# Corporate Affairs in 2026

## FROM INFLUENCE TO CLARITY

Global Communications Search Partnership

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# INTRODUCTION

## There is a noticeable shift underway in corporate affairs, although it is not quite the one that is often described.

For many years, the function has been making the case for a more influential role within organisations. The argument has been consistent: that reputation is not a soft or secondary consideration; that a diverse set of stakeholders with competing needs can have a material impact on commercial outcomes; and that communications should be embedded within strategic decision-making to strengthen it, rather than applied retrospectively to explain it.

On the evidence of responses from over 200 senior corporate affairs leaders globally, that argument has largely been settled.

Corporate affairs is no longer operating in the margins of the organisation. It is, in most cases, firmly established at its centre. A majority of leaders sit directly under the CEO, and there is widespread agreement at senior levels that reputation is a critical factor in shaping business decisions.

In structural terms, the function has achieved what it set out to do. It has secured influence, access and a seat at the table.

## However, that is only part of the story.

A closer reading of the data suggests not a function lacking importance, but one that has yet to clearly translate that importance into practice. While influence has been established, clarity of purpose has not consistently kept pace.

# KEY FINDINGS

## 01

### A need for increased focus on reputation

Business leadership teams and boards recognise corporate reputation as critical. Yet a significant proportion of communications leaders do not include it in their top three functional priorities.

In an external environment that continues to offer significant challenges, this lack of focus is concerning.

**92%** *say leadership understands importance of reputation*

**63%** *include it as one of their top three priorities*

## 02

### A gap in perceptions of trust

A significant majority of corporate affairs leaders believe their organisation is highly trusted by its stakeholders, but external benchmarks tell a different story.

The disconnect between internal confidence and external reality suggests a significant blind spot for the function.

**81%** *report high levels of trust from their stakeholders*

**64%** *of the global population have trust in businesses (Edelman)*

## 03

### Execution lagging AI ambitions

Almost all communications directors expect AI to reshape their work. Just a fraction have fully integrated it.

Without a clear AI roadmap, there is a risk that adoption remains fragmented; focused on isolated use cases rather than embedded at a foundational level within the function.

**94%** *expect profound or moderate AI impact on their work*

**11%** *have fully integrated AI in their function to date*

# Reputation is widely recognised, but not consistently treated as the organising principle

At its core, corporate affairs is concerned with shaping how an organisation is understood and perceived. Whether its stakeholders are internal or external, regulatory or commercial, the function exists to improve understanding, strengthen credibility and, over time, build trust. In that sense, reputation is not simply one priority among many. It is the lens through which all activity should be viewed.

The data reinforces how widely this is recognised in principle. There is near-universal agreement among leaders that reputation matters, and should be actively considered in decision-making. In most organisations, formal processes are in place to manage and protect it, suggesting a level of maturity that was not necessarily evident a decade ago.

Yet when corporate affairs leaders are asked to identify their top priorities for the year ahead, a significant proportion do not include building, protecting and nurturing reputation among their top three areas of focus.

This is not a trivial inconsistency. It points to a gap between what is understood at a conceptual level and what is being prioritised in practice.

There are a number of possible explanations for this, such as:

- An expanded remit, bringing with it a wider set of responsibilities
- Competing demands. with issues such as executive visibility, digital transformation, stakeholder engagement and geopolitical risk all requiring attention
- Perception of reputation as an outcome rather than the objective or purpose of the function itself

A consequence of this is that without reputation acting as the organising principle, activity can quickly become operational and task-based. In a more complex and more scrutinised environment, that lack of focus becomes problematic.

Reputation is not something that can be managed intermittently or by exception. It requires consistent, deliberate attention, and a clear line of sight between strategic intent and day-to-day activity. The data suggests that this line of sight is not yet fully established.

**92%**
of corporate affairs leaders say their leadership team understand the importance of reputation.

**85%**
say managing that reputation is an active Board consideration.

...but only
**63%**
include reputation as one of their top three priorities.

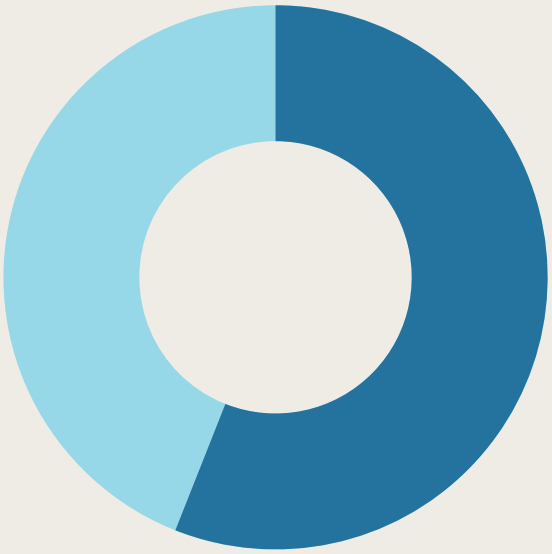
# Proximity to leadership has increased, but alignment remains uneven

One of the most significant recent developments has been the closer integration of corporate affairs into senior leadership structures. A clear majority of functions report directly to the CEO, which underscores recognition of the function's strategic importance. In theory, this proximity should ensure strong alignment with core business priorities.

In practice, the picture is more mixed. Corporate affairs is now present in the conversations that matter, but priorities do not always align as closely as they might with those of the organisation's leadership. CEOs tend to emphasise customers and investors, reflecting commercial drivers. Corporate affairs, by contrast, often adopts a broader set of priorities; reputation, visibility, stakeholder engagement, and a range of emerging issues. There is overlap, but the lack of complete alignment raises an important question about how the function defines its role.

Corporate affairs is not an extension of the CEO's office, nor should it be. Its purpose is to represent the organisation as a whole, balancing stakeholder interests and shaping how the business is understood externally.

It delivers greatest impact when anchored in these realities: translating business strategy into clear, credible narratives and using external insight to sharpen internal decision-making. The data suggests this alignment is present in many cases, but not yet consistent.



**56%** of Chief Communications Officers report directly to their CEO

*"The role is about being close to decision-making, understanding the business and its priorities, and acting as a genuine partner rather than a separate function."*

# Organisations are clear on their challenges, but less clear on how to respond

Another pattern that emerges from the data is a distinction between awareness and action.

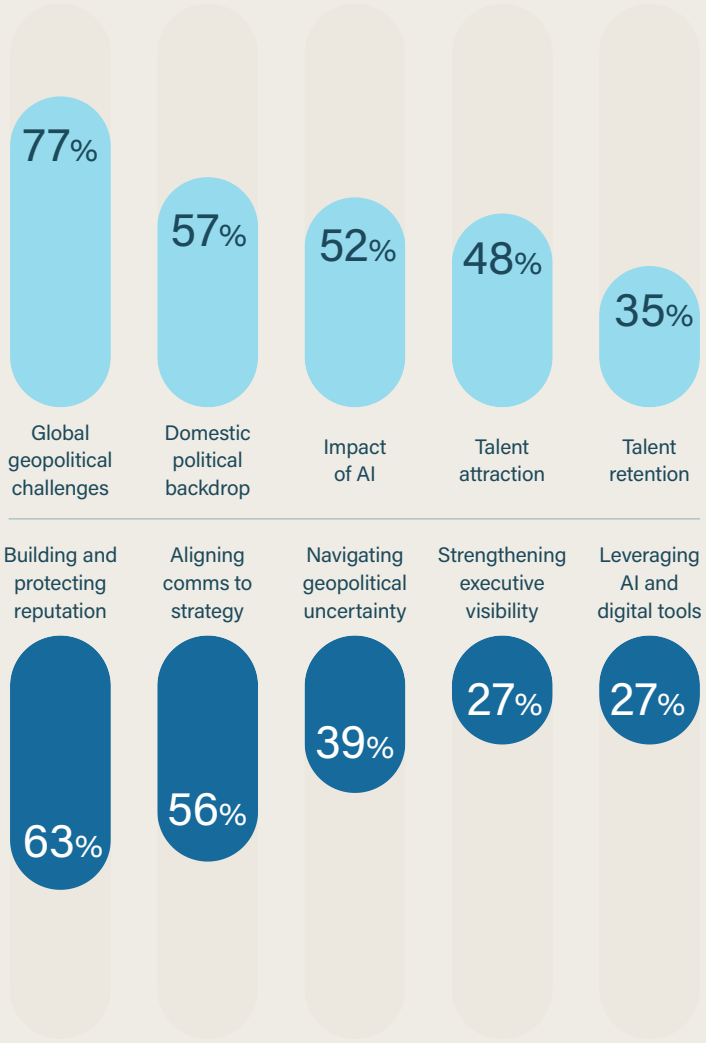
There is little ambiguity from the C-suite about the challenges facing organisations. Geopolitical uncertainty, talent attraction and retention, and the maintenance of trust all feature prominently. These are neither marginal issues nor new; they sit at the heart of how organisations operate and compete. However, when these challenges are compared with the priorities identified by corporate affairs teams, the alignment is not always there.

Geopolitics is the clearest example. It is ranked as a leading concern for leadership, yet it does not feature as prominently in corporate affairs priorities. This does not suggest a lack of awareness, but rather a lack of clarity about how to respond in a structured way.

A similar dynamic can be observed in relation to talent and trust. Both are recognised as critical challenges, yet the areas most directly linked to addressing them - particularly internal communications - are not always prioritised to the same extent.

This is less a capability gap than a focus gap. Without a clearly defined purpose, it becomes more difficult to translate recognised challenges into coherent, prioritised responses.

**Top 5 challenges currently facing the C-suite**




**Top 5 priorities for communications leaders**

*'There is a need for constant adaptation - a test-and-learn mindset, supported by judgement and prioritisation, to navigate an increasingly complex environment.'*

# The internal audience remains under-weighted relative to its importance

Employees play a central role in shaping how organisations are perceived. They are the primary conduit through which customers are served, value is created, and trust is either reinforced or undermined.

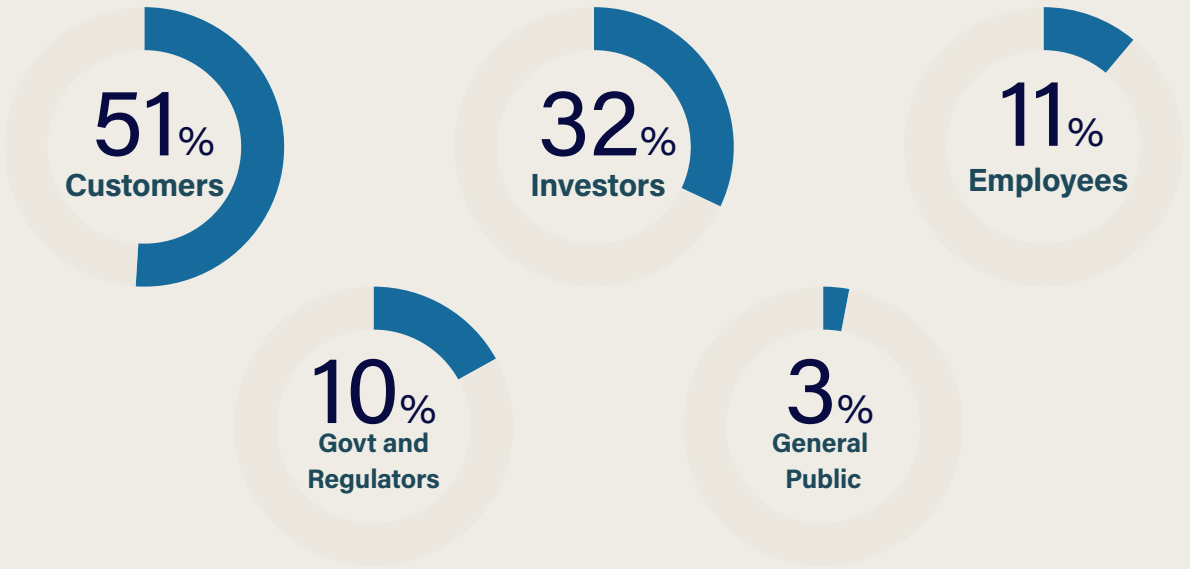
Given this, internal communications should sit at the heart of the corporate affairs response. However, the data suggests that while it is present, it is not always central.

As communications has moved closer to senior leadership, there has been a natural shift towards outward-facing activity. This reflects the expanded scope of the function, but it also introduces risk. If employees do not understand or believe in the organisation's strategy, external credibility becomes significantly harder to sustain.

Reputation is built from the inside out. The data suggests that this is understood, but not always reflected in prioritisation.

*'People skills and authentic communication remain fundamental - building relationships across all stakeholders, internally as well as externally, is essential to making strategy land.'*

**Stakeholder audiences ranked by their perceived importance to the CEO**




*% represents the proportion who said this audience was the most important*

# Uncertainty on where, how and when to deploy Artificial Intelligence

There is widespread expectation that AI will play a significant role in shaping how corporate affairs functions operate.

However, current levels of integration remain limited. Most functions are still in the early stages of adoption, with ongoing concerns around ethics, readiness, bias and measurement.

This creates an interesting tension. AI is one of the most prominent areas of attention for corporate affairs leaders, yet it is also one where the gap between ambition and execution is most visible. The technology is widely understood to be transformative, but its application within the function remains inconsistent and, in many cases, exploratory.

Part of the challenge lies in the nature of the work itself.

Corporate affairs is not a purely process-driven function. It relies heavily on judgement, context and interpretation, which makes wholesale automation both difficult and, in some respects, undesirable.

At the same time, there are clear opportunities to use AI to improve efficiency, enhance insight and support decision-making, particularly in areas such as monitoring, analysis and content development.

**94%** of Corporate Affairs Directors say AI will have a profound or moderate impact on their work

**11%** have fully integrated AI into their operations to date.

What the data suggests is not a lack of interest, but a lack of certainty about how AI should be applied to create meaningful advantage. Without clarity, there is a risk that adoption remains fragmented, focused on discrete use cases rather than fully embedded in workflows.

In that sense, AI reinforces a broader theme within the report. Awareness is high, but the translation of that awareness into structured, prioritised action remains variable.

*"AI is transforming the work of communicators around the world. Tasks that once took days or even weeks can now be completed in seconds. This gives us an extraordinary opportunity to deliver higher-quality work and better outcomes at unprecedented speed. However, we must ensure that critical thinking and decision-making remain our own responsibility"*

# Expectations continue to rise, but resources remain constrained

The function is now expected to operate as a strategic adviser, to manage increasingly complex stakeholder environments, navigate geopolitical developments and adopt new technologies.

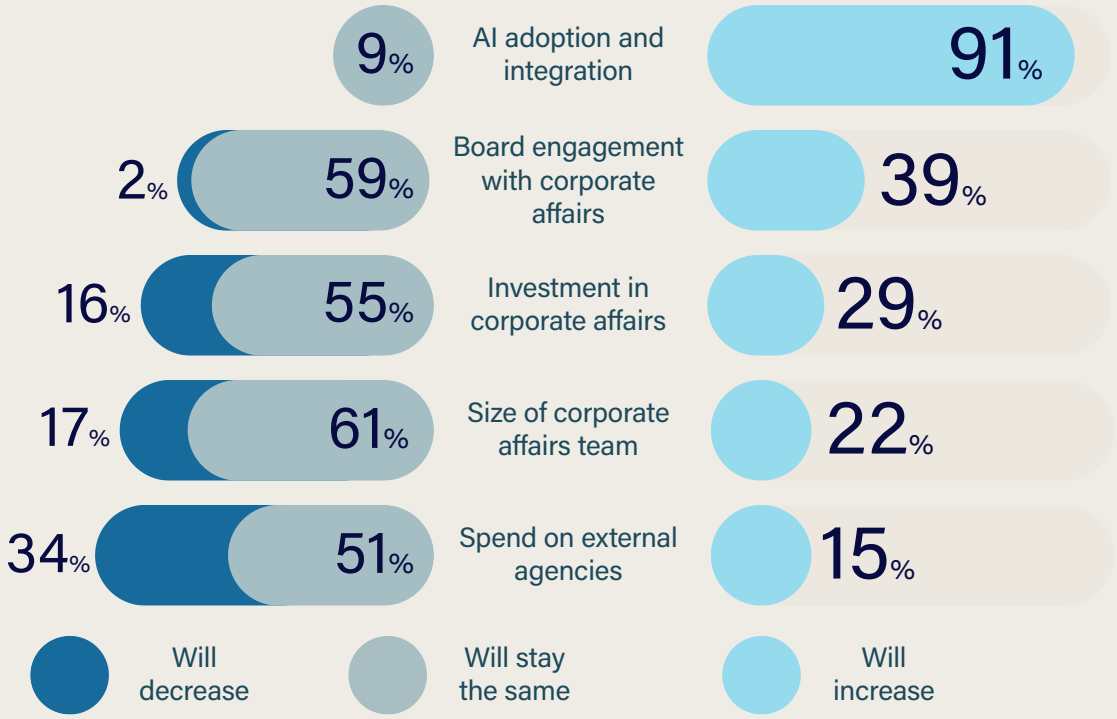
The data suggests that this expansion has not been matched by a corresponding increase in resources. While investment in areas such as AI, measurement and board engagement is expected to rise, overall budget and team size remain relatively stable.

At the same time, agency spend is more likely to decrease than increase, by roughly a two-to-one margin. This points to a more selective and constrained operating environment.

In this context, clarity of purpose becomes critical. Without it, there is a risk that effort becomes spread too thinly across too many areas, reducing overall impact.

> *"The function is evolving towards true partnership and combining innovation, stakeholder understanding and commercial awareness to drive meaningful impact."*

**How corporate affairs leaders believe aspects of their agenda will change in the next 12 months:**



# Trust represents a potential disconnect between perception and reality

Perhaps the most important finding relates to trust. A large majority of corporate affairs leaders believe that their organisations are trusted by stakeholders.

However, this sits at odds with external benchmarks, which consistently show trust as lower, more fragile and conditional.

This disconnect raises the possibility that organisations do not yet have a sufficiently granular understanding of what drives trust, and how it varies across stakeholder groups. As work in this area has shown, trust is not a single measure, but a composite of multiple drivers that need to be actively understood and managed.

A further complicating factor is measurement. While a majority of organisations report having formal processes in place to manage reputation and stakeholder relationships, fewer demonstrate the same level of confidence in how they measure outcomes. This creates a situation where activity is structured, but impact is less clearly understood.

Without robust and consistent measurement, it becomes difficult to test assumptions about trust, to identify where it is strengthening or eroding, and to understand which actions are driving those changes.

In that context, high levels of perceived trust may reflect confidence in process rather than evidence of outcome.

If trust is being assessed only at a high level, there is a risk that organisations overestimate its strength and under-invest in maintaining it.

Over time this creates exposure, particularly in more volatile or contested environments where trust can shift quickly.

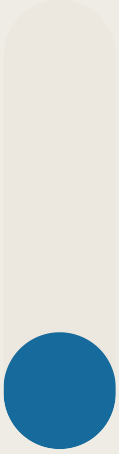


**81%**

of corporate affairs leaders report high levels of trust from their stakeholders

**64%**

Trust in businesses (Edelman Trust Barometer)



**26%**

Trust in business leaders (Ipsos Trustworthiness Index)

*"Precision, judgement and strong stakeholder relationships are critical - the ability to sense-check decisions and build trust across audiences sits at the heart of the role."*

# What this means in practice

The data points consistently to the same underlying issue: not a lack of capability or awareness, but a lack of clarity about how the function should operate in practice. For corporate affairs leaders, the question is less about what matters, and more about what to prioritise, what to de-prioritise, and how to organise their teams accordingly. This requires some explicit choices than many functions have not historically been required to make.

A useful starting point is a set of simple, but often uncomfortable, questions:

**What is the organising principle of our function and is it consistently reflected in what we prioritise?**

In many organisations, reputation is recognised as critical, but is not consistently used to guide decisions about where time and resource are deployed.

**What are we doing that is activity rather than impact, and what would we stop if forced to choose?**

As remits expand and resources remain constrained, clarity depends as much on what is de-prioritised as what is pursued.

**Do we have a clear view of what drives trust for our key stakeholders, or are we relying on assumption?**

Without robust measurement and insight, perceptions of trust can become disconnected.

**Where are we misaligned with the commercial priorities of the business, and why?**

Proximity to leadership has increased, but alignment is not automatic. Gaps often persist between corporate affairs priorities and those of the CEO and executive team.

**Where can technology meaningfully improve effectiveness, and where does it risk creating distraction?**

The opportunity presented by AI is significant, but only where it is applied with clear purpose rather than in a fragmented way.

These questions also have clear implications for how corporate affairs teams are structured and the capabilities they prioritise.

The shift towards clarity places greater emphasis on integration over specialisation. Functions that are organised as a collection of discrete disciplines can and do struggle to maintain a consistent line of sight between business priorities and stakeholder activity. By contrast more integrated models, whether organised around business units, priority issues or core reputation drivers, are better able to translate strategy into coherent action.

This has implications for the profile of talent within the function. There is increasing demand for individuals who can operate across boundaries to connect business strategy, stakeholder insight and narrative, rather than operating within a single discipline. The ability to synthesise information, exercise judgement and advise senior leaders with confidence becomes more important than depth in any one channel.

Technical capability will be more relevant in areas such as data, insight and the application of AI. However, these skills only create value where they are clearly linked to decision-making and outcomes, rather than existing as standalone capabilities.

In this context, the most effective teams are likely to be those that are highly focused, tightly aligned to business priorities, and more explicit about the role they play - rather than broader teams attempting to respond to an ever-expanding remit.

# From influence to clarity, some final thoughts

**Taken together, the research data points to a function at an important stage in its development.**

Corporate affairs has achieved influence. It is embedded, recognised and increasingly central to decision-making. However, influence on its own is not sufficient. The next phase is about clarity — of purpose, of priorities, and of how the function creates value in a systematic and repeatable manner.

This shift will have implications beyond ways of working. It changes how corporate affairs functions are structured, led and resourced. Clarity requires sharper definition of mandate (whether organised around stakeholder groups, business priorities or reputation drivers) and a willingness to make explicit trade-offs. It places greater weight on fewer, more integrated capabilities, rather than a broad collection of loosely connected activities.

This then demands leadership that is comfortable concentrating effort, stopping lower-value activity, and ensuring that resource is directed where it can have the greatest positive effect on the commercial realities of the business. This requires a more disciplined approach to prioritisation anchored in reputation, and a tighter alignment with the commercial realities of the business.

At its core, corporate affairs exists to shape understanding and perception. The data suggests this is widely understood, but not yet consistently applied. Moving from influence to clarity will require the function to define its role more explicitly, and to deliver against that definition with consistency.

**This is the challenge that lies ahead.**

**"Judgement, authenticity and leadership advisory are central - the role of CCO increasingly relies on the ability to guide decisions and sense-check how they will be perceived."**

# ABOUT US

## In every corner of the globe, organisations are operating in a new age of complexity, and in return the role of communications and corporate affairs is undergoing a notable shift.

The leaders responsible for shaping and protecting corporate reputation have become central, and essential, to enterprise strategy. Our work with clients worldwide confirms this evolution: communications is a strategic driver that fuels decision-making.

It is against this backdrop that the Global Communications Search Partnership (GCSP) came together. As a collaboration among four leading executive search firms – Taylor Birchwood in the U.K. and Middle East, Heyman Associates in the U.S., GKPRCC in Germany, and Barber Search in Hong Kong – we unite regional expertise with global perspective.

Our goal is to offer a clearer view of the evolving talent landscape, identify the growing challenges facing these teams, and elevate our collective understanding of what world-class leadership in communications and corporate affairs looks like today.

This inaugural Global Communications & Corporate Affairs Survey reflects that ambition. Drawing insight from senior leaders across regions and industry sectors, the findings offer a global benchmark for priorities, pressures, and levers of influence shaping the function. Many of the early themes reaffirm what practitioners have long sensed: communications is finally getting the airtime it deserves. We hope our perspectives will support leaders in navigating change and aligning reputation and strategy more effectively across the enterprise.

We look forward to continuing this dialogue globally in the months and years ahead.

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# METHODOLOGY

We conducted a global survey of communications leaders, collecting over 200 responses across diverse industries and regions. The survey was administered online, with participants recruited through professional networks, and responses were analysed in aggregate to identify key trends and insights.

This report was produced by the Global Communications Search Partnership (GCSP) which is a collaboration of four leading executive search firms.

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