



Transcript for S11 E7 Bringing sustainability data to life through storytelling with Debra Sobel

Jen Sproul (00:01.667)

Hello everybody and welcome to another episode of the Future of Internal Communication podcast. I'm Jen Sproul and as always here with my co-hosts Dominic Walters and Cat Barnard. And today we're really excited to be joined by Debra Sobel. I think Debra and I have met each other quite a few years ago now and had a real passion on the topic of sustainability and what we think is the opportunity for internal communication. So we're really pleased actually to have Debra here with us today.

Jen Sproul (00:31.321)

Debra is an experienced strategic communications strategist. And as I said, she has specialist knowledge in all things sustainability and purpose. She has over 18 years in business and she has partnered and consulted with national and multinational brands, helping them navigate the purpose landscape, shape strategy and deliver clarity when it comes to stakeholder communications and embedding responsible business into culture. Debra is also an ex-BBC prime time TV producer and director who's worked on programmes including Crime Watch, Watchdog and political and environmental documentaries. So Debra, welcome and we're really excited to have you here today to talk all things sustainability and what the opportunity is for internal communication.

Debra Sobel (01:18.114)

Thank you for having me.

Jen Sproul (01:19.929)

So let's kick off then. So as we said, sustainability has been an evolving and fast moving this year. There's lots going on. There's lots going on, legislatively, regulator, and lots of organisations sort of trying to step up on that sense of responsible business and social purpose and sustainability. But to kick us off, can you tell us, what do you think are some of the key developments that you've seen in this space, particularly this year?

Debra Sobel (01:44.95)

I think this year has been a pretty dramatic year of development and change in the sustainability space. I was thinking about it knowing I was coming onto this podcast. I'll give you the headlines and then we can sort of dip in to each one. And what's fascinating is how that translates, what that means for communications when it comes to talking about sustainability. So this year we've seen organisations in a brilliant way move away from aspiration and intention to activation and transformation. And this is great because we're beginning to see the beginnings of strategy coming to life and companies really moving into taking action, which is fantastic. But what I've noticed is



that companies and many organisations are still struggling with how do we communicate to mobilise change? And that's something we should talk about as we go through this conversation. There's also been a definite global shift to greater corporate transparency and accountability. So when it comes to climate disclosures and sustainability overall, again, which is incredibly, it's a positive move. I think sustainability professionals feel quite overwhelmed by the increase in reporting and disclosures, but it's definitely a positive move. We've had the introduction of new standards. I won't bore you with all of them, but it's a complete alphabet soup of acronyms.

But this year, standards and requirements have come together under an IFRS framework. We've had the introduction of the EU's European Sustainability Reporting Standards, the CSRD, Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive. And there is expectation that more will come into play in the UK as well. And what that has done, is it's influenced a really critical shift in the way we disclose, the way we do materiality assessments and the way organisations talk and communicate about impact. And we can definitely look at that a little bit more. There's been an increase in anti-greenwashing standards. There's been therefore, a rise in fear of companies talking openly about what they are doing for fear of being accused of purpose washing. But what it has meant is that companies now need to be really, really careful when they're about their being responsible businesses. So it's not okay anymore just to say, we're sustainable, we're responsible, not to use platitudes. You have to have evidence, can't just say you're a force for good. There has to be real evidence backing it. And we've moved away from the language of ESG.

It's become a hot potato and people are much more talking about sustainability. Although even the terminology of sustainability is still confusing for people. you mean environmental sustainability? Do you mean the breadth of sustainability? When it brings in people and communities as well. And finally, there's the elections.

Jen Sproul (04:55.769)

Mmm, can't miss those can we?

Debra Sobel (04:59.488)

We could literally, the whole podcast and a whole series could be spent talking about the impact of the UK and the recent US election of Trump. I would say at this point in time when we are recording this podcast, having had the result of the American election, is there are really deep tremors going across the sustainability community.

And without getting overly political, Trump has historically prioritised traditional energy sectors. He's championed the fossil fuel industry. He's vowed to immediately scrap offshore wind projects. He's unprioritised economic growth over any kind of social equity. It will be very interesting to see how it plays out, really.

Jen Sproul (06:00.045)

Yeah, I agree. And I think it's really hard, as we say, that result was days ago as we sit here and record this. It's hard to know how that will fully play out. But as you indicate from the rhetoric and



the pleasures that we heard, it does feel that there will be, from that side of the pond, a shift in a different direction to perhaps on the sustainability front that we particularly are trying to advocate for over here.

But that's not something we can control as internal communicators. I think it's something we have to be aware of and be cognisant of and respond to. But picking up on some of the other things that you just talked about in terms of those really big themes and there's some really good positive stuff in there, particularly around that shift towards yes, greater regulation, yes, greater standards and actually you can't say something now without evidence that you're doing something now. And we have seen the explosion of sustainability roles in lots and lots of corporate organisations, some sitting to the left or to the right of communication functions as well. So that is really being dialed up. But I think what was really interesting that you were talking about as well, particularly from the point of view of our listeners, is that's great, that's really brilliant, but we're still at that point of mobilising change and transformation and the role communication plays in that. And the language soup that we're in, which is all sort of, I think as professionals making that feel quite difficult to navigate our role in that, but navigate how we make that feel socialised, feel something that our employees and workforces can be behind. Is there, on that side of things, are you seeing any sort of trends, key themes that have come out of all of that? Perhaps we need to as communication professionals build our knowledge or education or get on top of or all that opportunity for us, particularly when you're talking about how we mobilise that sustainability transformation and the language and acronym soup that we now live in.

Debra Sobel (08:15.894)

Yeah, and to be able to mobilise, we know as communicators that you have to be able to articulate something in very easily digestible, moreish, bite-size often ways without always dumbing down. But sustainability can get complex and it can get technical, particularly on the environmental side of things. And this is where, internal communicators, marketers, communicators generally absolutely come, front and centre because that's the skill set, isn't it? So I suppose some key things, what can we learn from, I guess, the way the landscape has evolved this year is the fact that there is more reporting, more structure around sustainability reporting, I think is a brilliant thing because I think what that shows is it's a way to build a relationship of trust and accountability with stakeholders.

And I think internal communicators need to get involved in that. And I know that they're often not because it sits with sustainability teams and strategy, et cetera. But actually, it's the internal communicator role that can come along and say, look, everything that we're reporting, we can take this and how do we then translate it and make it digestible to all our different stakeholder audiences? And 100 % employees at all levels need to be able to find a way of understanding.

What is it that our company or organisation is doing? What do we stand for? How are we making a positive difference in the world? So I'd say that's the first thing to be able to use the change in reporting structure, framework standards, et cetera, as a way to look at, how can we use this to optimise and leverage better relationships and create more trust? The second thing I would say is what's built into the reporting now and anti-greenwashing claims, et cetera, is you can't just make claims or you can't just announce commitments. There has to be robust data and science-based evidence or evidence behind what you're saying. So again, from a communications point of view, what are you going to bring or how are you going to bring the data and how are you going to turn



the data into storytelling that's engaging, that's meaningful, that sort of brings all the claims or the commitments, the targets, the goals, et cetera and progress down to a level where people can connect with it. And that's how you can begin to open up conversations and mobilise change. And I would say on that front, because people are a bit scared of data sometimes, it's not just quantitative data, it's qualitative data as well. And that is that lovely, rich storytelling, the case studies, the human interest stories, et cetera. And I think another point that's come out this year, very much so is the idea of connected information. So making sure that when we communicate about sustainability, it's not ever communicated in silo. So it's connected with financial statements, it's connected back to organisational strategy, it's connected to management commentary. So it's never communicated just in isolation. And it helps people take, it helps take people on the journey with you. And I think what we've seen this year and previous years when it comes to sustainability is there can be a tension between organisations and businesses, we've got to achieve short term goals and profitability, but yet we've got to build foundations for long term sustainable development and growth. And the role that communications can play in that is to be able to communicate that. I'll give you an example, I suppose.

So IKEA invested in renewable energy and they saw immediate cost reductions, but they were also future proofing against rising energy prices. That's a story. As communications experts, we know that we could communicate in order to make sense of that tension between short-term goals and long-term goals. And we can also link in our storytelling sustainability with reputation and with market positioning. So just putting into our communications, for example, Unilever's sustainable brands grew 69 % faster than others, or our organisation has committed to this and it's led to X percent increase in, you're linking it to growth and to reputation, to market positioning, so it's connected information. And then just the last point, I suppose, is the greenwashing point, which we should talk about because and that comes with grounding in terms of organisational strategy, understandable commitments and genuine authentic intention and action.

Dom (13:14.719)

Debra, thinking about what you're saying from an internal communication point of view, one of the things we often talk about is how internal communicators can continually demonstrate their strategic benefits if you like, how they can help an organisation achieve their goals. And listening to what you were saying, lots of things were sparking off as to how they could do that. First of all, you talked about connecting with other things that are going on in the organisation. You talked about using the language properly. You talked about safeguarding against greenwashing.

So I imagine there's quite a lot in there for an internal communicator now at the end of 2024 planning what they might be doing in 2025. So what advice would you give to internal communicators based on what you've talked about in terms of prioritising how they can support their organisations when it comes to sustainability within internal communication? And that's a big question. But what are some of the key things?

Debra Sobel (14:08.942)

It is a big question and together with yourself, the IoIC earlier this year, we did a couple of sustainability surveys, didn't we? And reached out to all your membership and just to understand



how much, I suppose how comfortable internal communicators feel when it comes to communicating around sustainability, because I think that's some of the issue.

And the findings were fascinating because what was reported back were things like that there is at that point, back in July, August when we did it, June, July time, that there's a very shallow integration of sustainability into overall internal communication strategy was quite low numbers. We also heard that communications isn't covering a very broad mix of sustainability.

So 85.9 % reported that there was a very strong focus on social responsibility and community engagement. And then another 77.8 % said that they were focusing on climate action. But reading between all the lines and looking at all the results, what it showed was actually internal communicators aren't communicating broadly across, I will use E, and G, although lots of people may not like it, but there isn't a balance of communications across environmental issues, social issues and governance as well, sort of underpinned by governance. And at the end we asked, what would you need in order to be able to becoming players when it comes to communicating around sustainability? And 75 % said a clear articulation of sustainability strategy. And that's really what we need to discuss because organisations and companies, businesses, they need to be able to clearly articulate their sustainability strategy. Once that has happened, and I think internal communicators, obviously with our expertise, can then step up to the mark and even help with that taking that strategy and articulating it and bringing it into a kind of storytelling piece that makes sense to people. But that needs to happen first. And then internal communications really can be a very important business function to be able to take that strategy and be a player in terms of helping to mobilise change and helping to land the messaging and helping to explain the impact and financial materiality and impact materiality. The inwards looking and the outward looking in terms of the impact the company is making on society and the environment around it. And I think internal communicators have a really important role. And I know we've discussed it on and off the entire year as this whole landscape has changed.

Dom (17:25.131)

I think, look, that makes great sense. Listening to what you're saying, there's a strong role in reporting back what people are making of what the organisation is doing and how it's being presented.

Because it does strike me that from what you're saying, that organisations may be doing lots of good stuff, but people don't necessarily see it, or they don't interpret it in the right way, or they don't put it in the right context. And I think understanding what people are valuing and supporting. I guess part of that is around conversation. And it's something we've talked about a lot and do talk about a lot in these podcasts around the role of internal communication in conversation. So it'd be interesting to get your take on that, about how internal communicators in your experience can promote conversation about sustainability and issues related to it.

Debra Sobel (18:12.3)

Yeah, I think that's critical. And I think, they almost play sort of an unlocking role in terms of taking strategy, which often sits up here, and being able to socialise it and cascade it all the way down. And,



as you said, the conversation is critical, but it's presenting the information in multiple ways so that people can engage with it at whatever level that they want to or are able to. So, from the top line sort of information around what the strategy is, but what that means in terms of storytelling, giving kind of leadership or senior managers the ability, the tools, the content, those more stories and examples in case studies to be able to go and have conversations with their business units, with their teams, et cetera, and open up conversation through PowerPoint presentations or videos or stories or putting those human interest stories on the intranet, et cetera and all the while connecting individuals, examples and stories back to the overarching strategy. But it's all the way down to the water cooler moments as well. I think also, I work with quite a lot of global organisations, but also national organisations, we have different regions, et cetera. How as internal communicators can you connect? What one region is doing compared with another region, compared with different markets and bringing all of that good, rich communications and storytelling together because it sort of knits it all, it knits it all together. I think it really helps employees to understand that they are then an individual, but an individual cog and part of a much bigger picture of an overall organisation that really is committed to driving change in multiple different ways.

Dom (20:09.451)

I'll pass over to Cat in a second because I know Cat wants to explore this a bit further. But can I just go back to the leaders because that's something else that we're often discussing on the podcast. I guess many internal communicators will be thinking, how do I equip my leaders to have good conversations, to talk about sustainability, to share the stories that you said rightly are so important? So from your experience, what tips can you give internal communicators about equipping their leaders to have these conversations?

Debra Sobel (20:39.224)

So I've done lots of global cascades, taking sustainability strategy and enabling and empowering leadership and that tier of senior leadership and senior management to be able to engage with the information and with the strategy themselves and then give them the tools so that they can go and socialise and cascade and open up those conversations, et cetera.

And I think what's important is that there is a consistency of language, that there's an alignment that is achieved when it comes to, across the leadership, that everybody understands what the strategy means for the organisation. Leadership understands what it means for their specific business function, their business unit, and that they're able to then take that strategy and individually translate it into what does this mean for my unit and therefore what does it mean for my teams, the teams that sit underneath me, and that they're able to communicate that. And we do sort of exercises in that. There has to be alignment and at least a base buy-in of the strategy. There has to be a communications right from the top around expectations of leadership so that it's not someone else's problem to communicate to stakeholders around sustainability strategy, but it's everyone's responsibility and it is the responsibility of leadership. We often then set expectations in terms of a timeline to go out and cascade the information down and across the organisation and that could be tracked and measured and et cetera. And then it's giving leaders the right tools so that they can articulate the sustainability strategy easily in an accessible way, whether that needs translating for



them or for their teams, etc. needs considering, and the rich content as well, whether that's videos or whether that's a podcast or whether those are slides that they can show in a town hall or meetings, etc. or human interest stories or any content that we know will help them to be able to begin opening up conversations and that's what we need leadership to do.

We need them to be aligned, to collaborate, to buy in, and be committed to opening up those really, really critical conversations. And I would also say that they need to be role models as well, because everyone will look to them in terms of how they're talking about it and in terms of how they're behaving as well.

Dom (23:19.029)

So just to finish on that, think you've laid out there a brilliant way of empowering leaders to be effective communicators around expectations, providing good content, getting them aligned, giving them the questions, helping them make it relevant to people. So not just for sustainability, I think you've highlighted some of the key things around effective leadership communication in general. Anyway, I'll pass back over to Cat. Thank you.

Cathryn Barnard (23:40.072)

Gosh, so where to begin? So many thoughts. I'm still stuck on what, at the start of the conversation, the recent re-election of Donald Trump in the United States and what that could mean for the global sustainability agenda. And one of the things, Debra, that occurs to me as we've been, yes, I've been listening to you guys. Thinking about organisational sustainability targets, legislative and optional, and I'm thinking about how that agenda jars with the overarching agenda of returning to growth, which most organisations are obsessed by, to say the least, in 2024. There is an overarching desire to return to pre-COVID times. I don't know what the answer to this is, but I'm struck by those two narratives which are opposing because if you think about sustainability goals and objectives in the broadest of brushstrokes, we are talking about carbon emission reduction. Reduction being a really potent word here. So we've got reduction on the one hand and we've got growth on the other.

And my experience, my observation, my reflection is that most business leaders right now are erring towards growth, a return to growth, because that narrative is more manageable and more mainstream and more doable. And it's something that was done in previous times, whereas sustainability is to Jen's point at the start, it's a moving feast, it's evolving, it's reasonably new, it's an unknown unknown. How will we know what it might even look and feel like if we ever reach a point where we manage to bring emissions beneath 1.5 degrees? This week was in the paper that this year, 2024 climate scientists are saying we have breached the 1.5 limit for the first time. And my immediate thought at a cellular level when I read that headline was wow and yet it didn't feel like that because we didn't have a particularly roasting summer here in the UK. Obviously I'm well aware of the fact that extreme temperatures are prevalent in many other parts of the world. There was also an article this week talking about every single state in the United States of America now being drought ridden. So we know there are issues but I'm struck by these two competing, kind of almost opposing narratives. And I also just want to go back to the point about the return of Donald Trump to the White House, because a conversation arose in a community group, a sustainability community group that I belong to yesterday. The key members of that group quite distraught as I think probably



many people were. And there was a sense, a temporary sense of hopelessness. And then somebody else chimed in. And I think this is the really interesting point, which will bring me to a question and then we can have a conversation. Actually, will the reappointment of Trump galvanise people at a grassroots level to take action?

His re-election confirms that governments aren't coming to save us, that we are the solution to the problem, which makes me think about younger generations in the workforce, the rise of climate activism at work, the fact that younger people who are locked out of the opportunity for economic advancement, that they were promised their education system would provide them with, they've got not very much left to lose. So why not become an activist in your organisation? Why not call out the myriad injustices that are perceived on a daily, hourly, daily, weekly basis? Why not stand up and, take a position on the things that you hold to be important to you. And so I guess the question that I've got then is, and I loved what you used alphabet soup, word soup earlier. Therein lies the challenge. There are so many competing objectives and narratives, but underneath it all, in order to go anywhere as an organisation, as a group of people, a collective of people, we have to have some degree of alignment and consensus and agreement that this is the right direction to travel in. And so the piece that I'm most interested in is how we include the optimal amount of internal stakeholders in these open discourses about sustainability narratives and I know you've done so much work in this area and I feel like I'm now rambling. Why is it so important to include internal stakeholders in sustainability narratives from your point of view based on your practical experience of creating sustainable change on sustainability initiatives within organisations?

Debra Sobel (29:43.618)

Go to and pick all of that.

Cathryn Barnard (29:45.832)

Well, I applaud you for that because I feel like I just got on Facebook and ranted.

Debra Sobel (29:49.39)

I wrote a couple of things down as you were going through it, because there's a lot there. There's a lot there to unpack. A lot of the themes and the topics and the worries and the concerns that obviously are being expressed by so many people. So I would say, like you actually, because I'm also obviously in lots of sustainability groups and communication groups, et cetera.

What I've seen is the initial terrified tremors, I'll call them, turning into real sort of, right, let's stay calm, let's stay focused. This is the hand that we're now dealing with, but actually let's continue talking about sustainability because climate change isn't going away and social equity, the issues of social equity and social mobility and all the sort of other important critical social environmental issues, economic issues, they're all still there. So it's really interesting that I've also seen the conversations change from, my word, this is gonna be absolutely devastating for sustainability, what are we going to do? Is he going to stop the SEC climate disclosures and to actually sort of let's stay calm, let's stay focused, we're now going to fight on. So that's the first thing I would say. The second



thing I would say is, you said something about a focus on economic growth, 100%, we've come out of an economic sort of depression and inflation and all the rest of it. And what I always say to clients is companies unashamedly have to make money. That's okay. We have to do that so that we can keep our employees employed and build sustainable growth. But what is critical alongside that is we need to build the business case for sustainability. They're not two separate things. The absolute ideal scenario is that sustainability is totally, completely baked into BAU, to business as usual. You don't have a sustainability strategy and a business strategy. They should be totally integrated and connected. And it's a little bit dangerous to talk about them still separate, which is the case because many organisations do sort of sit separate. But in an absolute ideal scenario, we need to be moving to a position where companies fully understand and integrate. There is a strong business case for sustainability. It's built in, it should feed back into the triple bottom line. It's not that we need to achieve economic growth now and then we'll look at sustainability. It's by baking sustainability into our strategy, how does that impact positively on our triple bottom line? So that's an important point I talk about.

Cathryn Barnard (33:04.232)

I'm sorry, just to say, because I think that is a really, really important point because my observation is that actually too few companies have entwined or converged those two things. And I'm going to be probably quite disrespectful to, executive education. But, , the kind of MBA school of thought is growth and efficiency. And I'm not sure the extent to which the sustainability objectives that we're discussing here are taught on those curriculums. And I love the fact that you've actually just called that out, that in good business, they should be one and the same. I don't think they are currently, but isn't that a wonderful point to aspire towards?

Debra Sobel (34:01.166)

Yes, yes. And there are many companies who have succeeded and who are integrating and looking at circular economy and bringing all that into it as well. I think with the introduction of the CSRD in the EU, that was a lot of acronyms there, in terms of materiality, what it's encouraging companies to do is say what is our impact across financial materiality of sustainability? So what's the degree to which sustainability issues impact our profitability and performance? In other words, look at that. Look at it. Look at how sustainability is impacting profitability and performance. And what are the opportunities? Where's the low hanging fruit? And how can you change up your products or your services or your processes or your supply chain, et cetera, to be able to create a strategy and an operational operations moving forward that actually, feed in and create sustainable growth. But also on the other hand, look at the degree to which your organisation outwardly impacts society and the environment. So what it's saying to organisations, these new directives this year is look at both things and both things are important and both things need to be reported on and disclosed and considered as an organisation.

And in a sense then for communicators, it's the impacts inwards and outwards that you're communicating to, I think, if that makes sense.



Cathryn Barnard (35:38.426)

It does. And that's just immediately made my head explode because it immediately, my go-to is, and what does that mean for the boundaries of internal communication moving forward? Because actually, and I know we have talked about that on this podcast once or twice, and obviously the podcast is called the Future of Internal Communication, but there is this kind of blurring of boundaries, isn't there? Which interestingly, I think is really apposite. I was in a conversation yesterday and we were talking about, and you probably know exactly who I'm talking about, Debra, the work of Joanna Macy, the work that reconnects and the idea that one of our biggest challenges in the developed world is that we have come to see systems as being disparate and disconnected and separate from one another, whereas in fact, materially, the world is very interconnected and you can't be reductivist in the way that our recent like 200 years, 300 years of science has kind of educated and taught us to be. So for me, there's this really interesting piece around, you take an archetypal organisation and in the past we've allowed organisational designers to design the structure of the organisation and typically those organisations have been hierarchical and typically you have organograms that define who sits where and who reports into who and all of those great things that we immediately in business think that's how business is.

And then for me, the sort of mental switch up is, okay, so how is that going to work moving forward when we have, I can see Jen, when we move forward and we've got like, where does the end of one set of stakeholders end and the next set of stakeholders start? Like that blurring of boundaries is, I'm probably, this is probably a completely different podcast conversation and I've just mixed...

Jen Sproul (38:06.425)

No. But I think it is a future podcast conversation in many ways and one we can unpack. But I think this is a conversation we've all had. I know I think I've had this with you as well, Debra, is that we're in this kind of betwixt between, right? Where we're trying to redesign a jigsaw, but they're not all matching together because we're just trying to make the same jigsaw work in a different design rather than make a new jigsaw, which is a really horrendous analogy, but that was all that came into my head right now. And I think that you can sit here as professionals and we're not the only professional community that's thinking about it in this way. We're talking about internal communicators, but people professionals, finance professionals, operation professionals, sustainability professionals, everyone is thinking about it. And how do we get to that optimum place where things are not siloed?

As you said, Debra, from the beginning, that the circular economy and that our business case and our sustainability are all one in this, our strategy are all one in the same, that they're working in harmony with each other rather than a counteraction with each other. We're not there yet. There are some organisations because we're trying to move things around in that puzzle rather than start from a fresh perspective, a fresh perspective of design which is perhaps more outcome driven than system driven. But I think that we can see here, like I say, many other professions, but that is our opportunity as our profession is to kind of go, well, in an idea, how do we design into that? And how do we make sure we shore up our future and the future of internal communication in this changing world? We're not going to solve this when we're talking about it as part of this podcast, but I think that is the opportunity for us.



And going back to what Debra was sharing on the work that we did earlier this year at IoIC to understand where we are as a professional community. I think we are fear-factored and we're overwhelmed and we're overburdened and sustainability feels huge. But there still comes to a point where it is incumbent upon us to take up that helm, I think, and to redesign our roles into that future in a way we think is beneficial to the stakeholders, the internal, the leadership, the employees.

And that is our opportunity over the coming years to do that. Whilst I think that even though it might feel like some of the things are out of our control, there is still that, right, let's take this and go forward. And we need to keep control of that because we need to control, we can control, and this is in our powers to be part of that dialogue.

Debra Sobel (40:43.756)

And I would say adding into that is that internal communications has to have a seat at the table now. I would absolutely say that. And I would say that for sustainability to be communicated in the very, very best way, you have to have cross-departmental collaboration. You just do. Sustainability, the team has to talk to the internal communications team, who has to talk to the marketing team, who has to talk to the legal team who has to talk to the governance team, who has to talk to the strategy team. Because if you are putting communications out about sustainability, you need to know that it's robust and that it's evidenced and it's backed by the right data and the right science. The sustainability team and the legal team need to know that you're going to take the information and be able to articulate it and bring it to life, et cetera. And I was talking to someone the other day about communicators' capability to or ability to take on and leverage a paradox mindset. And I thought it was really interesting and I've really been thinking it through when it comes to sustainability. What communicators can do, is we have that ability to be able to balance competing demands. So this paradox mindset. So we're able to balance the competing demands and the tensions between them. For example, storytelling and data or strategic action and disclosure. And that's the skill of communications, to be able to take complex information that often feels a bit tense or competes, and be able to make that engaging, to be able to help people to connect with it, to be able to turn it into content that leaders can then take and disseminate and socialise across organisations.

And therefore I think, I know I bang the drum because I really do feel passionately about it, internal communications has to play a really, really important role and just as I said, it has to have a seat at the table.

Cathryn Barnard (42:54.374)

Well, in essence, I love, love, love, love everything you just said there. In essence, the task, the opportunity is for internal communication to use sustainability to make its own future sustainable.

Debra Sobel (43:13.826)

Yes!



Cathryn Barnard (43:15.56)

That's it really, isn't it? In a nutshell, because as we sit here talking about all things sustainability, I do appreciate we're going to have to get you back on next year to talk about what I'm about to throw in as a big kind of hand grenade and walk away, and there's no time or room to discuss this today, but how do sustainability objectives marry with the current ongoing obsession around AI?

We this week have been putting the finishing touches to a piece of work on the topic of AI. And we've been thinking deeply about the impact of generative AI, for example, on internal communication. And therein, therein is the opportunity. It's almost inevitable that some people in industry will think that generative AI is a really useful tool to use as a replacement for people who communicate because here's a tool that can do it for loads cheaper, loads more efficiently. I think we can probably all agree amongst ourselves, we're starting to see the limitations of that in terms of what actually generative AI outputs and the ongoing requirement for human oversight. But the point remains, we're at this kind of convergence spot, where actually the opportunity for the profession is to think about the sustainable future of the profession.

Debra Sobel (44:44.462)

And all the ethics behind that, when we talk, that is a whole separate conversation, but yeah, the ethics behind AI and sustainability and et cetera.

Dom (44:54.423)

It is a fascinating conversation, but I guess we need to come into land on this one, which has covered huge amounts of fantastic ground. I'm going to ask you, Debra, an impossible question in a second.

One of our goals as a podcast is to equip professional internal communicators for the future of work. That's what we're about. And you've said absolutely that communicators need to have a seat at the table. And we know that no one's going to give us that. We have to earn it. And you've told us a number of ways to do it by fostering stories, by that great phrase you use about the paradox mindset. Love that about balancing, I guess, soft evidence and hard evidence by bringing leaders together, by making sure people are aligned and talking, by crucially, I think, making sure that sustainability is not on its own, it's part of business as usual. It has to be. And these are my words, but I also think you are wise to say, we've to be careful of liberal groupthink. And we can't just try and push back against things that we can't really comprehend by saying this is outrageous. We have to do it through argument. I think that's the only way we can do it, by making logical argument, which what you said. So with all that fantastic stuff. What's one thing that you think an internal communicator should take from this conversation to equip them for the future of work, particularly into 2025 and beyond?



Debra Sobel (46:24.022)

So I would say that internal communicators should just know they have a role to play and they have a responsibility because Dom actually you summed it up pretty beautifully but if you don't talk to your sustainability team or your sustainability person go and have that conversation. I've had ludicrous conversations this year where sustainability teams have asked for my advice for how can they hire a sustainability communications person. You are there with expertise and with the ability to know how to engage multiple different stakeholders internally across your organisation. Put your head above the parapet and clue up. And it doesn't mean you need to become a sustainability expert overnight. Absolutely not.

And maybe we do a separate podcast or a separate something, know the sort of questions to ask your sustainability team and know the worth that you can bring really when it comes to taking sustainability strategy and being able to articulate positioning and the why. We didn't talk about the why, but the why and what it means and what it means in practice and how to turn that into really strong storytelling, which mobilises change.

Dom (47:48.085)

I think that's a fantastic call to arms. Thank you very much, Debra. That's summed up brilliantly and given us all, I think, something to go away and work on.

Jen Sproul (47:56.817)

Thank you so much Debra for a brilliant conversation and we'll definitely be back for more conversations next year.

Debra Sobel (47:58.51)

My pleasure.

Cathryn Barnard (48:02.504)

Definitely coming back. I'm commandeering you right now for 2025. Yes, please.

Debra Sobel (48:06.968)

With pleasure.

Jen Sproul (48:11.161)

Thank you.