

Transcript for bonus episode – A conversation with IoIC CEO Jennifer Sproul

Dom (00:01.378)

Hello and welcome to another episode of the Future of Internal Communication podcast. I'm Dominic Walters and joined as always by Cat and Jen. This session is slightly different because we realised, in fact got some feedback, that we have lots of great guests on and talk a lot about aspects of internal communication. But we have amongst us a leading light in the internal communication field that perhaps we ought to interrogate a little bit more. And that's Jen. Because...

Jen (00:12.416)

This session is slightly different because we realised, we got some feedback that we have lots of great guests that are going to talk a lot about aspects of internal communication. We have amongst us a leading leader in terms of communication, a field that perhaps we ought to interrogate a little bit more. And that's Jen, because in her role as Chief Executive of IoIC, she probably has quite a unique view on internal communication.

Dom (00:30.942)

In her role as chief executive of the institute, she probably has quite a unique view on internal communication, having come in as heading up a professional body, not having been an internal communicator initially, and we'll come onto that, but being able to observe internal communication as a profession, but also as a professional body for the institute to see how that's changing and evolving. So today we're gonna be turning the tables a little bit, I suppose, and Cat and I will be asking questions and having a conversation with Jen.

Jen (00:53.348)

So, Jen, welcome as a guest. This is very bizarre, isn't it? This is very bizarre. I got so used to it the other way.

Dom (01:09.33)

I know it is. So at least now you have empathy for our future and indeed our past guests. But it'd be interesting because as I mentioned, and I hope you don't mind my saying so, you didn't come in as an expert in internal communication. You came in because of your expertise in running professional bodies. So I can remember actually when you joined, it was about 2017, thereabouts.

Jen (01:34.312)

Yep, thereabouts.

Dom (01:37.354)

So that's six and a half years ago. So this is a very broad question, but it's a good place to start. From your unique standpoint, really, what have you learned about internal communication since you took over the helm of the Institute back in 2017?

Jen (01:54.868)

Such a good question and it's sort of a question where you sort of go, where do I start and what perspective do I come in at, I guess? Just to give, before I go into that answer, I guess just to give some perspective to, I guess, what I'm going to say about this. As you say, Dom, my background, I've not been an internal communicator. I have come from the world of professional bodies, 20 odd years now, but I'm a trained marketer and I started my life in trade publishing.

So there's a real kind of blend of there, but I've also come from understanding professional bodies, but also not just how they work, but I guess what they mean and what they're there to do and what their purpose is. So I come at it with those different perspectives. And I guess if you say, what have I learned about IC from the start? So if I take my perspective as a marketer and someone that started their life in trade publishing, which is kind of that blend of it, where I guess I was trained in that sort of school of thought of you create content, you make great design, you write well, you're editorial, you target, you use segmentation, you use digital technologies, all the things that internal communicators do. That was sort of the prevalence, I guess, of the profession and it's kind of this process of which we approach it. But what I think what I've learned it's different. So what makes internal comms different from marketing, from all those things that I've come from? And it really is quite simply, it's the human factor. Because I think in my past career, so the audience is sometimes particularly in marketing when you're producing a print magazine, dare I say monthly print magazines and think of the past. But yes, you have your readership in mind to make sure you're giving content, but you're not really thinking about what I do feels and what it means and that human aspect of work, because you are so separated from it, so you can't always feel it. And you're often looking as a marketer to create a transaction to the back of something. Whereas I think internal communication, a transaction is secondary to trying to create an emotion or a feeling or an understanding. So you have to, I think, come at internal communication with, yes, some of those strengths of my core help, but actually come at it from the perspective of it's not just where we say it, it's how we say it's never been more important. I think it was the how and understanding that and the sense making, how we create meaning, how we create understanding beyond the push of information, beyond the push. It's that interconnection that we're given. I think that's a uniqueness and a different skill set that was some of my biggest learnings. I've seen that so evolve over time. If I come back from my professional bodies hat on, when I've worked in other professional communities, it has some real similarities in terms of we want to be recognised. We want to be valued in our own rights. We need to have confidence in our own rights. So if I go back all that time, I think for me in the internal comms, understanding humanity is the biggest lesson. And then with our profession, understanding how do you build that sense of pride and recognition and value in what we do, then the backdrop of, well, we can get into a bit more detail of the last however many years has been just immense. The change and the world in which we've been in has put that under, I think, undue more pressure, but also more change.

Dom (05:53.103)

Can I ask you a question about that? Because we've talked in the past about this, to borrow a phrase from the Australians, this cultural cringe that we've sometimes experienced as internal communicators, by which I mean there's a tendency for us to sometimes feel we're not a full profession or we don't deserve recognition, I'm paraphrasing wildly here, as maybe HR does or more established professions. You've alluded to this already. But what sort of shift, if any, have you seen in that position for us as a profession?

Jen (06:23.692)

Vast. It's been great. I think that where you start from, and many professional bodies like us, we're not alone, have the same problem that you've outlined. When you're in a community where professional membership is not required as a licence to practise, you always feel like you come from a lower set. You can't have an accountant if they don't have a licence or a lawyer or a legal.

So what you're trying to do is you're trying to, as a professional body, sort of go, well, you don't need us to do what you do. But actually, if you come together as a community, and this is where community building comes so important, which is even more important, well, to say if we actually want it collectively, because we recognise we want to have a stronger voice in our own organisations, then we want to do that. Now, since I've joined the IOIC, you know, membership was lower.

I think we've grown quite significantly. And I think that does come from a desire. And we have to, again, that's why humanity in emotion is so important. It does come from a desire of recognition and it is the power of the many is stronger than the power of the single voice. And that's what professional bodies can do. But you have to work harder at it when you represent a professional community where it's not a requirement to their job. So, that becomes even more important. But we're getting there. I think we still have a long way to go though.

Cat Barnard (07:55.628)

That's really interesting, Jen. So I've heard you talk a lot about the evolution and the shifts and the changes that have manifested even, you know, in the last six or so years since you became Chief Executive. And I see that as well. I remember we started working together in 2019. And then our kind of future of work, future of internal communication, projects got overshadowed by a small thing called COVID, which, you know, I think it's a, I think it's an understatement to say that turned that put a cat amongst the pigeons. But when you started just thinking back to that point, what would have been a typical scope of work for an internal communicator back in 2017?

Jen (08:46.129)

I've had to really go back in the memory to answer this one because we have changed so much. But what I would say, the biggest point of reference I can pull on that brings to memory in answering this question is, obviously one of our jobs as an institute is to provide qualifications. Again, sets that professional standard, you can see a set and Centre of Excellence.

When I joined the IoIC, we've run diplomas and we had two diplomas back then. If I look at the syllabus of that diploma when I first started versus where it is now, that's one recognition of the leap. If I think about that syllabus when I started, it felt very much about the technical aspects. It felt very much about high-end content production.

So you know, can you take good photographs? Do you know how to do good grammar, to do good spelling? I'm not taking away that these things aren't important. I think we're certainly in a more earthy world. I'll use that word as a way of describing it, that once we once were. But it felt to me like it was sort of very similar, as I say, to my profession, that it was a very technical aspect of content production. But that's incumbent also of IoIC, which has been around a long time.

Jen (10:06.828)

It started out as the British Association of Industrial Editors, as we well know. If you looked at the manuals and the joining packs I got, it was all the advice of how to make things print ready, how to make good digital, how to make a good website, how to build a good intranet. That was the scope of work. It was the material channel and the content and the way we present content that was of the higher value than the deep down, I guess, psychological aspect of communication.

Cat Barnard (10:37.008)

So quite functional, quite playbook-ish, quite how to perform these quite tangible tasks. Whereas I think a lot of the conversations we have on this podcast now, veer towards the role of communication and how we would hope that our colleagues and internal stakeholders would feel about us and the organisation that they're working for. So when I say us, I don't mean us as podcasters, I mean us as co-workers and colleagues and peers at work. It's that, it's trying to use language. I feel, I don't know, you guys jump in, but I feel like our job when we explore the future of internal communication is to explore the role of language in building relationship and affiliation and community and goodwill and motivation, engagement, whatever the words are we want to use. And that's what I'm hearing when you describe that. There's a marked difference between what you describe, what I've heard you say is quite functional, almost like tick boxy kind of transactionality versus now where we are. Would you, am I being a bit too...

Jen (11:30.7)

we explore the future of internal communication is to explore the role of language in building relationship and affiliation and community and goodwill and motivation, engagement, whatever the words are we wanna use. And that's what I'm hearing when you describe that. There's a marked difference between what you describe, what I've heard you say is quite functional.

Jen (12:00.78)

No, you're not. And I think what I'm trying to describe is going back to that history piece, is that we were born out of trying to bring Fleet Street-style standards of magazine and newspaper production

to internal communication production. So it was very much about what's a headline, what's a stand first.

Cat Barnard (12:17.539)

Yeah.

Jen (12:29.6)

How do we create that? How do we make imagery? How do we make something compelling? How do we use our craft? Our craft is still important. It's not to say that the craft doesn't value as much, but I think if I look at the syllabus now, we're less about the structure. I guess that's also what I'm trying to say, perhaps not in a very articulate way, is that Mir is where business is because we wanted everything to be done quite process-y, quite...

Cat Barnard (12:41.553)

Hmm.

Jen (12:56.708)

we follow a flow, don't we? We start, so we've got a piece of information that the management wants to get out. We need to make sure we put it in this publication on this channel. We need a good headline. We need a good story. It needs to be grammatically correct. Those are all still good value crafts. We're not trying to dismiss them. But where we are now is much more fluid, perhaps chaotic, perhaps a less...

Cat Barnard (12:57.016)

Yeah.

Jen (13:25.164)

We need to be less systematic, if that even makes sense, and process-driven, more human-driven. And that comes down to not keeping the focus on the how, but much more the focus on the why. To what end? Why? Why does this matter? Why are we achieving it? And where do we make sure? How do we make sure we do that in a way that connects, as opposed to fulfills a good specification of content production?

Cat Barnard (13:54.572)

I think that why piece is so important because, you know, when I'm not recording podcasts with you guys, I am looking at future of work trends and the shifts and undercurrents that are gonna change the way in which we work together. And it is very, very clear to me that work is becoming increasingly fragmented and fluid. So, you know, we know that there's a huge resistance to this on mass return to the workplace, this very antiquated mandate to get everyone back into the office full

time. And we also are starting to consider more fully what the impact of next generation artificial intelligence could be on roles, tasks and responsibilities. And that will inevitably lead to some kind of fragmentation of work.

Jen (14:40.428)

And earlier in the year, we had Joe from the Four Day Workweek campaign come and talk to us about shifts in working patterns. So to all intents and purposes, work, the construct, the mental model that we hold about work is breaking free of location based 40 hour standardised work weeks. And that and the substance of the work that we do is going to be increasingly altered by next-generation technologies. So it strikes me that to your earlier point, when moving away from the process and out of absolute necessity having to gravitate far closer into the realm of the role that communication plays in culture. And I'm just thinking back as well. I'm sure it was, we had a previous guest on Andrew Try, and at some point or another, when I've been in conversation with him, he's talked about culture being the glue. And I think communication is the glue, the glue that binds us all together and keeps us aligned with a common purpose or cause. So, I mean, Dom, you've worked,

Cat Barnard (16:15.04)

internal comms for a long, long time. So you're like the godfather of this conversation. That's quite a shift, isn't it? What do you think about that and the practicalities of it?

Dom (16:29.446)

I think it's a massive, massive shift. I think it's about the skills that we have to learn as communicators now. So Jen was just saying about the focus used to be on practical skills. I remember I came in 30 years ago at my first communication job as Ali, and I came from a training background because I was working for a bank and we were trying to get leaders to be better communicators. And that was quite a radical suggestion then.

Dom (16:56.682)

And probably wasn't always welcomed by the journalists that had seen communication as their premise. So I think, sorry to answer your question, I think it's about the shifting skills we need to make as communicators because it's much more important, even the last few years, it's much more important that communicators can develop conversation, can encourage listening, can do something with what they get back from that listening, are able to support their leaders, to get their leaders to be more nuanced in what they say. And these are much more around

Dom (17:24.322)

people skills, I think, than around the practical skills, which are still very useful, of writing and so on. And it'd be interesting actually to get your take on this, Jen, because that also then plays into something we've talked about a lot on these podcasts, about how do we get people to select internal communication as a profession? So as I've just described, I sort of fell into internal communication, and I know from conversations over the years, lots of our peers and colleagues

Dom (17:53.474)

did the same, but we're trying to make internal communication much more attractive to people to select. And over the last few years, I guess we've almost fought off, if that's not the right way of describing it. We've worked alongside people who are more focused on engagement, people who've said, well, internal communication is really internal marketing or internal communication is really just an extension of corporate communication and PR. And I think we've been successful in saying that's not true. But it'd be good to get your assessment of...

Dom (18:21.866)

where internal communication is now, today. Particularly in light of the need to encourage people to say, well, that's something I fancy doing.

Jen (18:32.328)

Absolutely. And this comes back to some of my professional body life and career. And one of the things I noticed when I walked into IoIC was that, and I think that the things that struck me is that we needed to, I don't want to use the word fight, but I guess stand for that ring fence nature of what it is. But then we also need to look at say, well, we believe internal communication is a profession, a set of distinct skills in its own right. But as you say, Dom, it wasn't on my radar, I have to say. I'd never really heard of it as a professional career until I came into IoIC. I was a marketeer and I was advocated and I was told where to go as a young undergraduate. Then you come into where we are today with that and we still have this falling into it.

And there's a couple of things that makes that challenging. I think first and foremost is because it's not expressed, it's not understood at young levels or undergraduate levels. I don't think there's many university lecturers particularly. And again, if there are, I would love to hear from you because please do argue with me. That sits on Corp comms or media degrees that actually even discuss what internal communication is. It's just that there is a lack of awareness, and that happens and it's not there at undergrad, it's not being, there is no, I'm aware of, please again argue with me that I can find distinct modulus that puts that on there. But also the other thing that we do is that people don't understand the skill background or any skills and how they can move into it. And actually when I speak to people in the years that I have, who've come from other backgrounds, I just go, oh, well, if I'd known about this is great. So I think we need to put this argument down and we're working on

If you're interested in psychology, communication, if you're interested in language or human nature, if you're a curious soul, if you're an empathetic skull, if you have great interpersonal relationship careers that we put on the map, that this is a potential career for you because those skills are really, really relevant. We're doing that more so with the I Choose I See campaign, but it's hard graft and that also takes community. We talk about community building on our organizations and there's certainly a lot more work we need to do.

Jen (20:51.312)

as internal communicators. But going back to where I think IoIC then is today, taking in that mind that I think we need to attract a more variant skill sets into our profession. We need to make that clear that skill set has a place for us and there are roots for us, I think is one. I think that also, and

with that in mind, I think we're sort of, I'm going to use what Perry talked about on a past podcast and I think he said this really nicely, is that we're kind of in a mid evolutionary cycle as a professional community where we've still got those things I've talked about, the craft and the tactics because they're still needed. We're trying to bring in different varieties of backgrounds and diversity of thoughts and thinking to challenge our organisations. We are getting a growing remit. So whether that remit goes beyond content production to cascading information, humanising, socialising, driving trust, leadership behaviour, line manager behaviour, but we're not fully embedded in every facet of an organisation, and communication exists in every facet of an organisation. So I don't think we have grown up, but we still have more to do in terms of organisational priority and investment, and we're still not willing to let go of content and channels. So you kind of start to sit in this midpoint, so we're in this mid-evolution, we're still keeping our heritage and we want to get into the future, but we don't have enough investment, we don't have enough ear and we can't quite make that full shift. So I think we're living in between two worlds, if that's a way of describing it.

Dom (22:37.378)

I think it is a very good way of describing it. I guess that's part of our evolution as a profession. I'll go back to your point about the university courses. I better say this, that I know Solent University in Southampton does have a module on integration, but also I've taught it partly, so I already want to mention that, but your point is valid, which is it's not that widespread, and I think it's only because of Solent's connection with the Institute, perhaps, that's become more prominent with them.

Jen (22:49.276)

Of course, of course I do. Our wonderful partners. Thank you Dom, I needed correcting.

Dom (23:06.082)

But I think what you're saying there is, one of the things I'm picking up from that is, it's about attracting people who are interested in the outcomes, who are interested in influence, who are interested in helping shape arguments, in helping to transfer strategy into action and help organisations shift. Not necessarily the people, not excluded, but not necessarily exclusively the people who like the art form, who like to be able to write and compose and put things together. I think that's a really interesting shift. And it's a great way of accessing different people, I think, different diverse thoughts.

Jen (23:36.988)

Yeah, absolutely. And it's a shift I pick up in, you know, as I always see, we run many advisory boards. I run professional advisory boards, content advisory boards. Part of our job is also to make sure that we have enough member voice, call that our employee voice. And I ask these questions quite regularly, how are we changing our own hiring practices? Or how are we changing the own way that we position this profession? And I think that we've done some work but there is more to do, but certainly anecdotally from those at perhaps the top of the internal comms game, I'm now looking for people that can provide influence and can be a bit more of a chameleon and drive that. Yes, we still need, I'm not trying to ditch technical knowledge like digital, but those qualities are standing out very high up. I think it's about what you bring and what you can teach and how those balance together.

And that's certainly a very different conversation to what I had when I first joined the Institute in terms of what the leaders were looking for when hiring into their teams.

Cat Barnard (24:49.596)

I think what's so interesting about that is, you know, again, going back to when you started in 2017, it was a year or less than a year, I don't know exactly when you joined, but it would have been within a year of the Brexit referendum result and Trump winning the presidential election in the United States and we have seen on both sides of the Atlantic, a dismantling of social cohesion because of social media's role in dividing us into, you know, for or against, leave or remain Republican or Democrat. And it's been very, very binary and it has fragmented communities and families and organizations. And any collective of individuals in ways that none of us could possibly have foreseen. And what I think is so interesting about the landscape in which we find ourselves now is that

Cat Barnard (25:55.752)

good communication skills, good relationship building skills has been a staple requirement on most job descriptions in, in well, certainly the 30 years that I worked in staffing, you know, it was just there, it existed. But now we need those skills like never before in order to provide an antidote to that social division within our organisations. And I'm, you know, it's an innate, we've talked about this so many times on the podcast, it's an innate skill set that we take for granted, but we cannot afford to take it for granted any longer, because if we continue to do so, I'm not entirely sure what happens to us at a civic and societal level, the way in which we,

Cat Barnard (26:52.124)

communicate with one another in a respectful, inclusive, reciprocal way requires us to not simply transmit, but also to receive and to partake of active listening and hone those human skills. And I think the challenge really is that to your exact point, Jen, I think the...

Cat Barnard (27:21.848)

the term that I've become most familiar with is that we are in a liminal space. We've left one space, we're headed towards another space, but we're not there yet. So we're kind of in that in between space. And I don't feel that most business leaders fully understand the role that communication plays in organisational cohesion because it's taken for granted. Everybody, most people in organisations have got the faculty of speech at their disposal, therefore why do we have a communication problem?

Jen (28:04.941)

Yeah, I think it's a really fair point and I think it is trying to reset what communication...

Communication has always existed as you say, but I think it's just that it's been a line, but I don't think it's really been a line that's had an outcome or a necessity about it. And I think, Dom, you'll agree with this as well, hopefully. You know, in terms of thinking where it's headed and what that

means, there's this whole sort of employee experience agenda, right? Which is then thinking about communication from an embodied perspective, from a human perspective.

I think it's all been at the moment portioned out in organisations. That's why I think everything feels disjointed if you are having a lived experience. But going back to the point, and it's something that comes up all the time, and I've seen quite a bit of debate or comment about it on LinkedIn as well recently, is this whole line manager communication piece. That's one example of what you're talking about, where on many line manager jobs it says just must be good communicator, have experience of leading a team.

Then we go, check, here's the job. But we don't give any support or any nuance in what that means, nor are they measured on that performance, but it comes back to why these jobs are created. There's that systemic mindset shift that's needed organisationally, where they're burnt out anyway, to kind of sort of reposition what management and leadership and humanity means in an organisation. And it's more than, and it doesn't get I don't feel much waiting in those kinds of job descriptions that we see. I don't know, Dom, you might have a particular view on that, but it doesn't feel we're there yet.

Dom (29:53.242)

No, I think it goes back to the point you and Cat both made, it's about people taking a lot of this stuff for granted, I think. It is, it is. I mean, this is slightly controversial, I suppose, but in many cases, line managers have the skills to communicate. Because when they go home and other aspects of their lives, most people are able to articulate a message, they're able to have a conversation, to ask questions, to show empathy, to listen to people.

Cat Barnard (30:00.618)

Yeah, 100% it's assumed, isn't it?

Dom (30:21.846)

Many find it really hard when they get into work because everything else comes into play. Their position, their power, their politics, their relationships, what they're worried about. Everything crowds in and makes them anxious to have the conversation. For example, we know that many leaders, when they're honest, are quite fearful about...

Cat Barnard (30:32.721)

Hmm

Dom (30:41.046)

having an open discussion because they're scared that it might unleash these demons or these questions they can't answer or they're going to look silly. That's all about position. That's all about

perceptions of an individual and their leadership. So sorry to answer your question. I think it is down to that to take it for granted. And the fact that

Cat Barnard (30:47.547)

Yeah.

Cat Barnard (30:58.788)

Yeah, but you know, I mean, I, you fully, I empathise, I know we empathise with the, with the cautiousness, with the nervousness, the anxiety of a manager to communicate because we're, we're ensconced in cancel culture and you daren't open your mouth for fear of saying the wrong thing and having your opponents take to social media to destroy your character and your reputation.

Cat Barnard (31:27.736)

And one of the things that I think is really interesting about this space is that, and I know I've mentioned it before on air and off air, you know, perhaps if we were to contemplate internal communication full bloodedly as an art form rather than a scientific codified playbook that if you just do these five things, then these five things will happen.

Cat Barnard (31:56.792)

If we can embrace the artistic element of it, surely in art, the pursuit of art is to continuously hone your craft over a life long period, you know, if you're committed to your craft. And therefore, if we could reposition communication as not a finite parameterised function to be playbooked and hacked.

Cat Barnard (32:27.652)

and rather as a kind of orchestral array of musical endeavour that is always to be practised, honed, improved upon. That, I would hope, might alleviate some of the tensions that any

Cat Barnard (32:54.684)

manager or leader who's struggling to communicate effectively might feel. I don't know whether any of that makes sense.

Dom (33:00.074)

Hmm, that does make sense and I think it's true because one of the biggest questions that we do a lot of training around leaders. One of the biggest questions you get asked is what exactly is expected of me? And I think...

Cat Barnard (33:14.96)

Right.

Dom (33:15.83)

There's still a school of thought that says leadership communication is about articulating messages in a wonderful way. You're going to electrify the audience. You're going to stand up and be Obama like in your way of connecting. And that's great if you can do it. But it's not the whole by no means the whole picture. And going back to the points you've both made, which is really a manager can be or leader can be an effective communicator just by asking some questions.

Dom (33:40.414)

How do you make use of this? How does this strike you? What impact is it going to have on you? Go back to your point, Jen, how do you feel about it? Those sort of things can be so powerful in breaking down barriers, helping people process stuff, helping them feel they're having a good experience, helping them feel safe. And they're probably much more accessible skills than being able to present and articulate and inspire an audience. And yet we don't, organisations don't tend to value them as much.

Jen (34:07.504)

I agree and I think the point of safe is really important. That's what the world of work or environments just don't feel safe, perhaps because we don't feel as connected or all those things. They're just the world around us and uncertainty is at every part. I don't just mean what we say, but also just we feel uncertain in society.

Cat Barnard (34:10.672)

Mmm.

Jen (34:30.972)

You know, in business and businesses are uncertain. We can talk about us as human, but leaders of businesses are also in an uncertain operating environment, you know, and we're in an uncertain economical environment. So it spans all of us. But what we probably don't do is share that emotion. And we don't share that discussion through honesty, because it feels exposing and vulnerability feels something we should we should stay away from.

Jen (34:59.988)

But going back to your question, your point as well, I just want to say, I do think it's an art form, but I think we need more science to back up our art form. And that would be one of my arguments

because we need to invest in the skill of the art, but we need to make sure we have our science to push forward on our narrative. And what do I mean by that? So one of the greatest things I think I learned actually when I joined IoIC was the science of the human brain.

We make 86% of our decisions emotionally. So science, when you express how the brain works and how you create messages and how we respond can help drive our narrative for art. If we can use better science of data and analysis to argue that evidence speaks truth to power, please, it makes investment in our art. I think we can use that to drive up that investment and we need to play the two.

So I think that that's a really important point because, you know, we are still getting more sway. We are getting more. There is a changing shift, but we're not there yet and there's still more work to do. So we need to keep our science up to demonstrate our case to invest in the art is something I would also consider.

Dom (36:17.186)

Well, with that in mind, Jen, let's change the focus slightly and build on what you've been saying. Let's ask you to get out your crystal ball and start looking ahead into the future. So we've touched upon some of them already, but it'd be great, again, from your perspective of steering the profession, what do you see as some of the key challenges that we face as internal communicators?

Jen (36:40.844)

I think one of the biggest challenge I hear everywhere and every member, students, particularly those coming into our profession, those that are the future of our profession, every facet is confidence. We just really struggle with that confidence. I think that confidence to fight for something, to fight for that investment, but also confidence that we feel we suffer a lot with that sense of.

Oh, but you know, I don't have a metric or an outcome. Marketing will get more of that. Maybe I shouldn't stay, I should stay out of that. I can't quite push one, because what I do isn't as credible. And I think credibility is a real world we need to work on because we are credible. You know, and what we have is credibility, but also integrity. And those are two really important and authenticity things that can be matched together. Most students that go through our programme, we've got it now. We had...

I think we had a kickoff with one of our latest cohorts and in session one, they went, oh my gosh, I feel so much more confident now to go into a meeting. It's a real problem that we have. And I think I hope as a community, that's why binding us together and using that is really important. I think space and time just don't have enough of it. Don't have enough space to think, to process, to do anything mentally. We're all overwhelmed. We don't have the time. We don't have the resources. We don't have the capacity is another issue.

And one of the things I will be saying on capacity, and this is my sort of, and I think it's happening now, but I'm pleased if anybody's listening that's got a case study and I think we're doing some stuff on it. How do we up, if we're going to upscale ourselves, say we've got the confidence, say we've walked into the room, we've got the investment, we're building the capacity. What does good capacity look like in an internal comms team? How do we build multi-skilled teams? You'd still need your craft skills. You need your influences. You need your coaches.

I think we have this expectation on ourselves to be about 10 different people and skill sets and often our job is to build those in. So I'll be thinking about how we build IC functions of the future and I think we need a better alignment. As I say, when it comes then to practical, you could take the EX agenda, is that HRs, is that here's? It's just, we're still in this process but fight for want of a better phrase.

Jen (39:01.428)

And we're not fully aligned or in as organisations. And that's not necessarily on internal communicators. That's on org design, I think. But those are the things that would spring to my mind as confidence, space, capacity, with that recognition and investment and then alignment across all the areas and all the key business functions.

Cat Barnard (39:24.092)

I think if as an internal communicator, you are willing to invest in the time to research as much as you can about the role of communication in civilisation and society, your confidence will be enhanced because it quite literally is a life or death matter. And so those ambitious, perhaps, you know, those ambitious internal communicators who are looking at, you know, taking the next step in their careers, I would absolutely invite everybody to just dig in as much as possible to the academic literature that's out there about, and I imagine it is that interconnection between kind of anthropology and communication. I know we've had

Cat Barnard (40:21.78)

Alex Gepard on here in the past and he's talked to us about anthropology, but you know, the role of story and civilisation and societal cohesion, things like that. If you can appraise yourself of the academic literature that exists and take that to your C-suite, personally, and just to be contrarian, I don't think organisational design has the answers here because in my view...

Cat Barnard (40:49.58)

organisational design has its own challenge, which is that it's trying to build form and function using angular foundation blocks, whereas I think the future of work is going to be increasingly fluid and shape shifting. And that is, you know, that's complex enough to get your head around, but I, I definitely feel that

Cat Barnard (41:16.732)

arming yourself with as much academic literature as possible will empower you to be able to go into a boardroom and demand actually your space because your skill set is needed in a way that it's never been needed before because up until 2016, 2017 or arguably even the pandemic, things were reasonably

Cat Barnard (41:45.676)

stable and secure. We've gone from, you know, one of the longest, and Dom, you're the historian, so please tell me that I'm completely wrong, but one of the longest periods of societal stability from the end of the Second World War up until 2020. And now we are floating and flailing around without

Cat Barnard (42:15.136)

many of the skills and resilience is that we need to adequately make sense of where we're at. But the only thing that I know to be true in my heart and my bones, which kind of comes back to a not very scientific way of making sense of the world, is that communication is the self to all of the uncertainty.

Dom (42:36.663)

I think you're right about the fact we've been through a period of fair stability, I think. Although of course like every period if you dig into a certain time of it you'll probably find there were lots of debates and arguments, but nothing on the scale, or sorry, very little on the scale that we're seeing at the moment. And you're right, when you're going through uncertainty, when you're going through instability, when you're going through stuff that you're unprecedented, the only way you can navigate it is through conversation.

Cat Barnard (42:41.71)

Mm.

Dom (43:02.542)

because if you don't have conversation, you don't understand it, and or you feel overwhelmed by it potentially, you don't understand how other people feel about it, you can feel very isolated. So I think, I'll just stop reinforcing what you said really, as communicators we can offer a way through this. But I would like to go back to something you said, about academic stuff, because I think you're absolutely right about that. But I can feel quite overwhelmed. If you look on LinkedIn, there are lots of debates.

Cat Barnard (43:02.597)

Right.

Dom (43:29.774)

varying quality. There's lots available, many academic techs on, so how can, what can we do as an institute perhaps, or anybody do, to help steer through that, almost quality check I suppose, what's good and where they should be focused. I guess that's going to be subjective. There's about 30 questions in there aren't there?

Jen (43:48.144)

Yeah, Dom, and I think you've picked up on something that's just a challenge to every membership body, right? It's a conversation. Like I say, I started out in membership bodies when the internet was just coming out. It was still dialed up, there was still printed and we didn't need that. And I remember, oh God, maybe 10, 15, I don't know, 15 odd years ago, this whole debate we had as a membership body about our concern of user-generated content, on what that would do to our proposition, because we'd held that space, if you like. We'd held the core of the advisor, of the content, of the distributor. You were that trusted source, if you like. Then user-generated content came out and opinion came out. How do we step into that? How do we part of it but maintain what's important. And it's really hard to give a real simple, and I think there's something as an institute we need to do. We just need to make sure we stick to our values. We need to make sure from us that what we put out there, we at IoIC, as you know, have peer review processes, the way that we go things, but we also need to be in for the conversation. So we need to make sure we position all those things in different ways and be part of the of the content world out there, but protecting that is really difficult. And I think that education is gonna have a big problem when it comes to assessing assignments on opinion versus fact. And the trust has a big problem around that. So I think it does call on us all as humans to be more discerning of what we read and how.

But yeah, it's a lot to deal with and how do you step outside of that? And I think as an institute, we need to stick to our values of what we do and how we go about it.

Dom (45:49.094)

I guess the obvious point is if anybody's been on this podcast, they're worthy of being listened to and they should be recommended. I should say that.

Jen (45:53.408)

Exactly.

Cat Barnard (45:57.584)

So just to kind of tie up, because I know we've been nattering on now for a while, I can get very excited and see all manner of opportunity for the future internal communicator. But Jen, if you were to try and distill my crazy ramblings and tally that with your own sense-making, what would you say, I don't know, top three, top two, just what are the...

Jen (46:12.172)

Mmm.

Cat Barnard (46:25.424)

What are the emergent opportunities for the profession, do you feel?

Jen (46:30.236)

Oh, top two, there's lots. I think that's fair to say. And I think that it comes back to what we've all just been talking about. There's a lot to make sense of. But if I was going to put it, I guess maybe in some really two clear buckets to try and add for clarity, I think one for me would be around people and culture. We need to build environments of connection, communication.

Cat Barnard (46:54.086)

Love it.

Jen (46:58.22)

conversation, audience understanding around that and experiences. And then I think the other one for me would be around, I'm trying to think of it in a really nice way, is around change and leadership. Change is happening and there's a lot of change happening at corporate level, reputational level that needs our, and I could put AI on that, take that technological advancement, the changing workplace, change programmess, M&A's, mergers. There's some real opportunity for us to be in that arena at a very senior level, as well as designing the workplaces of the future. And for me, they come back to, you know, my favourite thing to say, all comes back to the Return on Emotion agenda.

Cat Barnard (47:43.244)

Wow. Well, I don't know, Dom, whether you've got anything else to add, but I think that's a beautifully apposite place to end this particular conversation. I feel as if on a weekly basis now, the outside world is hurtling along at lightning speed. And so while we're recording this conversation at the back end of 2023 I've no doubt that

Cat Barnard (48:13.06)

by the start of the new year, a whole bunch more stuff will have unveiled itself. So I think these conversations are really healthy and heartening just for us to check in on our sense-making. And hopefully, you know, the conversations are of interest, relevance, and thought provocation to those listening. So thank you, Jen.

Cat Barnard (48:41.444)

For allowing us to put you under the spotlight. And now that we have seen for ourselves that you're up for that task and that challenge, don't think it won't happen again. Thank you so much for letting us do this. It was great to have this conversation with you.

Jen (48:59.444)

It's a pleasant change, thank you guys.

Dom (49:02.522)

Thanks, Jen