles theory to identify four main behavior patterns for strategic communication practitioners, including expert prescriber, communication facilitator, problem solving process facilitator, and communication technician. Additional research has expanded and condensed some of these roles over time. More recently, Volk et al. ([2017](#)) developed a grid that associates sets of communication manager tasks with eight key roles including ambassador, communication strategist, strategic manager, advisor, multiplier, professional communicator, operational manager, and coach. Role enactment theory suggests that these patterns develop because practitioners replicate behaviors they are familiar with and are rewarded for completing (Heath, [1994](#)).

As practitioners' work shifts from a communication technician role and towards a more strategic management role, researchers have stressed the increasing importance of boundary-spanning, a term that refers to communicator's efforts to understand the external communication environment, build relationships with stakeholders, and bring key information back into organizational conversations (J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, [1992](#); Dozier & Broom, [2006](#)). Top departments, writes Grunig ([2006](#)), embrace strategic management roles by

scanning the social, political, and institutional environment of the organization to bring an outside perspective to strategic decision making. As Sallot, Porter, and Acosta-Alzuru (2004) point out, using this information strategically benefits careers and solidifies the importance of communication. The increasing value placed in demonstrating a unit's tangible contributions to business results for boards and shareholders has made this distinction in roles more important (Penning & Bain, 2018).

Organizational structure and culture can influence role availability and adoption. As organizations grow and become more differentiated, roles and tasks change and structures become more hierarchical (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006; Moss, Likely, Sriramesh, & Ferrari, 2017). Reporting lines, structure and power can be connected to what roles are adopted within an organization (Moss, 2005). Werder and Holtzhausen (2011) argue for additional work in this area, specifically focused on examining how structural variables connect to practitioner roles, management practices, decision-making behavior, and leadership styles.

Because the current study examines practices in multiple countries, it is also important to note that country culture often influences these roles, management practices, and motivations. As Sriramesh (in press) writes, "organizations are culture-bound" and "linkage between culture and public relations is logical and very obvious" (p. 53). Corporate and societal culture together shape communication practices, and influence "not only the way people communicate but also how they respond to communication within the organization" (Sriramesh, in press). The mainstream culture of society does not necessarily dictate that of organizations, as distinct internal cultures also develop (Sriramesh, in press). Researchers have demonstrated the importance of corporate and societal culture on role enactment in various contexts, including South Africa (Tindall & Holtzhausen, 2011) and India and Greece (J. E. Grunig, L. A. Grunig, Sriramesh, Huang, & Lyra, 1995). This research is interested in applying these theoretical concepts to our examination of measurement and evaluation. The next section examines literature on measurement and evaluation practices.

## Literature review

### The state of strategic communication evaluation and measurement practice

Both practitioner and academic researchers have examined the state of strategic communication evaluation and measurement practice with great regularity, since at least the 1980s. These studies address evaluation and measurement perceptions amongst practitioners, units of analyses measured, utilization of research methodologies, uptake of tools and applications, and skill levels.

There is a strong stream of measurement and evaluation research that cyclically reports on current practices (Baskin, Hahn, Seaman, & Reines, 2010; Dozier, 1984; Watson, 1994; Watson & Simmons, 2004; Zeffass, Moreno, Tench, Verčič, & Verhoeven, 2009; Zeffass, Verčič, Verhoeven, Moreno, & Tench, 2012, 2015; Zeffass, Verčič, & Volk, 2017). These studies typically focus on practitioner attitudes towards evaluation, the types of methodological

approaches in use, and practitioner competency of evaluation methodologies. Although practitioners have demonstrated an increasingly positive attitude towards the need for outcome measures, as well as for the importance of both formative and summative campaign research, findings on the actual use of evaluation methodologies show limited advances in sophistication over a 30-year period. A lack of practitioner evaluation knowledge and technical measurement skills were regularly found in these studies to be a major reason for not employing more sophisticated outcome evaluation methodologies (Lindenmann, [1990](#); Zerfass et al., [2009](#); Baskin et al., [2010](#)). The primary methods employed included seat-of-the-pants (Dozier, [1984](#)); media coverage (Watson, [1994](#)); advertising value equivalents (Wright, Gaunt, Leggetter, Daniels, & Zerfass, [2009](#)); or volume of media publicity efforts (Zerfass et al., [2015](#)).

Another stream of research looks more in-depth at practitioner perspectives and goals (Hon, [1997](#), [1998](#); Place, [2015](#)). For example, Hon ([1997](#)) examined definitions of effectiveness and evaluation and found that practitioners define terms in many ways, but they attribute evaluation only to program or campaign effectiveness. Place ([2015](#)) also explored the relationship between program evaluation and ethics and found contradictions with their combined application in practice.

Content analyses of award entries and published program reports comprises a third stream of studies (Baerns, [2008](#); Blissland, [1990](#); Gregory, [2001](#); Pieczka, [2000](#); Schriener, Swenson, & Gilkerson, [2017](#)). These researchers found much in common over a 25-year period. First, most entrants put forward output measures in their submissions as their primary form of evaluation, and typically these were traditional media measures, or in later studies, combined with social media metrics. Second, seldom was cognitive, affective, or behavioral outcome evaluation undertaken against preset communication objectives. Third, few entrants conducted all three stages of scientific campaign research (formative research, process research, and summative research). Even recent analysis (Schriener et al., [2017](#)) of PRSA Silver Anvil winners from 2010 to 2014 showed that entrants focused on output metrics at the expense of outcome measures and that developing industry standards (i.e., Barcelona Principles or Valid Metrics Framework) were disregarded by most award winners. O'Neil's ([2013](#)) systematic review found that even though communication objectives were set in campaigns, evaluation focused on outputs and work combined various evaluation methods. Also, rigorous methodological design was typically not employed and communication objectives were not linked directly to an organizational goal (O'Neil, [2013](#)).

Various scholars have provided overviews that capture and discuss the results of many of these studies. They identify numerous barriers. Macnamara ([2006](#)) found a lack of time, budget, and management demand were barriers, while that same year, Xavier, Mehta, and Gregory ([2006](#)) identified a lack of practitioner evaluation of outcomes and their impact as barriers to strong measurement and evaluation work. Watson and Noble ([2007](#)) and Gregory and Watson ([2008](#)) found a lack of practitioner evaluation knowledge and expertise and a lack of evaluation beyond output metrics. A lack of standardized terminology (Macnamara, [2014](#); Michaelson & Stacks, [2011](#)), especially around important concepts like ROI (Likely & Watson, [2013](#);

Watson, [2012](#)) and evaluation modeling (Macnamara, [2014](#); Macnamara & Likely, [2017](#)) has also been identified as a barrier. Little attention has also been paid to ethical underpinnings in evaluation processes (Macnamara, [2015](#); Place, [2015](#); Watson & Noble, [2014](#)). Recently, Zerfass et al. ([2017](#)) discussed a lack of requisite expertise to undertake reliable evaluation and measurement, and similarly, Macnamara and Zerfass ([2017](#)) found a lack of knowledge and skills among practitioners.

Two sets of researchers provide up-to-date summary inventories of the barriers previously reported in earlier research studies. Macnamara ([2017](#)) details an extensive list of barriers that have been identified in the literature stretching back decades. Tench, Verčič, Zerfass, Moreno, and Verhoeven ([2017](#)) re-examine findings from a number of European Communication Monitor studies and produce a list of seven barriers: limited resources; low departmental credibility from “presenting measures that were perceived as a post-hoc self-justification of their work” (p. 106); misunderstanding of concepts, methods, instruments and stages; reductionism in research methodologies; reductionism in communication models; reductionism in management models; and lack of competence and expertise. Zerfass et al. ([2017](#)) suggest additional research on barriers, stating that “comparative, cross-cultural research into evaluation and measurement practices of the profession is needed to gain a deeper understanding of the current barriers to successful evaluation and to identify both best practices and future challenges” (p. 14).

Taken collectively, these studies put forward a vision of strategic communication practitioners who appear to understand the importance of and who appreciate the value in conducting evaluation and measurement. Within this vision, practitioners, as well as scholars, often state a strong desire and need to improve current practices, yet the vision is tempered with associated findings that show evaluation and measurement practices have, at the most, improved very slowly across the profession in scope and sophistication over the past decades. These studies demonstrate that there remains a greater use of activity output and outtake measurement compared to the evaluation of projects and campaigns and their impact on the organization, on its stakeholders, or on society at large. These scholars’ overviews of the 40 years of studies find that there is agreement on a common set of perceived barriers to evaluation and measurement deployment in practice.

## Maturity of practices

The identification of CCOs, under whose leadership the communication department is surpassing the barriers described previously, and is moving from the enactment of evaluation and measurement tasks at only the technician level to include more mature strategic management practices, is paramount. Grunig ([2008](#)) described this movement as moving up levels of analysis, from the simple measurement of communication messages, products, and channels, to the evaluation and measurement of communication programs (projects or campaigns such as media relations, employee communication, etc.).

Next, analysis focuses on the evaluation of the overall public relations or communication function, moving to evaluation of the function's role in organizational effectiveness and success and, finally, to an evaluation at the societal level—evaluating the contribution the organization makes to societal welfare, particularly the strategic communication department's role in organizational ethical behavior and social responsibility (Grunig, [2008](#)). Grunig ([2008](#)) presented five levels of analysis, with evaluation and measurement at each higher level of analysis. Hon ([1997](#)) added another unit of evaluation and measurement analysis, that of the individual practitioner or communication department employee and how effective they may be in achieving what is expected. Buhmann and Likely ([in press](#)) provided a seventh level or unit of analysis by differentiating between and among project/campaign and program. They argued that the overall strategic communication function includes integrated programs for marketing communication, employee communication, and media relations, and within these programs separate projects or campaigns are conducted. Then, from the perspective of the function's CCO, a very mature set of evaluation and measurement practices would include evaluation and measurement at all seven levels or units of analysis: message/product/channel, project or campaign, program, organization, society, department, and individual employee (Buhmann & Likely, [in press](#)). As noted before, studies demonstrate a greater application of message/product/channel output and outtake measurement in comparison to evaluation and measurement at any other level, be it on the level of projects and campaigns, programs, the organization, or society. A recent quantitative survey of 1,601 professionals working in the communication departments of corporations, nonprofit, and governmental organizations found that attention was focused most on lower level units of analysis, such as media clippings, yet impact on organizational targets like stakeholders, financial impacts, and intangible assets, such as brand and organizational culture, was neglected (Zerfass et al., [2017](#)). Research and professional commentary suggest a profession having difficulty climbing a maturity ladder and a need to focus research on those communication executives who have overcome barriers with the goal of enacting more mature evaluation and measurement practices.

In summary, there is an ongoing stream of research focused on current practice, practitioner attitudes, and perceived barriers to improved evaluation and measurement practices. Interestingly enough, no research has been undertaken to identify and closely examine CCOs who are overcoming the barriers identified in the literature or working to mature their practices. To fill that gap, this research focuses on understanding the characteristics of these leaders and organizations in attempting to build strong, sophisticated measurement and evaluation programs and which have, in some degree, overcome many of the barriers addressed in this literature.

## Method

This research project set out to examine the following research questions, in order to contribute to the gaps in research: RQ1:

How do leaders build measurement and evaluation practices and programs?

RQ2:

What are strategic communication leaders' measurement and evaluation objectives?

RQ3:

How do strategic communication leaders judge the success or maturity of measurement and evaluation efforts?

The purpose of this study is to provide insights, from in-depth interviews with corporate communication executives who were selected by their peers as leaders in evaluation and measurement, to better understand characteristics of leaders and departments who excel at measurement and evaluation. Research was focused on understanding internal processes and key factors that impact the development, adoption, use, and growth of evaluation programs and measurement practices.

Authors conducted in-depth phone interviews with communication executives from an international pool of major corporations. The study relied upon purposive sampling, with interview participants strategically recruited through organizations known to have demonstrated past leadership in communication evaluation and measurement. The research team approached members of various groups — informally part of what could be considered an evaluation and measurement community of interest — such as the German Public Relations Society (DPRG) and the International Controller Association (ICV) Value Creation Through Communication Task Force, the International Association of Measurement and Evaluation in Communication (AMEC), in particular their Academic Advisory Group, and the Institute for Public Relations Measurement Commission (IPRMC). As well, executive leaders in the Institute of Public Relations (IPR) and the Arthur W. Page Society, together with prominent academics and professionals based in various countries, were engaged to help identify a pool of possible evaluation and measurement leaders.

The final sample primarily consisted of executives from Fortune 500 companies with representation from a wide range of business sectors and industries, including insurance, energy (oil and gas), technology and communication, transportation (a major airline), manufacturing, retail, health care, and consulting. Interviewees were based in Asia, North America or Europe, typically at corporate headquarters. The majority of participants held titles such as Chief Communication Officer (CCO), Vice President of Corporate Communications, or Director of Measurement and Analytics (selected for interview by the CCO), or held similar professional roles and organizational responsibilities.

An initial screener questionnaire was developed and refined by the team of researchers to determine the relative sophistication of evaluation programs and measurement practices and to verify the quality of the recommendation to the pool. The screener asked respondents about their use of evaluation and measurement frameworks, dashboards, and performance indicators, sophistication of measures, how regularly they track and report on communication

effectiveness, use of communication evaluation findings, and their investment in communication and measurement resources. Following the completion of the screener and subsequent acceptance, research team members individually interviewed participants. During interviews, executives were asked about their planning processes, roles, key measurement practices, perceptions of communication's value or merit within their organization, utilization of metrics by organizational leaders, the alignment of measurement processes with industry standards and existing models, barriers to advancing evaluation and measurement, and to reflect on the growth and development of their own programs and practices. Participants were promised their individual comments would remain anonymous in order to allow for candid conversations and honest assessments of organizational activities. The total sample consisted of 20 interviews, which ranged in length from 30 minutes to over an hour. Interviews were digitally recorded with the knowledge and consent of the participant, and then professionally transcribed by a paid research assistant.

Following the transcription process, the research team and a graduate research assistant completed an initial coding of interview comments to identify key themes connected to common barriers and challenges identified in the literature. Strauss and Corbin (1998) grounded theory approach for open coding was used. Throughout the coding process, the research team worked together to identify major patterns, solidify significant themes and perspectives emerging, and cluster codes into subcategories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Key findings from this qualitative analysis process are presented next along with noteworthy quotes from interviewed participants.

## Findings

A number of findings with important implications for strategic communication emerged from our interviews. Key insights from organizations that are overcoming common barriers to evaluation and measurement are reported here. RQ1:

How do leaders build measurement and evaluation practices and programs?

### Adjustment, alignment then integration

In our interviews, we identified three themes that reflect the general steps strategic communication leaders took to progress to sophisticated programs: communication executives' evaluation and measurement programs were first used to adjust their department's strategies and activities; then were aligned with other business units; and finally, were integrated with organizational goals and priority plans. For example, leaders started out using measurement to assess the impact of communication strategies and inform the next cycle of communication planning, using evaluation as feedback to adjust communication activities. As their programs advanced, communication leaders started focusing on measurable outcomes and lining these metrics up with the activities of other corporate functions. In the most sophisticated organizations, communication plans "nested" with other business unit's plans and objectives, and communication activities were integrated with organizational

priorities. Evaluation work was used to demonstrate clear links between communication activities, communication plans, the planning and work of other corporate functions, and organizational priorities. These trends are described and illustrated next.

#### Use findings to adjust communication activities and organizational objectives

Communication leaders in the early stages of their programs used measurement findings primarily to assess the effectiveness of communication activities, then to adjust communication strategies, and then to inform the next cycle of communication planning. For example, one senior communications executive told us:

The seven dimensions [we use in one of our measurement models] are around Performance, Products and Services, Innovation, Leadership. And then your CSR components are Citizenship, Governance, and Workplace. ... When we look at this dashboard, this model, and we see that CSR could give us the most lift, [and] we've got a great CSR story that we've really never told, we started pushing it through multiple channels and doing different partner events.

Even early in the development of their programs, executives built a strong internal understanding of how to inform communication goals within their department. This was the base upon which more sophisticated evaluation and measurement programs were built. If those outside the communication function were to understand the business case for measurement, the communication team also had to embrace its value and articulate its importance, as this is how measurement alignment with other units and organizational objectives begins to happen and opportunities for advising or coaching other units are built. As one global vice president said, “[The gateway to using more advanced communications effectiveness measures is] having a strong strategy and having people understand what your objective is from a communications standpoint.”

Setting up evaluation of communication activities was the first step in making sure most communication practitioners within the organization could internally articulate the business case for specific communication strategies. Once the use of evaluation findings was strong within their own departments, communication leaders shared those findings with other business units and organizational planners, setting the stage for members of the department to advise and coach other organizational leaders. This work is described in more detail next.

#### Align communication measures and plans with the work of other business units

Communication leaders also built partnerships with other business units to align their work, tools, and insights with the objectives and operations of other organizational groups. Communication leaders were not measuring work only within the communication silo, but instead built a holistic approach to communication, in which impacts on all stakeholders were considered and tied together. To enhance adoption by the business, evaluation operatives acted like internal consultants – consulting on objectives and measurement methods upfront. One head of influencer analytics explained, “We’ll blend the data from what’s happening in the

market and we'll work with the teams from across marketing and even sales and our business units to say: 'Here's where opportunity is. Here's what customers are saying. Here's what the market is saying.' And bring all those together to help drive the planning and the strategy, the messaging, the content, etc." As programs advanced and relationships with other business units strengthened, communication leaders increased their role as internal consultants and contributed measurement data that informed other corporate functions' planning and decisions. Evaluation helped lift the perception of the communications function, leading to earlier and increased engagement during management strategizing.

Dedication to working cross-functionally was a significant way communication leaders advanced their evaluation programs and improved the strategic contributions of the communication function; however, building these partnerships with other units was a challenge. Interviewees noted that it takes longer and many decentralized or devolved organizations don't have a hub at the center of their organization to facilitate this process. Having an organization with a strong data-driven culture might ease this process, as one division chair for communication at a leading medical organization remarked: "We're a data driven organization. We make decisions based upon data. And so I don't have to go to HR and Market Research or other groups to try and convince them this is a good thing. Everybody is on board. I think that that really helps. The challenge has been with some groups, helping them have business goals tied to communication."

Communication leaders stressed the importance of overcoming challenges associated with cross-functional partnerships, as lack of knowledge of other business areas relegates communication work to its silo – thus stunting the growth, advancement and perceived value of evaluation programs. As a director of measurement and analytics explained, "I think [the missing piece from delivering more effectively] can be lack of communication or knowledge of what's going on in other areas of the business...It's that whole silo problem where you may not be aware of it, you may not have knowledge of it, so therefore you don't include it. And I don't ever want to look like we're disconnected." Communication executives with sophisticated programs also felt integrating their activities with other units helped demonstrate how communication generates revenue and connects to assets such as brand equity: "The real magic happens when you get multiple disciplines at the table early on to be building a tapestry...where they can stack and play off of each other. And then, at the end, it is much easier to measure, because you see how the pieces all fit together."

This respondent went on to describe how this worked in the pharmaceuticals industry in which she worked before her current job:

A business team is generally what it's called. And that business team is cross-functional and ... they include R&D.... The [people with] expertise then [start] to talk about "How are we going to commercialize this? How, are we going talk to consumers, patients? How are we going to talk to ... the best physicians to be using this drug?" ... So, by its nature, it's very cross-functional, if you have to have consumer and physician and advertising and communications and all sorts of different groups.

Integrate communication plans and measures with organizational objectives and priority plans

Corporate communication executives with strong evaluation programs described efforts to improve strategic management by integrating communication planning with organizational objectives and using evaluation and measurement practices to demonstrate how communication activities contribute to corporate objectives. Communication executives also honed their ability to show straight lines between communication efforts and business results, which was key to departmental growth. A manager of public affairs at a multinational energy company said, "If you're measuring what you do, [are] accountable for what you do, and you can show a much straighter line between what you do and business outcomes, that ultimately is what allows you to continue to grow...If you're not doing those things, it's a path to extinction." Communication planning was approached as an ongoing strategic process that was tightly tied to the organizational planning process. Communication leaders served in an advisor role in some of the initial organizational objective setting and planning sessions in order to ensure communication goals aligned with functional business measures, and to ensure organizational priorities considered insights developed from communication evaluation programs. On this point, one executive reflected, "The measurement data is heavily integrated into that planning process to insure that we actually are leveraging and operationalizing the insights from that, before we just started something from scratch – or out of the blue – that's not baked in data and informed by those insights that we've captured throughout the year." RQ2:

What are strategic communication leaders' measurement and evaluation objectives?

From proving communication's value to providing insights

Once comfortable with communication's authority and stature within the organization, communication executives were motivated to provide insights that mattered to many business groups and organizational leaders. Insights are defined as new learnings of significant consequence to an organization, based on meaningful interpretation of research. Interviewees' objective was to provide insights that were evidence-based and actionable for the organization. Communication leaders with mature evaluation programs chose to report on the intelligence they'd gathered and the insights they'd drawn as forecasts in counseling other senior executives, rather than simply showcase the effectiveness they had obtained in previous communication campaigns. That is, as evaluation programs developed in sophistication, communication leaders centered their reporting opportunities on insights drawn from their evaluations overall, in order to inform future organizational decision making, rather than glorifying their work in measures, such as success in social media channels or in recently conducted communication campaigns. This change in reporting helped leaders move away from discussions centered around communication value, or on the merit or worth of a particular communication initiative, with other business units and organizational leaders. Instead, interviewees wanted to move

conversations towards insights that were based on research and were relevant to future action plans of other groups. This required more sophisticated analyses, the integration of many data points from within and outside the department, a focus on formative research and a concentration on evaluation, not simply measurement. These trends are explained next in more detail.

Move away from discussions about communication's merit or value

By demonstrating the strategic importance of communication insight derived from data generated by multiple and increasingly sophisticated methodologies or tools, trusted relationships with organizational leaders were built—allowing these relationships to move beyond any discussion or questioning of the perceived value of communication. A chief communications officer and global vice president at a Fortune 500 food company remarked: “I don't have to prove my value to the company or communication's value to the company. They know it. It's a cost of doing business these days.” But the CCO admitted, in order to maintain this level of trust in communication, “You have to continually show your line of sight to the business, that you're aligned with the business.” For this interviewee, ‘line of sight to the business’ was making sure the communication department's work was visible in the organization and that everyone inside the department clearly understood how their work aligned with business goals, objectives, and values. Communication executives with sophisticated evaluation programs were especially cautious about how far communication effectiveness measures were shared, typically trying to keep these within the communication function itself. Communication executives centered reports to senior management on insights, rather than traditional media or social media effectiveness measures, as they felt there was danger in regularly reporting measures that do not directly inform the decision making of organizational leaders and boards. Communication leaders could determine when comparison findings or insights about initial reactions from stakeholders (like from social media) might be valuable to other corporate functions on a case-by-case basis. This is described next.

## Report insights

Interviewees described how being reflective about measurement reporting contributed to their success. All interviewees reported some metrics to individual business unit executives to demonstrate the impact their communication product, channel or campaign may have had on a business project and its objective. As noted, these measures were not reported to a board or management team as a whole. Over time, interviewees honed their ability to focus on the most meaningful metrics, to decide when and how to report communication effectiveness measures, and how to provide learnings that were actionable for other business units in order to support their next planning cycle.

The leaders understood that their evaluation programs needed to provide learnings and insights that were actionable for other leaders, to continually build communication's authority. Most importantly, these leaders included high-level metrics concerning stakeholder relationships, corporate reputation, brand image, and corporate social responsibility (CSR), along with their product/channel and campaign metrics in their current evaluation and measurement programs, which then allowed them to have difficult conversations about corporate strategy formulation and implementation decisions, and to steer the organization through issues management. Some interviewees discussed their efforts to share insights from these evaluations, with one vice president from a global manufacturing corporation based in Germany explaining, “I use the survey results to insert objectivity into Board and management discussions. My evidence-based insights foster a higher level of discussion. And by giving strategic input I raise the reputation of my department.”

One interviewee said this was one of their key evaluation and measurement strategies: “One of our measurement strategies... is turning ... the numbers in our findings into action. So, taking a look at everything that we found — the analysis and the insight — and really, really coming up with some actions. What are we going to do as a result of the numbers?” Making evaluation actionable and knowing how others might use communication insights were key in drawing other business units to communication. One vice president of corporate communication at a top 20 Fortune 500 company attributed their recent increased investment allocated to evaluation and measurement initiatives to the department's skill in “operationalizing the insights”

they had generated from measurement. In regard to “the efficient deployment of resources,” the interviewee noted, “there’s a ton of value to us being able to grow our investment in measurement as we become more efficient from the insights and the data that we’re capturing there.”

Communication executives had different views on the need to produce a ‘scorecard.’ One vice president of group communication and marketing at a multinational manufacturing corporation and someone with a very sophisticated evaluation and measurement program said, “I want to steer clear from the danger of a formal scorecard, one that’s reported to the Board two times per year. First, it’s not important information in itself for Board decision making. Second, you are always compared to a baseline and the tendency is to always need to report higher and higher gains from that baseline. I only use supplier scorecards internally.” On the other hand, a vice president of corporate communications and public affairs at a top 25 Fortune 500 company, someone with a slightly less sophisticated program, disagreed. This communication department produces a scorecard but this communication executive relies on the deep business experience of the executive team to not continually inflate measurement baselines: “You know, measurement is glacial. And luckily the leadership team doesn’t get too hooked up on those topics and say, ‘I need to see a five-point improvement in X,’ because they get it...And just because we don’t have the right measure or we don’t see it moving every month, doesn’t mean these aren’t the right things to invest in. We have a really tenured senior leadership team...so it’s relatively easy to explain this to them. They’re very wise.” The tendency for communication executives leading much less sophisticated evaluation programs was to produce a regular scorecard and report less sophisticated metrics.

### Connect the organization with outside environment and stakeholders

In our interviews, communication executives also described their motivation to use evaluation and measurement programs to connect organizational goals, the outside environment, and stakeholders. Environmental scanning within measurement programs was used to track major stakeholder groups and their issues. Asked if other business units had their own intelligence groups [similar to that evolving in the communications group], one communications executive answered: “Not the kind of stakeholder intelligence capability we’re building, no. Actually, that’s a functional expertise that we would provide to the businesses.”

Communication leaders saw their role as paying attention to current events and factoring them into organization planning and decision making. One senior communications executive gave this example:

“We’re constantly tracking what’s happening in the external environment. ... So, we know where the needs for our support might be most acute. So, let’s say we know that there’s going to be activity to disrupt our [company’s] ability to do business in certain geographies. We’re tracking what public sentiment is. We’re tracking what stakeholders are involved in. We might say, “This is happening in this area. This area is very important to us. We have a lot of our business plans based in that geography.” And we’ll use the data and the understanding of the public sentiment ... to drive our engagement strategy.”

A manager of public affairs in a multinational energy company said, “Almost everything [our organization does] requires the public’s permission to do it. We either have to get permits or beat back punitive measures that will try to slow us down or stop us from operating. And so there’s always a communication element to everything we do. But, we don’t do communications just for communications’ sake. It has to be a means to an end.” Communication executives pointed out, as noted previously, that other business functions often do not have the intelligence across multiple stakeholder groups that communication functions build, so they made sure their evaluation reports leverage this strength and create their insights based on this gathered intelligence coupled with the data from their many evaluation and measurement metrics. RQ3:

How do strategic communication leaders judge the success or maturity of measurement and evaluation efforts?

Respondents described their journey over the last several years as moving away from relying only on simple measures such as message reach to growing comfortable with more advanced sets of tools and advanced metrics. They described success as a move towards customized programs and reports centered on key performance indicators (KPIs). Interviewees also described success as building a strong evaluation culture inside the department and among organizational leaders. These themes are described next.

### Strong evaluation expertise at all levels

Communication leaders described the importance of having all employees within the communication function able to articulate the value of their work and demonstrate how it connects to other business units and organizational strategy using metrics. As a vice president of corporate communications for one of the world's largest telecommunications companies remarked, "When I first took over this function five years ago, we didn't have people across the team that were skilled and comfortable talking metrics, but we've gotten them to that place where, no matter what level you're at, they are pulling data and stopping conversations at the working level."

This evaluation activity had a positive effect on the overall communication department's stature within the organization and on the attitudes of staff. Staff felt appreciated and well respected within the organization when able to articulate their value through numbers and demonstrate how their work drives business needs. As a communications officer said, "Everybody [in the communications department has] gotten with the program. They're happy. They're appreciated. They're much [better] respected within the organization, because they are able to articulate their value through numbers. And, they are not just fighting all the time trying to explain what the heck it is they do. They're very focused on 'this is my role. These are my responsibilities. And this is what I'm driving from a business perspective.' If you can get everybody in that vein, it's an amazing thing. Very motivating."

Interviewees felt growth and success happened when all communication staff had not only a baseline level of evaluation and measurement expertise but also could connect strategy and data. Interviewees describe being easily overwhelmed with the amount of information they are able to generate and how much they value the ability to interpret and drive strategy based on findings for all members of the department, including new hires. Some interviewees described using industry standards and models in their early stages of development and as a tool to familiarize new employees with key measurement practices and terms, but that they had different needs as their programs grew more sophisticated. Some communication leaders were familiar with industry standards and described how models and resources from organizations such as AMEC, IPR, the German CC model, Reputation Institute, and the Norwegian Business School influenced their work. Other communication leaders did not find value in industry practices or standards, as they were too restrictive, defensive-oriented, and focused more on effectiveness of simple communication practices rather than overall value of larger communication programs or strategies.

Strengthening the evaluation culture within the department also allowed leaders to increase the accountability of all communication practitioners; some interviewees tied the work of their direct reports to an internal scorecard and held them accountable for their effectiveness, such as on reputation. Some felt this might set up potential conflicts. "If you're the HR guy and your management incentive compensation plan is dependent upon the employee engagement score going up, you're going to make sure that that survey is structured to focus on a lot of strengths. If you're incentivized for fixing problems, you're going to make sure that survey is focused on a lot of weaknesses so that you can go in and fix the problem and demonstrate a year over to year improvement on the problem," cautioned a chief brand and communications officer.

Even though they saw widespread evaluation expertise inside the department as an indicator of maturity, many organizations still valued outside partners for the specialized expertise that they could add, and their ability to share insights across peer organizations. Some advanced programs had data scientists on staff and teams

specializing in insights and analytics. Before getting to this point, leaders relied on a few experts in the IT area for analysis and partnered with outside agencies to improve their measurement capabilities. Organizations often leveraged a key internal or well-known external expert for training and charting new directions for measurement and evaluation practices. One interviewee described his organization's strategy of balancing internal expertise with outside resources: "We obviously have a lead (internally) who oversees our measurement protocols and is the primary reference interface with our vendor team, where we have a ton of analysts who are culling through and doing the real-time data analysis and scrubbing. And so, we have a team of two [or] three internally that supports what is a much larger agency team externally."

To foster a culture that encourages all communication employees to hone their measurement and evaluation skills, executives also brought their own passion and personal expertise in this area. Indeed, the executives with the most sophisticated programs had high levels of expertise: some held PhDs, others were self-taught, but all could "speak the language" with their internal or external specialists and use their deep understanding to direct these measurement experts.

### Competence with holistic measures and tools

Interviewees also judged their success by growing competence with more holistic measures and tools. In the early stages of their programs, communication leaders did not have tracking research that allowed them to assess communication beyond the output level, which prevented them from having a rigorous measurement program that could generate insights and demonstrate business value. Some communication executives were unsure how to navigate a path forward and advance their research toolkits at this early stage, but were driven by general dissatisfaction with traditional tools focused solely on output measures, and a strong internal dedication to continuous improvement of tools and expertise.

Once they refined their ability to assess communication reach measures like exposure, communication leaders started to tie these granular metrics to response measures like knowledge and behavior change, and then to organizational performance measures such as sales. Although interviewees rarely used the language of outputs, outtakes, outcomes and outflows, suggested by dictionaries and models from industry bodies and academics, interviewees did seem to move through these basic stages. One executive explained, "So we start with: What's the business outcome we're trying to achieve? And then, what are the communications goals as a part of that? And then we always try to measure the effectiveness of the communications as part of that broader project. [However,] if we're working on a business project, and we achieve our communications goals, but we don't achieve the business outcome, we don't necessarily consider that a success. Because ultimately we want to be held accountable by the same overarching measures that everybody that's part of an integrated team is held to." The move to a focus on organizational performance measures was pivotal in how interviewees described their journey of maturity. The desire and pressure to contribute to business-level decisions motivated them to combine multiple data sources and reach out to other business units to share tools, when resources were limited. Interviewees described the challenge of figuring out how to tie communication activities to brand awareness and quantifying organizational measures, like company reputation. It was difficult for some organizations, especially those without Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems, to make direct links between communication activities and business impact.

### Ability to customize measurement practices and evaluation programs

As measurement and evaluation programs became more advanced, customization became important because it allowed for more back-and-forth interactions with executives to determine which measures the organization cares about and what measures might be "aspirational" for the leadership team. Customization also helped communication work tie more tightly to intangibles, such as stakeholder relations, reputation, and corporate social responsibility. Third party and research insights were used to validate strategy and metrics. One chief brand and communications officer described their use of this strategy:

"I use Reputation Institute data. And I use the movement of the pulse score. And I take their model, and I blow it up. I even bring Reputation Institute people in once a year to kind of put more color into the data particularly for the finance folks [and the] Board. And only recently elevated [it] to the Board because we've got a new CFO, and I brought him in and it was supposed to be a 45-minute session. It was an hour and a half, because he was so fascinated that we're using a model and math to tie it to attributes that, based on 26 years of research and data, we're as accurate as we could get. Almost using that historical data as predictive analytics. And he's the one that said, 'You need to do this regularly to the Board.' So, it's effective. As much as you can use third-party data to validate your strategy and your metrics, the better off you'll be."

## Discussion and future research direction

This study extends strategic communication scholarship and practice by exploring the success of top leaders in evaluation and measurement and illustrating how they have advanced their practices. Our research revealed that interviewees moved their programs through three steps: adjustment, alignment, and integration. In the adjustment stage, communication executives use measurement practices to improve communication plans and make communication activities more effective. In the alignment stage, communication leaders use evaluation programs to also connect their work with the strategies of other business units. In the integration stage, communication executives are able to leverage measurement practices and evaluation programs to connect organizational decision-making processes to the external environment.

Volk and Zerfass (2018) examined alignment as a key concept for strategic communication research and practice, and distinguish between *primary alignment*, which is focused on connecting communication strategy and corporate strategy, and *secondary alignment*, which takes an integrated communications perspective, as it is focused on aligning communication strategy and activities. Our research builds upon their scholarship by demonstrating how central measurement practices are to both types of alignment. Our interviewees with mature programs used measurement and evaluation insights to foster partnerships with other business units and enhanced cross-functional alignment by "nesting" evaluation plans with the activities of other groups. Future research might continue to explore how measurement and evaluation structures help improve not only intrafunctional alignment, but also cross-functional alignment, which as Volk and Zerfass (2018) point out, can help organizations increase synergies and improve workflows.

Theoretically, findings in this study build upon previous research on role enactment and extend scholarship by demonstrating how overcoming common barriers to strong measurement and evaluation practice might be related to roles adopted by organization leaders. For example, interviewees adopted a coaching role (Volk et al., 2017) with other departments in which they shared measurement findings to improve the work of those units and better align evaluation practices. This allowed communication executives to further strengthen partnerships outside the communication silo. Through this coaching role, other groups found value in measurement findings from the communication department, which could help build an organizational performance measurement culture, a common barrier for advancement of measurement practices.

Interviewees also described using measurement and evaluation to advance an advisor role (Volk et al., 2017), which allowed them to improve strategic management opportunities with the organization, another common barrier identified in the literature. As communication integrates with business goals, leaders understand and manage the external environment and figure out what to bring back into organizational conversations, planning, and decisions about direction, which connects to boundary-spanning roles, as described in previous scholarship (J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 1992; Dozier & Broom, 2006). Interviewees used measurement and evaluation as a bridge to bring something of value to organizational level planning and decision-making conversations. As Volk et al. (2017) and Zerfass and Franke (2013) wrote, a key part of the strategic advisor role is dependent upon building trust and finding resources to support serious, honest, and bold consultations with top organizational leaders. Evaluation was a key factor in leveraging the stature and authority of communication within the

organization and emboldening communication executives to have difficult conversations with organizational leaders. Future research might continue to explore how high-performing communication departments enact various roles to reduce barriers to evaluation and strengthen their authority.

As noted in our methods section, we used a screener questionnaire to verify that respondents were invested in evaluation and measurement, and in doing so, were engaged in moving beyond the barriers identified in the literature. All of our interviewees had moved beyond the barriers identified to some extent; however, our interviews and questionnaire revealed that some had moved considerably further than others. We also asked interviewees to look back at how their programs advanced and developed over the years. Our interviewees underscored the need for a framework to help guide the benchmarking and advancement of measurement and evaluation programs. Another promising direction for future scholarship is to advance models that aid in the development, formalization, and optimization of strategic communication evaluation.

Further research might explore how to place corporations on a scale of maturity and compare programs in early stages of growth and success to those that are more established and sophisticated. Our interviews revealed initial trends in this area, as communication executives described their efforts to consciously overcome barriers, how they addressed different challenges at different times, and their changing roles and strategies for success.

A preliminary generic model for overcoming barriers to evaluation and measurement is suggested in Figure 1. In addition, Table 2 describes an evaluation and measurement program maturity framework for a communication department to apply as it develops a more sophisticated program. The model is based on overcoming barriers to evaluation and measurement and then moving through various levels of program sophistication. This model is a scalable vision of communication evaluation and measurement that can help communication departments determine their maturity level and understand practices that need implementation in order to move to the next stage. Table 1 summarizes the findings in this study, and [Figure 1](#) and Table 2 build upon those insights to offer a description of each stage of maturity from initial investment (early stage) to adjustment (mid stage) to alignment (advanced stage) to integration (optimal stage). This framework can be helpful to determine what practices are common at each stage, gaps that need to be addressed to move to the next stage, and common challenges encountered for advancement. Models and frameworks for measurement and evaluation program maturity can help organizations, especially those at the early and mid-stage, develop a migration plan for further growth and development.

Table 1. Summary of findings.

Steps	Objectives and Challenges	Indicators of Success
<p><b>Adjustment.</b> Measurement practices are focused on adjusting the work of the communication department (campaigns, plans).</p>	<p>Objective is to keep communication work visible within the organization, without reporting only effectiveness measures that steer discussions towards communication’s value or merit within the organization.</p>	<p>Strong measurement and evaluation expertise at all levels. Communication departmental employees are able to use metrics to drive their work and understand their contributions to organizational success.</p>
<p><b>Alignment.</b> Evaluation programs are aligned with work in other business units and facilitate partnerships across business functions.</p>	<p>Objective is to focus measures and evaluation reports around insights that are actionable and relevant to the communication department <i>and</i> units outside the communication silo.</p>	<p>Growing comfort with advanced measurement and evaluation practices and tools. Communication leaders are able to provide insights and data- driven strategy intelligence to other business units.</p>
<p><b>Integration.</b> Measurement practices and evaluation programs are aligned with other business units <i>and</i> integrated with organizational goals, objectives, and decision- making processes.</p>	<p>Objective is to bring metrics on outside environment and stakeholders into organizational goals and decisions; this requires reports that consider multi- dimension and high level metrics like reputation, image, and relationships.</p>	<p>Capability to customize evaluation programs, reports, and measures based on organizational needs, changes in environment, and shifts with stakeholders. Communication leaders are trusted and valued contributors to discussions about organizational strategy, future plans, and decisions.</p>

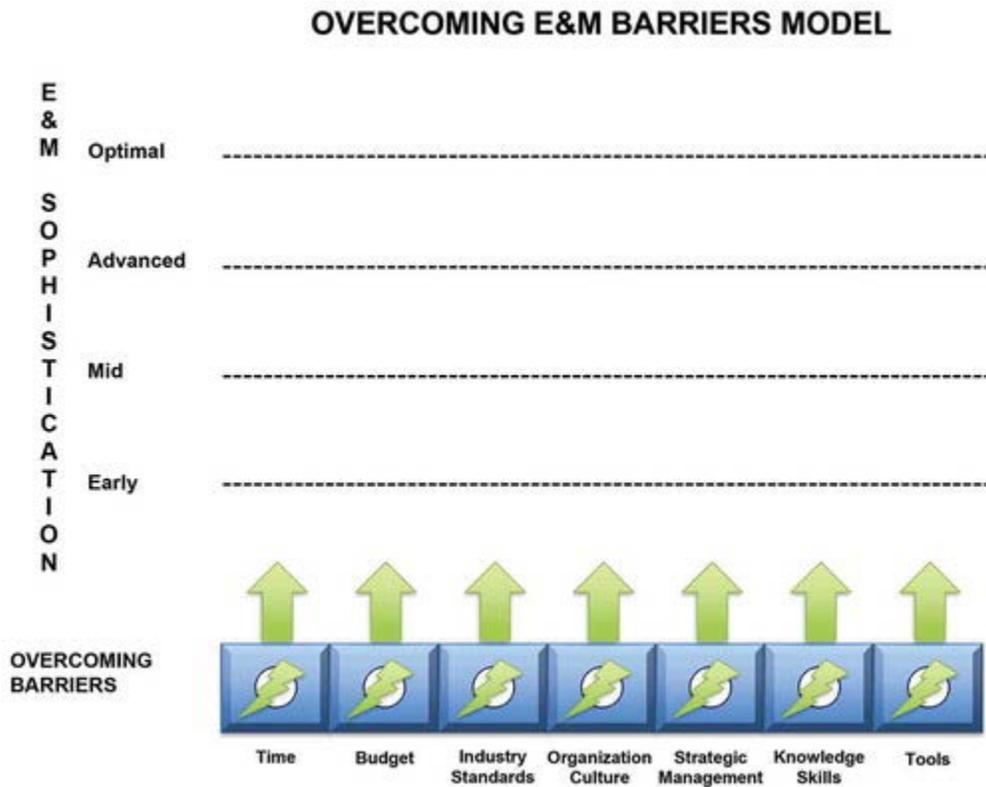
**Table 2.** Maturity model for sophistication of measurement practices and evaluation programs.

Optimal Growth	Time is not an Issue.	We have sufficient budget to meet the costs of organizational and societal impact evaluation.	We report actionable insights on the communication impact on intangible assets (reputation; brand image; stakeholder relations; CSR) to the organization's executives.	We have scientific expertise on staff and for we work with expertise in other functional areas and for suppliers and we customize the available data stream to create unique dash boards.	We employ research tools that capture stakeholder and societal perspectives, organizational-stakeholder and organizational-societal relationships and communication impact on these.	We establish our own standards and best practices for our communication evaluation program and communication measurement systems.	We use measurement data to determine if the organization has 'license to operate' support within its constituencies.	Societal Level
Advanced Growth	Time is not an issue.	We have sufficient budget to meet the costs of outcome and business impact evaluation.	We report communication outcomes to business unit and organizational clients and the Impact that meeting our goals has on their tangible program objectives .	We have expertise on staff to capture and analyze outcome data and its impact on other data sources and/or to work with expertise in other functional areas and/or suppliers and we trained staff to apply learnings.	We employ research tools that capture the impact of communication outcomes on business and organizational performance objectives.	We establish our own standards and best practices for our communication evaluation program and its impact on business and organizational performance objectives.	We use measurement data to determine if meeting the goals for our communication activities Impacted on the objectives set for business unit or organizational programs.	Organizational Level
Mid Growth	Time is not an issue .	We have sufficient budget to meet the costs of communication outcome evaluation.	We report communication outcomes within the department to improve our project/campaign goal setting and planning.	We have expertise on staff to capture and analyze outcome data and/or to work with suppliers and we trained staff to apply learnings.	We employ research tools that capture communication outcomes, such as attitudinal, opinion and behavioural changes.	We establish our own standards and best practices for our communication evaluation program and/or we learn from outside experts.	We use measurement data to determine if we met the goals we set for our communication activities.	Campaign/Program Levels

Early Growth	Time is not an issue.	We have sufficient budget to meet the costs of output and outtake measurement.	We aggregate measurement data and report that data only within the communication department in order to improve our communication processes.	We have trained staff members to capture output data and to monitor and analyze traditional media, social media and digital outtake data and/or to work with suppliers.	We employ research tools that capture activity outputs and outtakes, such results as coverage, reach, tonality, engagement , and	We establish our own standards and best practices for our communication evaluation program and/or we learn from outside experts.	We use measurement data to determine the effectiveness of our communication processes (for channels; products; messages).	Channel Media Product Message Level
Beyond Barriers	Time	Budget	Culture	Knowledge Skills	Research Tools	Industry Standards	Strategic Management	Analysis of Levels
Identified Barriers	We have so much work, that taking time for proper measurement is a luxury.	We think spending money on execution gives a better bang for the buck .	Our organization doesn't have a robust self-measurement culture.	As staff, we haven't the confidence in math, stats, analytics , etc.	We only use tools for output and outtake tracking and monitoring.	The terminology we see is confusing and contradictory.	We do not set measurable goals for our communication activities.	Identified Barriers
	Tracking, monitoring and measuring our activities takes a regular and routine time commitment, which	We were not allotted a specific budget for evaluation and measurement.	There is no demand from management for us to provide	There is no impetus to pursue educational or training opportunities.	More sophisticated tools are owned by other functions and we don't have access to data..	We have no knowledge of any industry measurement standards and each supplier seems to have its own 'better' proprietary system.	Our activities do not stem from or tie to business unit or organizational measurable objectives .	

	we can't make.							
	More sophisticated evaluation takes too much time, particularly for the long period of evaluation required.	We believe more sophisticated evaluation is too costly and we can't rationalize its benefit.	Management has not supported any evaluation and measurement initiatives we've brought forward.	We don't have specialized expertise on staff nor do we employ E&M specialists who could coach and mentor.	Even if we bought more sophisticated methodologies, we still wouldn't have the ability to leverage the resulting data..	We don't see that industry has a best way to tie together all that we could measure into a single framework. (silver bullet)	We do not input research, info/data or Insight Into organizational strategic management processes.	

Figure 1. Stages to overcome measurement and evaluation barriers.



Additional research should test and apply our initial maturity model and framework and further explore roles, practices, and factors driving maturity, triggers for different stages, and additional steps to overcome barriers in each phase. Future research might also address some of the challenges described by executives at each stage, such as how to capture the mentoring value of the communication department and how to measure the impact of executive and board coaching. Overall, there is an opportunity for additional research on the management and function of corporate communication departments, especially in large organizations that have opportunities to interact with multiple business units and use measurement and evaluation to align practices across business functions.

There is also an opportunity to expand this work to examine measurement and evaluation in different types of organizations, especially with more leaders working in the public sector. A sociological approach might reveal additional insights about the relationship between communication measurement practices, conceptions of leadership roles, and organizational culture. Here, interviewees described potential ethical dilemmas when metrics become king within an organization and individual performance gets tied to data driven performance measures and compensation plans. Within data driven organizations, it is important to continue examining the role of ethical practice and good judgement. Additional work on the ethics surrounding measurement practices is an important area for future work, as Place (2015) has pointed out.

#### Additional implications for communication practice, education, and research

Our interviews suggest that industry organizations should closely examine what the standardization of communication movement needs next. Thorson et al. (2015), who define standards as “comparative evaluation measurements used to determine the performance of a public relations campaign in relation to prior or even competitive programs,” examined the movement to create a level of measurement standardization or consistency across the profession (p. 3). Their research revealed that a quarter of top communication

professionals in 2013 reported adopting standardized measurement practices and found that organizational culture, especially those who see themselves embedded in innovative and proactive organizations, was a key factor in decisions to standardize measurement or not (Thorson et al., [2015](#)). Here, we found that there was not a great deal of discussion of industry standards, even when probed. Perhaps there is a peak for interest in external standards at the lower end of the maturity curve and less need for industry bodies and expertise as programs grow. Our research also suggests there might be an opportunity for scalable standards related to evaluation maturity stages. Simple standards and guidelines might be geared to educate staff internally, in a train-the-trainer vein. More complex standards might help sophisticated programs benchmark their work against other advanced peer organizations and learn how to continually incorporate new tools and techniques. Future standards will likely need to be both simple and complex. That is, standards should help both ends of the maturity model.

Our interviews also revealed a great deal of support for expanding measurement and evaluation training for all levels of communication practitioners, including new hires. This has important implications for academics incorporating evaluation and measurement skills into curriculum, and suggests a strong need for planning activities that allow students to practice interpreting data, translating numbers into actions and learning how to make numbers meaningful within the story you tell about your work and communication investments. Our work also suggests a need for communication curriculum to incorporate business language, goals, and measures, and to practice building partnerships across organizational silos.

## Limitations

Due to their success in raising the stature of communication within their organizations, most interviewees had significant time and budget dedicated to measurement and evaluation and had the ability to access training, tools, and industry resources. Larger corporations usually expend more resources, including for in-house staff, external consultants and operational spending on measurement and training. For those who were able to report budget numbers, it seemed to be on average 5–10% of their communication budget. Additional research should explore what maturity looks like at smaller organizations and how to advance evaluation and measurement programs when resources might be more limited. As one interviewee said, “I think you need to measure things differently based on what you can and can’t control, and what you have access to and what you don’t.”

## Conclusion

Findings from this study help academics and practitioners better understand the nature of successful evaluation and measurement practices within corporate communication departments that dedicate a significant amount of resources to measurement, demonstrate an ability to measure communication activities at multiple levels, and connect communication objectives to organizational goals. We hope academic researchers and practitioners continue to examine the nature of successful evaluation programs and measurement practices within leading communication departments, especially those that dedicate a significant amount of resources to measurement, and continue to develop maturity models and frameworks to aid the advancement of measurement and evaluation across the strategic communication industry.

This study illustrates how practitioners achieved effective, highly functional evaluation and measurement practices in communication. Moreover, the study demonstrates that the capacity to overcome perceived barriers, realize appropriate stature with organizations, and grow the communications function accordingly, are all within reach of communication leaders. Success requires deliberate strategy, practitioner desire, and a rational approach for findings to be valued. Paving a path to maturity might help improve the strategic communication function, increase its recognition and value within broader organizational contexts, and speed up the glacially slow progress of industry maturity in evaluation and measurement.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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